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Rebel with a cause: The effects of leadership encouragement and psychological safety on professionals' prosocial rulebreaking behavior

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Abstract

A core idea of bureaucratic organizations is that rule-following is a necessary precondition to pursue the public interest. However, rules may sometimes become dysfunctional, burdensome, and even interfere with public value delivery. In those situations, professionals sometimes engage in prosocial rule-breaking (PSRB), rather than rule-following, with the aim to deliver meaningful public services. This article examines leadership encouragement and psychological safety as antecedents of PSRB behavior. Data from two waves of a multi-source dataset consisting of professionals' self-reported PSRB behavior and psychological safety ($n = 837$ and 965 respondents) and their supervisor-reported encouragement for PSRB behavior ($n = 58$ and 64 respondents) is used. Findings point to a positive relationship between psychological safety and PSRB. Moreover, the study partly supports the hypothesis that leadership encouragement is associated with higher levels of PSRB, but only under conditions of high psychological safety.

Abstract

Een kernidee van de bureaucratie is dat het volgen van regels noodzakelijk is om het algemeen belang na te streven. Niettemin kunnen regels soms disfunctioneel worden, waardoor ze goede publieke dienstverlening in de weg staan. In dergelijke situaties kunnen publieke

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professionals zich genoodzaakt voelen om regels te breken en maatwerk te leveren om burgers goed te helpen. Dit noemen we prosocial rule-breaking (PSRB). Dit artikel onderzoekt hoe aanmoediging door de teamleider en ervaren psychologische veiligheid PSRB in wijk- en jeugdteams kunnen bevorderen. Op basis van twee meetmomenten met data uit vijf grote en middelgrote Nederlandse gemeenten onder professionals ($n = 837$ en 965 respondenten) en hun teamleiders ($n = 58$ en 64 respondenten) laten we zien dat er een positieve relatie bestaat tussen psychologische veiligheid en PSRB. Bovendien vinden we ondersteuning voor de hypothese dat aanmoediging door de teamleider PSRB bevordert, maar alleen wanneer er sprake is van een hoge mate van psychologische veiligheid.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Professionals in public organizations are often confronted with a myriad of rules. Rules are commonly seen as the “bedrock of bureaucracy” and serve an important role in creating public value: rules and rule-following enable efficiency, equity, and accountability (DeHart-Davis, 2017). However, rules may also become dysfunctional or a cumulative (administrative) burden (Bozeman, 1993) and, therefore, fail to advance organizational goals (Bozeman & Feeney, 2014). Administrative burdens resulting from organizational rules and procedures created by public organizations (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022) do not only affect citizens' experiences of public service delivery (Herd & Moynihan, 2019) but also those who need to enforce them (Hattke et al., 2020). In particular, frontline professionals are among the first actors to recognize how divisive and dysfunctional rules cause harm to citizens and other stakeholders (Bozeman, 2022) and may attempt to lessen their impact by rule-bending (Borrey, 2017) and rule-breaking (Borrey & Henderson, 2020; Fleming, 2020; Weißmüller et al., 2022).

When intentions to improve public service underlie professionals' decisions not to enforce or even break the rules, we speak of prosocial rule-breaking (PSRB) (Morrison, 2006). PSRB refers to violations of organizational policy rules and procedures, but not to *contra legem* decisions (that is: decisions that defy or violate the law). The term prosocial implies that the primary driver behind rule-breaking is the welfare of another individual, sometimes going beyond what can be expected based on role requirements (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986; Fleming & Bodkin, 2022). Examples of PSRB range from granting extensions to pay off one's debt, to giving social benefits to an individual who would usually not be entitled to receive these. In these cases, PSRB can be seen as a way to adapt to situations where rule-following has become overly burdensome or otherwise counterproductive to public service delivery.

While PSRB is increasingly common and relevant in public organizations (see, for example, recent work by Fleming, 2020; Fleming & Bodkin, 2022; Piatak et al., 2022; Weißmüller et al., 2022), it remains challenging for professionals to deviate from rules. Different studies have shown that rules can help reduce uncertainty for public professionals (Fleming, 2020; Raaphorst, 2018). In addition, breaking rules may be viewed as deviant behavior, which negatively impacts performance ratings by both supervisors and co-workers and is sometimes even punished (Dahling et al., 2012; Morrison, 2006). Especially in organizations with a high degree of formalization, breaking rules, even for societal reasons, may thus be a perilous endeavor for professionals. As PSRB may be a way through which

professionals can deliver meaningful public services in the midst of dysfunctional or harmful rules, it is important to study the conditions under which public professionals are more or less likely to engage in such behavior.

This study focuses on two conditions that potentially impact PSRB behavior: leadership and psychological safety. Leaders provide direction for professionals and help them organize their work in line with the vision and mission of the organization (Moynihan et al., 2012). As such, leadership may stimulate PSRB, especially if rule-following in specific situations goes against the organizational vision or mission. In addition, leadership encouragement can take the form of encouraging specific behaviors, especially concerning new or deviant ways of working (Vigoda-Gadot & Beerli, 2012). Finally, leaders may facilitate PSRB by protecting professionals who break the rules from political scrutiny and acting as a buffer between the organization and professionals (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006).

In addition to leadership encouragement, we expect that a psychologically safe team environment is an important condition for PSRB to arise. Psychological safety may be defined as “feeling comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes, without the fear of embarrassment or retribution” (Edmondson, 2019: p. xvi). A psychologically safe team environment thus facilitates experimentation and deviation from usual ways of working, and as such, it can support PSRB. In addition, psychological safety may be expected to be a key factor for leadership encouragement for PSRB to be effective. While leaders may intend to stimulate PSRB, professionals may perceive their leadership behavior differently (Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015). Especially in the case of risky behavior with uncertain outcomes, such as PSRB, leaders may be under the impression that they provide encouragement for PSRB, while professionals do not feel safe to act upon this. Our research question, therefore, is:

How do leadership encouragement and psychological safety affect PSRB?

Empirically, we examine these relationships using two waves of a multi-source and multi-level dataset consisting of professionals' self-reported PSRB behavior and psychological safety ($n = 837$ and 965 respondents) and their supervisor-reported encouragement for PSRB behavior ($n = 58$ and 64 respondents). Data were collected among professionals and their supervisors in Dutch social support teams in Autumn 2020 and Winter 2021/2022.

Our study contributes to different streams of the public administration literature. First, this study answers calls by Weißmüller et al. (2022) and Fleming (2020) to pay greater attention to how leadership encouragement facilitates PSRB behavior. While the increasing emphasis on PSRB resulted in identifying different factors that affect PSRB (e.g., Borry et al., 2018; DeHart-Davis, 2007; Weißmüller et al., 2022), there has been limited attention to leadership. Second, we contribute to the public administration literature by examining the effect of psychological safety on PSRB. Where this literature increasingly focuses on related concepts, such as employee voice (Tsameti et al., 2023) and speaking up (Cooper, 2018; O'Leary, 2019), psychological safety has so far received little consideration in public administration studies (but see: Liston-Heyes & Juillet, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2017; Hassan & Jiang, 2021). Our study shows how this concept relates to one of the most challenging questions of bureaucracy and paves the path for a better understanding of how psychological safety plays out in a public setting. Third, by examining psychological safety as a moderator in the relationship between leaders' intended encouragement of PSRB and PSRB of professionals, our study contributes to public leadership research, particularly to discussions on leadership intention and perception (Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015). By studying psychological safety as a moderator, we examine to what extent psychological safety may be a condition under which the intention-perception gap between leader and follower decreases. As such, this paper contributes to understanding when leadership intention and perception are more likely to align.

This article is organized as follows. We start by giving an overview of research on PSRB, followed by outlining the theoretical framework and formulating our hypotheses. In the methodology section, we elaborate on the case selection and sample, and we discuss the analytical strategy that we used. We then proceed with presenting the findings of our research. Finally, we discuss these findings in light of the literature and highlight the implications of our study for future research and practice.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Prosocial rule-breaking

PSRB has received increasing attention in the public administration literature. It can be defined as “any instance where an employee intentionally violates a formal organizational policy, regulation or prohibition with the primary intention of promoting the welfare of the organization or one of its stakeholders” (Morrison, 2006, p. 6). PSRB is thus intentional behavior, willingly and knowingly departing from rules and procedures (DeHart-Davis, 2007). Rule-breaking has been conceptualized as a form of behavioral coping (Tummers et al., 2015) that frontline professionals use to adjust to client needs. Frontline professionals are often confronted with situations in which rules and procedures do not align with how they want to deliver public services. PSRB is then a way to resolve the tension between (organizational) rules and professionals' views about frontline work. PSRB is driven by societal and prosocial motivations.

Three foundational reasons can be identified for PSRB. First, PSRB can be focused on increasing (organizational) efficiency. Professionals engaging in PSRB, for this reason, could mean that they see a “business case” for breaking rules. For instance, social care professionals may disregard the “four-eye principle,” which requires that two individuals approve some action before it can be taken. They thus speed up the decision-making process and increase organizational efficiency. A second reason to engage in PSRB is to help colleagues. An example may be that professionals share useful information about clients, although this violates privacy regulations. Third, engaging in PSRB can lead to better public service delivery, mainly when rules do not rightly capture the complexities of everyday life and where rule-following would result in outcomes that do not do justice to what the rules were designed for (Morrison, 2006). An example of this type of PSRB is a professional who sidesteps official waiting lists to grant a rental flat to a juvenile who has to leave youth care after becoming of legal age and otherwise would need to live on the street. This study focuses on the latter reason for PSRB, which is most strongly connected to public value creation.

PSRB, in order to improve public services, may be an effective way for professionals to mitigate the negative impact of administrative burden on citizens. In contrast to red tape, which refers to rules and regulations that are onerous from the organization's or its employees' perspective (Bozeman, 1993), administrative burden generally refers to citizen's experience with rules (Burden et al., 2012; Campbell et al., 2022). Rules that can be classified as an administrative burden are harmful as they can diminish the effectiveness of government programs and can even block individuals from fundamental rights (Herd & Moynihan, 2019). Breaking those rules may then be seen as reshaping formal policies through the informal practices of those professionals who need to implement or execute those policies (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2022). Rulebreaking should, in such cases, not be seen as deviant and unwanted behavior, as it generally is, but rather as a means of creating public value. Professionals who feel trapped by counterproductive or rigid rules may thus engage in PSRB to deliver better public service to citizens.

2.2 | Antecedents of prosocial rule-breaking

Whether professionals are likely to engage in PSRB behavior depends on different factors. Generally, we can group antecedents of PSRB into three categories: (1) organizational factors, (2) individual factors, and (3) client-related factors. Our emphasis on psychological safety and leadership encouragement implies that, in this study, we focus on the first two categories. While leadership and psychological safety have only caught limited attention in the study of PSRB, a number of other organizational and individual factors have been shown to affect whether professionals engage in PSRB.

First, both formal and informal organizational and work characteristics impact the likelihood that professionals engage in PSRB behavior. Formalization and consistency between sets of rules increase rule-following behavior and, hence, can be expected to decrease the intention to break the rules (Borrey et al., 2018).

For instance, Piatak et al. (2022) show that professionals are more likely to follow written rather than unwritten rules, highlighting the importance of formal work characteristics. Furthermore, informal characteristics within organizations can impact PSRB, too. For example, Borry (2017) shows that organizational norms play a critical role. If PSRB is considered at odds with the norms within the organization, then PSRB is less likely to be exhibited. Norms are an aspect of the organization's ethical climate, defined as "shared perceptions that individuals hold regarding the ethical procedures and policies that exist in their organizations" (Potipiroon & Wongpreedee, 2021, p. 329). The ethical climate provides clues to organizational members about appropriate behavior (Borry, 2017). When PSRB is at odds with the norms and ethical climate, it may be seen as inappropriate and, in addition to that, less likely to be engaged in by professionals. Important to note is that the ethical climate and organizational norms are not static concepts. The ethical climate may change over time, dependent on cultural changes in society at large as well as political and managerial interference.

Second, studies that include individual factors to explain PSRB usually do so with reference to personality traits, such as conformity and propensity for risk-taking. DeHart-Davis (2007) argues that while conformity reduces PSRB, risk-taking is likely to support bending or breaking rules. The primary rationale behind these findings is that choosing not to conform to organizational rules might be punished and seen as deviant behavior, regardless of its intention (Fleming, 2020). Dahling et al. (2012) found that supervisors react negatively to professionals who engage in PSRB, rating their task performance lower than professionals who reported less PSRB. PSRB may thus have negative consequences for professionals, begging the question of whether professionals are willing to risk their jobs or their performance ratings for the citizens they serve (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003).

Interestingly, Assadi and Lundin (2018) found that rule-following becomes less when tenure increases, which may imply that PSRB becomes more likely when professionals' tenure increases. They explain their results by arguing that increasing client experience may increase professionals' confidence and skills to make judgments that may contrast organizational rules and procedures. In addition, Weißmüller et al. (2022) show that the likelihood of engaging in PSRB also depends on public service motivation (PSM), where a higher degree of PSM positively impacts professionals' willingness to engage in PSRB.

2.3 | Leadership encouraging prosocial rulebreaking

Drawing from the assumption that PSRB should be supported in public organizations to improve public service delivery, the question arises of what factors contribute to professionals' willingness to engage in such behavior. While leadership has so far received limited attention in studies on PSRB (but see Fleming, 2020), there are different arguments on how and why leadership can support PSRB behavior among professionals.

First, leadership can provide direction for professionals and help them see how their behavior fits (or does not fit) with the organizational vision, mission, and values (Moynihan et al., 2012). Professionals who see how PSRB can contribute to the organization's vision and mission are expected to be more willing to engage in such behavior. Leadership's direction is especially important when facing ambiguity or conflicting goals and values (Getha-Taylor et al., 2011). Public organizations often simultaneously serve multiple, sometimes competing values (Hood, 1991), and both rule-following and rulebreaking can contribute to the realization of public value. For instance, where rule-following serves predictability, rulebreaking may serve responsiveness. Leaders can then prioritize among these competing values and, as such, stimulate or inhibit PSRB.

Second, leadership encouragement can help professionals when attitudinal or behavioral change is needed. When we view PSRB as a change of habits or routines, leadership encouragement may help professionals cope with these changes. For example, leadership can support professionals by focusing on taking the concerns of professionals into account and considering individual needs (Keulemans & Groeneveld, 2019). Furthermore, leadership encouragement can come in the form of encouragement of particular behavior. The latter is also evident from the organizational change literature (Chen et al., 2023; Vigoda-Gadot & Beerli, 2012), which shows that leadership positively

affects change-oriented behavior in public organizations. Thus, leadership can encourage professionals to embrace changes and show behavior congruent with organizational changes.

Third and last, leadership may help to protect professionals from adverse outcomes because of PSRB by operating as a buffer between the organization and professionals (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). This is particularly important for PSRB, as one important reason some professionals do not engage in PSRB behavior is fear of punishment. Getting encouragement from people in a leadership position to engage in PSRB may help professionals to feel that there is backup for behavior that is otherwise seen as deviant. In all, we thus expect that leadership encouragement positively affects PSRB. Our first hypothesis, therefore, is:

H1. Leadership encouragement positively affects PSRB.

2.4 | Psychological safety and prosocial rulebreaking

In addition to the encouragement provided by their team leader, we expect that a professional's perception of their work environment also influences the extent to which they engage in PSRB. Specifically, we expect that a professional's perception of psychological safety is important here. Psychological safety means that people are comfortable expressing themselves and being themselves. At work, this includes feeling comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fearing embarrassment or retribution (Edmondson, 2019). Psychological safety also includes a feeling that experimentation and risk-taking will not be punished (Edmondson, 1999).

Studies on psychological safety, which are mostly bound to generic management journals, have linked psychological safety to a wide variety of outcomes such as inclusiveness (Carmeli et al., 2010), whistleblowing (Potipiroon & Wongpreedee, 2021), learning (Edmondson, 1999), innovation (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006), and change (Donahue & O'Leary, 2011). Psychological safety has been named as a key predictor for embracing changes and engaging in change-oriented behavior (Donahue & O'Leary, 2011; Iqbal et al., 2020) and as one of the main catalysts for forming new routines (Potthoff et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant for this study, as engaging in PSRB means that existing routines and procedures are disrupted. Creating an environment where existing routines can be challenged helps professionals reflect on their work and work processes.

Psychological safety in the workplace supports or even invites employee voice (Cooper, 2018; Morrison, 2014; Tsameti et al., 2023). Employee voice refers to "informal and discretionary communication of ideas, suggestions, concerns information about problems, or opinions about work-related issues to persons who might be able to take appropriate action, with the intent to bring about improvement or change" (Morrison, 2014: 174). Brockmann (2017) demonstrates that giving a voice to professionals can encourage "unbureaucratic behavior." It can thus be expected that a psychologically safe environment increases the likelihood that professionals challenge existing work routines and engage in PSRB.

Finally, high perceptions of psychological safety have been shown to influence creativity (Carmeli et al., 2010) and "workarounds," for example, to deal with issues that block efficient and effective workflows (Halbesleben & Rathert, 2008). PSRB can be seen as an example of "creative" use of discretionary room (Visser & Kruijen, 2021), and using PSRB to become more effective has been argued as one of the foundational reasons for engaging in PSRB behavior (Borri & Henderson, 2020). Therefore, our second hypothesis is:

H2. Psychological safety positively affects PSRB.

2.5 | The interaction effect of leadership encouragement and psychological safety

Besides these direct relationships, we also expect that psychological safety and leadership encouragement interact with each other in their effect on PSRB. Specifically, we argue that psychological safety moderates the relationship

between leadership encouragement and PSRB. First, this can be expected as we presume that the effects of psychological safety and leadership encouragement on PSRB are synergetic. That is, a psychologically safe team environment strengthens the effect of leadership encouragement of PSRB, as professionals then do not only feel stimulated to engage in PSRB but they also feel sufficiently empowered by their team environment to actually experiment and deviate from existing rules and norms.

Second, psychological safety may impact the *perception* of leadership encouragement. Under conditions of high psychological safety, it may be expected that the intention of leadership encouragement comes across better to professionals. After all, in psychologically safe team environments, there is a more open dialogue between team leaders and professionals. This may lead professionals to perceive their team leader as more authentic, leading to the team leader's messages coming across more clearly. In the current case, leadership encouragement for PSRB is thus expected to be more effective under conditions of high psychological safety. Therefore, our third hypothesis is:

H3. Leadership encouragement more strongly facilitates PSRB if professionals feel psychologically safe.

In all, work environments differ with regard to the level of encouragement from leaders for PSRB and psychological safety. We expect that PSRB is most likely in situations where both leadership encouragement and psychological safety are high. Conversely, when leadership encouragement and psychological safety are low or absent, we expect that engaging in PSRB is the least likely. All else remaining equal, engaging in PSRB behavior is still likely when either leadership encouragement or psychological safety is absent, though not as likely as when both are present. The complete theoretical model is shown in Figure 1.

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Research setting: social support teams in the Netherlands

This study is situated in the context of social support and youth care teams in the Netherlands. These teams were introduced in the Netherlands from 2015 onwards in response to new legislation, which decentralized many responsibilities in the domains of care and social support from central to local government as of 2015. Important for this study is that this legislation specifically encourages public professionals to work across organizational boundaries and to come up with solutions that fit the individual circumstances of citizens. In doing so, professionals need to avoid a strong focus on rules and procedures when this hinders the responsiveness to citizens' needs (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport, 2015, p. 17). At the same time, the decentralizations have created a situation in which professionals work under a myriad of rules and regulations: they have to adhere to national legislation, national and municipal policy rules, and organizational rules and procedures. Especially the interaction between different sets of rules and regulations may create undesirable outcomes, making rule-breaking rather than rule-following a means to create public value. Because of the combination of a myriad of rules and procedures and a

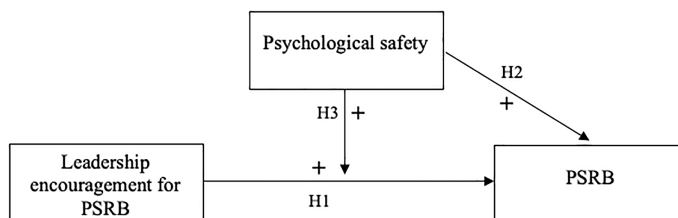


FIGURE 1 Theoretical model.

legal emphasis on avoiding a too strong focus on this formalization, this case can be expected to offer fruitful grounds for professionals to engage in PSRB behaviors and, thus, for researchers to study PSRB.

While the Dutch context may be seen as an extreme case to examine the relationships between psychological safety, leadership encouragement, and PSRB, the relevance of the findings is not limited to the Netherlands. In recent years, government responsiveness has stood high on the political agenda in many countries (Sabel, 2012), and this often translates into individualized service provision and customization (Sabel et al., 2023). Specific studies on PSRB and workarounds have, for instance, been conducted among US child welfare workers (Fleming, 2020), US university researchers (Bozeman, 2022), Israeli social service professionals (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022), and in a comparative Dutch / Belgian / German context (Weißmüller et al., 2022).

3.2 | Data collection

Data collection took place in two waves: September – December 2020 and December 2021 – January 2022. The data were collected using an online survey among professionals and their team leaders in five Dutch municipalities. The first wave comprised a sample of 1988 professionals and 73 team leaders working in 88 social support teams. The response in this wave was 837 professionals (42.1%) and 40 team leaders (54.8%). The sample of the second wave consisted of 2094 professionals and 75 team leaders working in 84 teams. The response in this wave was 962 professionals (46.1%) and 60 team leaders (80.0%). There are more teams than team leaders, as some team leaders supervise multiple teams. The respondents of waves one and two partially overlap. However, we cannot connect respondents across waves due to privacy regulation. Merging survey data from professionals and team leaders led to the exclusion of some responses. In cases where the team leader did not fill out the survey, responses from professionals had to be omitted. The final sample, therefore, consists of 684 professionals in wave 1 (instead of 837 professionals) and 832 professionals in wave 2 (instead of 965 professionals). The main advantage of using two waves rather than a single cross-sectional survey is that the findings can be considered more robust, given that similar findings in both waves would mean that the results are less likely to be affected by any temporal factor. Thus, using two survey waves helps for data validation and consistency checks.

3.3 | Measures

While psychological safety and PSRB were measured by surveying professionals, leadership encouragement was measured by surveying the team leaders of the professionals. As indicated, the dataset allows us to link professionals and their team leaders, thus enabling us to connect intended leadership encouragement to professionals' perceptions of psychological safety and their PSRB behavior.

Prosocial rulebreaking is measured using three items, adapted from Dahling et al. (2012). The Dahling et al. (2012) scale consists of three dimensions: (1) efficiency, (2) co-worker assistance, and (3) customer assistance, based on the foundational reasons that professionals may have to engage in PSRB (Morrison, 2006). This scale and its adaptations have been used in other studies on PSRB, such as the research by Fleming (2020) and Wang and Shi (2021). As we are interested in PSRB to improve public service delivery to citizens, we used the items for “customer assistance” and adapted these to fit with a public sector context. This leads to the following items: “if necessary, I break rules or procedures to better assist clients”; “if necessary, I interpret rules and procedures to the advantage of clients”; and “if necessary, I ignore rules and procedures that hinder good service to clients.”

Leadership encouragement has been measured by asking supervisors about their encouragement for PSRB. The three items for PSRB by Dahling et al. (2012) have been used and are preceded by “I stimulate my team members to ...”

Psychological safety is measured using three items based on Edmondson's (1999) well-cited article. The items are: “in our social support team, you can raise problems or difficulties;” “in our social support team, it is easy to ask

other team members for help;" "in our social support team, making a mistake is not held against you." The scale was not aggregated to the team level, as it is common in studies on psychological safety to use an individual-level measure of psychological safety to predict individual-level outcomes (Newman et al., 2017). Furthermore, the within-group differences were too large to make aggregation meaningful.

All the above items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "1" strongly disagree to "5" strongly agree. Professionals' age, years of experience as a professional, gender, and education level served as control variables. An overview of all the items can be found in Appendix 1. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the descriptive statistics for waves 1 and 2, respectively.

3.4 | Analytical strategy

We use multi-level regression analysis in Stata 15 to test our hypotheses. Multi-level analysis allows us to control for the nested structure of the data, with individual professionals nested in teams that are led by a team leader (Hox et al., 2017). Twelve (wave 1) and nine (wave 2) team leaders were leading two teams at the same time. These teams were included as two separate teams in the analysis.

3.5 | Analysis

Tables 3 and 4 show the results of the multi-level regression analyses predicting PSRB for waves 1 and 2, respectively. In both tables, we present three models. Model 1 uses leadership encouragement as a predictor of PSRB, model 2 uses psychological safety as a predictor, and model 3 examines the interaction effect of psychological safety and leadership encouragement on PSRB. Model 1 indicates that hypothesis 1 needs to be rejected: we do not find evidence of a direct, positive relationship between leadership encouragement for PSRB and PSRB behavior among professionals (0.005, $p = 0.904$ and 0.003, $p = 0.947$ for waves 1 and 2, respectively). Hypothesis 2 states that psychological safety positively affects PSRB and is tested in model 2. Hypothesis 2 is partially supported by the data. While the data analysis of wave 1 shows a positive relationship between psychological safety and PSRB behavior (0.128, $p = 0.001$), we do not find support for this relationship in the data of wave 2 (0.033, $p = 0.436$).

Hypothesis 3 states that leadership encouragement more strongly facilitates PSRB if professionals feel psychologically safe and is tested in model 3. The analysis shows partial support for this hypothesis. The analysis of wave 2 shows a significant interaction effect between psychological safety and leadership encouragement for PSRB (0.096, $p = 0.040$), indicating that leadership encouragement is associated with PSRB among professionals when they perceive their team climate as psychologically safe.

In addition, the results show that PSRB increases with age. This finding is consistent across waves and different models. This finding suggests that older professionals feel more secure about breaking the rules for the purpose of public service, probably because they can rely on their professional experience and relate to previous cases.

4 | DISCUSSION

In line with our theoretical argumentation, this study demonstrates that psychological safety is associated with PSRB. When professionals feel safe in their team, they dare to take risks to achieve societal value. That said, the finding of a positive relationship between psychological safety and PSRB is not very robust, as this relationship is not statistically significant in the second wave of data collection. A possible explanation of why psychological safety is an important but not a sufficient condition of PSRB lies in the fact that whether professionals engage in PSRB behavior does not just depend on whether they "dare to do it" but also on whether they "want to do it" (Wang & Shi, 2021).

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics (Wave 1; $n = 684$ professionals and 40 team leaders).

	Range	Mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 PSRB	1–5	3.50	0.79	0.705	1						
2 Psych. safety	1–5	4.31	0.73	0.800	0.124**	1					
3 Leadership encouragement	1–5	3.85	0.69	0.733	0.016	–0.022	1				
4 Gender	1 is female	0.88	0.32	n/a	–0.031	–0.049	–0.017	1			
5 Age	20–66	41.67	11.12	n/a	0.162**	0.024	0.046	–0.181**	1		
6 Experience	0–48	13.85	9.99	n/a	0.107**	0.027	0.056	–0.114**	0.743**	1	
7 Education	1 is MSc or PhD	0.20	0.40	n/a	0.084*	–0.015	0.058	0.010	0.033	0.011	1

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics (Wave 2; n = 832 professionals and 60 team leaders).

	Range	Mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 PSRB	1–5	3.45	0.78	0.670	1						
2 Psych. safety	1–5	4.24	0.80	0.810	0.033	1					
3 Leadership encouragement	1–5	3.69	0.69	0.775	0.017	–0.079*	1				
4 Gender	1 is female	0.86	0.35	n/a	–0.055	–0.013	–0.030	1			
5 Age	20–67	41.88	11.74	n/a	0.131**	0.019	0.127**	–0.033	1		
6 Experience	0–49	13.85	10.72	n/a	0.180**	–0.012	0.051	–0.003	0.660**	1	
7 Education	1 is MSc or PhD	0.17	0.38	n/a	0.013	–0.099**	0.034	0.004	–0.029	–0.035	1

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

TABLE 3 Multi-level random effects analysis predicting PSRB (Wave 1; $n = 684$ professionals and 52 teams).

Variable	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	Coef.	SE	z	p	Coef.	SE	z	p	Coef.	SE	z	p
Intercept	2.949	0.235	12.55	0.000	2.647	0.222	11.94	0.000	2.366	0.298	7.95	0.000
Age	0.013	0.004	3.15	0.002	0.009	0.004	2.39	0.017	0.013	0.004	3.19	0.001
Gender	−0.006	0.094	−0.06	0.948	−0.081	0.085	−0.95	0.334	0.007	0.094	0.08	0.939
Experience	−0.002	0.004	−0.50	0.615	−0.001	0.004	−0.19	0.851	−0.002	0.004	−0.56	0.574
Education	0.154	0.075	2.06	0.040	0.148	0.067	2.20	0.028	0.158	0.074	2.13	0.033
Leadership encouragement	0.005	0.043	0.12	0.904					0.007	0.043	0.16	0.875
Psychological safety					0.128	0.037	3.44	0.001	0.130	0.041	3.20	0.001
Interaction effect									0.026	0.059	0.44	0.662
R ² within	0.031				0.034				0.052			
R ² between	0.055				0.064				0.006			
R ² overall	0.032				0.037				0.048			
Sigma u	0				0				0			
Sigma e	0.783				0.772				0.776			
Rho	0				0				0			
Wald χ^2	22.97			0.000	31.90			0.000	33.97			0.000

TABLE 4 Multi-level random effects analysis predicting PSRB (Wave 2; $n = 832$ professionals and 69 teams).

Variable	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	Coef.	SE	z	p	Coef.	SE	z	p	Coef.	SE	z	p
Intercept	3.339	0.185	18.10	0.000	3.238	0.188	17.20	0.000	3.354	0.251	13.38	0.000
Age	0.001	0.003	0.36	0.718	0.001	0.003	0.33	0.741	0.001	0.003	0.35	0.723
Gender	−0.124	0.074	−1.68	0.093	−0.123	0.074	−1.65	0.098	−0.122	0.074	−1.64	0.100
Experience	0.012	0.003	3.80	0.000	0.012	0.003	3.83	0.000	0.012	0.003	3.77	0.000
Education	0.036	0.069	0.51	0.608	0.042	0.070	0.61	0.543	0.050	0.070	0.71	0.477
Leaders encouragement	0.003	0.040	0.07	0.947					−0.023	0.043	−0.53	0.596
Psychological safety					0.026	0.033	0.78	0.436	0.018	0.033	0.56	0.574
Interaction effect									0.096	0.047	2.05	0.040
R ² within	0.034				0.036				0.043			
R ² between	0.097				0.090				0.065			
R ² overall	0.037				0.037				0.042			
Sigma u	0.058				0.060				0.074			
Sigma e	0.754				0.754				0.751			
Rho	0.006				0.006				0.010			
Wald χ^2	31.13			0.000	31.75			0.000	36.06			0.000

Where psychological safety is linked to “daring to do it,” other factors may increasingly weigh in for professionals on whether they “want to do it.” Public sector professionals may be reluctant to break the rules, as rule-following is commonly associated with crucial public sector values, such as accountability and equity (DeHart-Davis, 2017). Additionally, while PSRB, in the context of our study, may be encouraged by the law, professionals still risk organizational backlash by breaking rules. In fact, despite a legal focus on the customization of services, organizational contexts are still frequently characterized by a rule-bound rigidity that was common before the new legal framework of 2015 (Sabel et al., 2023). In such contexts, professionals may decide not to engage in PSRB despite support from their team leader and a psychologically safe team context.

Leadership encouragement is associated with higher levels of PSRB, but only when professionals perceive their team climate as psychologically safe, this study shows. Leadership encouragement positively affects PSRB if professionals feel safe to take an interpersonal risk without fear of negative consequences. This indicates that, in order to engage in PSRB, it does not suffice for leaders to actively encourage PSRB. Rather, they should also facilitate a psychologically safe team environment in which professionals dare to deviate and break rules if that is needed to help citizens better. Facilitating such an environment could mean that professionals are encouraged to take part in deliberations and case discussions that facilitate a shared understanding of when and how PSRB can contribute to public service delivery (Møller, 2021; Møller et al., 2022). An additional interpretation is that a psychologically safe team environment facilitates leadership intention to effectively come across to professionals. Leadership encouragement is then more effective in stimulating PSRB in psychologically safe teams, as leaders in these teams are better understood by their followers. This finding contributes to our understanding of when leadership intention does and does not affect followers' behavior.

It is important to note that while psychological safety moderates the relationship between leadership encouragement and PSRB, it does not mediate this relationship. The correlations between the variables show that leadership encouragement of PSRB is not (wave 1) or even negatively (wave 2) correlated with psychological safety. This may be explained by the fact that rule-following and not rulebreaking creates a sense of safety and security. Often, professionals fall back on rules when they are uncertain (Bernards, 2023; Bernards et al., 2021). If leaders stimulate professionals to deviate from the rules, this may, thus, in fact, create unsafe situations as professionals may feel forced to take risks. This points to the delicate balancing act for leaders who aim to stimulate PSRB.

4.1 | Future research

This study's findings point to several new avenues of research on the intersection of leadership, psychological safety, and PSRB. First, our study shows that leadership encouragement is associated with PSRB, but only when team members feel psychologically safe. Leadership encouragement may be effective in stimulating PSRB when professionals trust their team leader and expect her to not only encourage PSRB but also support them in their needs and protect them against criticism (see also Wang & Shi, 2021). It can thus be expected that a trusting and respectful relationship between team leaders and professionals is an important condition for leadership encouragement to become effective in stimulating PSRB. Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory may offer a valuable theoretical angle to further explore the relationship between professionals and their supervisor. LMX theory concerns the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers and states that high-quality relationships are characterized by trust, liking, and mutual respect (Erdogan & Bauer, 2014). As such, LMX may be the crucial linking pin between leadership encouragement and professional's PSRB behavior.

In addition, substantial amounts of previous research have been devoted to unveiling the importance of leadership in creating a psychologically safe environment. For instance, previous studies found that inclusive leadership (Carmeli et al., 2010) and supportive leadership (May et al., 2004) foster psychological safety in the workplace. In their review study, Newman et al. (2017) showed that different theoretical perspectives may explain how leadership support and psychological safety relate. Based on a social learning perspective (Bandura, 1977), Newman et al.

(2017) argue that by providing direction and forwarding support, leadership can model to subordinates that they can safely take risks. From a social exchange perspective, it can thus be expected that leadership support to subordinates is reciprocated, creating a psychologically safe environment for all. Given the limited amount of research on psychological safety in public administration literature, studies on leadership and psychological safety in a public context are needed to bring the field further. Specifically, as we did not have insight into what specific leadership behavior was used to encourage PSRB, future studies should empirically examine how specific leadership behaviors (such as role modeling, paying attention to individual needs, or intellectual stimulation) impact PSRB and psychological safety.

Second, leadership is especially effective in so-called psychologically weak situations (Shamir & Howell, 1999). In these situations, individuals lack strong information cues regarding what is expected of them and what constitutes appropriate behavior (Mischel, 1977). Conversely, leadership is less needed and effective in steering behavior in a highly professionalized context, such as that of the current study, as their specialized knowledge and strong norms already firmly guide the behavior of professionals (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). So, where we do not find a direct relationship between leadership encouragement and professionals' PSRB behavior in this context, we may expect that leadership encouragement can effectively stimulate PSRB behavior in a less professionalized context. Future studies should explore the role of professional socialization and the level of professionalization of the work environment in the association between leadership and PSRB.

Third, the findings of our study show which organizational and individual factors contribute to professionals engaging in PSRB. Such behavior ultimately is a decision of professionals on how they balance various public values. Just as PSRB can contribute to public values, such as responsiveness and agility of government, so does rule-following serve the public good by guaranteeing predictability and equality of treatment. Future studies should delve further into this matter. Specifically, qualitative research may reveal how psychological safety can contribute to an environment where professionals feel free to explicitly consider competing values and support each other in their decision-making. Research on organizational factors may also focus on the overall rule structure in organizations and how this affects PSRB. Research connecting red or green tape perceptions with PSRB may help to understand under what circumstances PSRB is more, or less, prevalent. Additionally, research linking administrative burden and PSRB is welcomed to provide a better understanding of what individual factors may affect PSRB. Given that administrative burdens may also affect professionals (Hattke et al., 2020), it can be expected that frontline professionals' experiences of how administrative burdens affect citizens are a factor that may stimulate behavior to help out these citizens. In other words, frontline professionals' experience of administrative burden for citizens might make them more inclined to engage in PSRB.

Fourth and finally, our study may give rise to more normative research on the importance and appropriateness of PSRB. From a normative perspective, it should be underlined that rules essentially serve important purposes in public organizations, as they can help to assure equal treatment among citizens, create predictable government service, and help professionals to work efficiently. By stimulating PSRB, such values (equality, predictability, efficiency) may come under threat or can become violated. PSRB may violate political primacy, too. Fleming and Bodkin (2022) argue that whereas PSRB may not be intentionally harmful, a lack of professionals' understanding of the rule's purpose and values may trigger undesirable outcomes when PSRB is used and thus pose dangers to democratic governance. Furthermore, professionals may frame their rulebreaking behavior as being prosocial to "get away" with it without being accountable. Therefore, a much-needed area of research is a normative analysis of how PSRB may impact the effectiveness and legitimacy of public service and what this implies for the roles of professionals and their supervisors.

4.2 | Limitations

Several limitations of our study are important to discuss and may also serve as suggestions for future studies. First, leadership encouragement was measured as the intention of supervisors. While doing so has advantages compared to measuring employee perceptions of leadership, such as countering common source bias, this approach also has

some drawbacks. Most importantly, we cannot be sure that the intention of supervisors in encouraging PSRB has manifested in actual behavior vis-à-vis professionals. Future studies should apply methodologies that increase our insights into the actual behavior of both supervisors and professionals, for instance, through observations of their daily interactions at work. Second, while our measurement of psychological safety draws on a validated measurement scale, we were only able to include three items for pragmatic reasons. The analyses also showed that the perceptions of psychological safety varied among team members, such that an analysis at the individual level was required. Future research should provide further insights into psychological safety at the individual and team-level by incorporating validated scales in multi-level research designs. Third, where our study focused on safety perceptions within the immediate work team, it is realistic to expect that safety perceptions at an organizational level have an impact on PSRB behavior as well. Especially when considering that PSRB concerns breaking organizational rules, we may expect that professionals feeling psychologically safe in the larger organization as well as in the team may impact to what extent professionals engage in PSRB. Future research into the effect of psychological safety at the organizational level on PSRB is, therefore, recommended. Finally, data collection for this study took place in Autumn 2020 and Winter 2021/2022. The COVID-19 crisis substantially impacted the working conditions of the professionals in our study. During both periods, it was strongly advised to work from home, and offices were generally empty. While the professionals frequently had virtual contact with their team leader and colleagues, it may be that the guidance of their team leader and the safety of the team context were perceived differently in the work than during 'normal' work periods. As such, the specific timing of the data collection might explain the null findings in this study. We, therefore, suggest replicating our study, also in different professional and national contexts.

5 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our study demonstrates the role of leadership encouragement and psychological safety in stimulating PSRB, which can be considered as a way for public organizations to become more responsive to citizen needs. As the work of frontline professionals cannot be fully captured in rules, the tension between rules and responsiveness at the frontlines of public service delivery, captured in PSRB, is likely to remain an important topic that public administration scholars and practitioners alike will need to address.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

PEER REVIEW

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study cannot be shared due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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APPENDIX 1

OVERVIEW OF ITEMS

Leadership encouragement	
1	I encourage team members to, if necessary, break rules or procedures to better assist clients.
2	I encourage team members to, if necessary, interpret rules and procedures to the advantage of clients.
3	I encourage team members to, if necessary, ignore rules and procedures that hinder good service to clients.
Psychological safety	
1	In our social support team, one can raise problems or difficulties.
2	In our social support team, it is easy to ask other team members for help.
3	In our social support team, making a mistake is not held against you.
Prosocial rulebreaking	
1	If necessary, I break rules or procedures to better assist clients.
2	If necessary, I interpret rules and procedures to the advantage of clients.
3	If necessary, I ignore rules and procedures that hinder good service to clients.
Control variables	
Gender	What is your gender? (answer options were male; female; different or prefer not to say)
Education level	What is the level of your highest, finished degree? (answer options were 1 – primary school; 2 – secondary school; 3 – vocational education, 4 – Bachelor's degree, 5 – Master's degree, 6 – PhD)
Age	What is your age?