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Raaphorst, N.J.; Ashikali, T.S.; Groeneveld, S.M.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Active representation and equal treatment: The influence of bureaucrats' social background on discrimination

Nadine Raaphorst  | Tanachia Ashikali | Sandra Groeneveld

Institute of Public Administration, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

Correspondence

Nadine Raaphorst, Institute of Public Administration, Leiden University, Den Haag, The Netherlands.
Email: n.j.raaphorst@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

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Abstract

Drawing on street-level discrimination literature and representative bureaucracy literature, we theorise that bureaucrats from social groups that have a lower status in society are less inclined to discriminate in evaluating citizen-clients than bureaucrats from higher status groups. We conducted a 2×2 vignette survey experiment among bureaucrats in Dutch street-level organisations ($N = 3109$) in various organisational domains. The study shows mixed findings. We found evidence for discrimination and so-called reverse discrimination, revealing that bureaucrats ascribe more competence to higher status citizens, but lower trust at the same time. We did not find bureaucrats' own status background to matter in their biased evaluations.

KEYWORDS

bureaucrats, discrimination, equal treatment, representative bureaucracy, street-level organisations, survey experiment

1 | INTRODUCTION

Social equity can be considered as one of the core pillars within public administration (Blessett et al., 2019; Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017; Svava & Brunet, 2005), yet more understanding is needed of how it can be reached in public service delivery (Cepiku & Mastrodascio, 2021). In the provision of public services, bureaucrats are expected to treat like cases alike. Existing research has, however, provided an abundance of evidence for street-level discrimination of

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citizen-clients based on their gender, race, or social class (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Harrits, 2019; Pedersen & Nielsen, 2020). This research consistently shows how members of lower status groups are treated more harshly or evaluated more negatively than citizen-clients from higher status groups in society. Research has pointed to several contextual factors in explaining discrimination, for example, the role of a lack of resources such as time in activating cognitive biases (Andersen & Guul, 2019), the role of heterogeneity of the clientele served in street-level bureaucrats' use of stereotypes in differential evaluations of citizen-clients (Harrits, 2019), or institutional blindness towards unequal backgrounds of citizen-clients, leading to a harsher treatment of minority citizen-clients (Brussig & Knuth, 2013). There is however only limited insight into how bureaucrats' own status group belonging may affect their biased evaluations of citizen-clients with various social statuses (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019). Therefore, the following research question is central: *To what extent do bureaucrats with diverse status backgrounds discriminate in evaluating citizen-clients with diverse status backgrounds?*

We draw on street-level discrimination literature and representative bureaucracy literature to theorise how bureaucrats' own status background may affect their use of double standards in evaluating citizen-clients. Representative bureaucracy theory assumes that bureaucracies are in essence biased, and that representation fosters equity in bureaucracies by including the interests of minority groups in policy formulation and implementation (Meier, 2023). Within the delivery of public services, active representation by minority bureaucrats is held to serve the interest of clients from minority groups. We hold that actively trying to reduce one's own use of stereotypes to the disadvantage of lower status groups can be seen as a form of active representation. We test various hypotheses based on two theoretical propositions that (1) citizen-clients from lower status groups in society will be evaluated more negatively than clients from higher status groups in society, and (2) bureaucrats from a lower status group in society will be less inclined to discriminate to the disadvantage of lower status group clients than bureaucrats from a higher status group in society. In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted a 2×2 vignette survey experiment among bureaucrats in Dutch street-level organisations ($N = 3109$) in various organisational domains, such as education, police, municipalities and the judiciary. Our sample consisted not only of typical street-level bureaucrats who interact with citizen-clients, but of bureaucrats working inside street-level bureaucracies more generally, because they all contribute to the provision of public services to citizen-clients. The vignettes portray a decision-making scenario in which two social statuses are manipulated: citizens-clients' level of education and ethnicity, allowing us to study how the intersection of social statuses may affect frontline discrimination in possibly different ways.

This study contributes to existing scholarship in different ways. Theoretically, this research contributes to research on street-level discrimination and representative bureaucracy literature. There is still only limited insight into how street-level bureaucrats' own background may influence their biased evaluations of citizen-clients with different backgrounds (Groeneveld & Meier, 2022; Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019). While existing research examines the link between representation and citizen outcomes, such as racial profiling, this is typically done using aggregate data on the level of departments (e.g., Hong, 2017; Song, 2018; Wilkins & Williams, 2008), making it impossible to establish through which mechanisms active representation actually affects decision-making. To clarify, such studies are inconclusive on whether minority street-level bureaucrats themselves act differently towards minority clients compared to bureaucrats from majority groups, or whether their presence affects the attitudes and behaviours of majority bureaucrats and/or organisational policies. By conducting a survey vignette experiment, this research can specifically focus on the former explanation focusing on bureaucrats' own evaluations of citizen-clients. Our main contribution is to theorise on how bureaucrats' own social background, as constituting either a minority or majority status in society, might directly affect their discriminatory evaluations of citizen-clients with different minority and majority statuses. Our survey vignette experiment should be seen as a first empirical test of the resulting hypotheses. This research thus contributes to the limited micro-level research that examines the link between street-level bureaucrats' social backgrounds and unequal treatment of citizen-clients (Headley & Wright, 2020; Jilke & Tummers, 2018; Wright & Headley, 2020).

Empirically, our research focuses on a range of different types of street-level bureaucrats. Much research on discrimination or stereotyping by street-level bureaucrats focuses on only one professional group, such as teachers (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Harrits, 2019), police officers (Epp et al., 2014; Hong, 2017), tax officials (Raaphorst

et al., 2018), doctors (Assouline & Gilad, 2022) or welfare workers (Schram et al., 2009; Thomann & Rapp, 2018). A notable exception is the work by Harrits and Møller (2014), focusing on differential categorizations of clients of different social classes, by nurses, pedagogues, and teachers. We contribute to this, by focusing on different street-level organisations who vary in their core task (Jensen, 2018), including both street-level organisations with service-producing core tasks (e.g., education, municipalities) and those with more regulatory core tasks (e.g., police, judiciary). While we do not examine the differences between different core tasks and policy domains, including a broader range of street-level organisations in studying biased evaluations increases the generalizability of our findings.

In what follows, we introduce our theoretical propositions and hypotheses based on existing studies on street-level discrimination and representative bureaucracy. After that we present our research design, methods, and findings. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for both theory and practice.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Discrimination in evaluating citizen-clients from different status groups

The last decade, street-level bureaucracy scholarship has advanced its theories and methods to explore and explain how citizen-clients are stereotyped and discriminated against in frontline decision making. Studies have shown how stereotypes or biases about citizen-clients' social class, ethnicity, race, and gender may affect street-level decision making (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Epp et al., 2014; Harrits, 2019; Headley & Wright, 2020; Pedersen & Nielsen, 2020; Raaphorst et al., 2018). Discrimination can be defined as 'treating a person or particular group of people differently, especially in a worse way from the way in which you treat other people, because of their race, gender, sexuality, etc.' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). Studies focus on differential evaluations in the process of decision-making as well as the outcomes in terms of the differential allocation of services. This study focuses on discrimination in the decision-making process, that is, how bureaucrats differentiate citizen-clients with different social backgrounds in evaluating unobservable characteristics (e.g., competence and intentions) which are essential to reach a final decision.

Processes of discrimination have been studied by means of qualitative methods, such as participant observation and interviewing, showing how a citizen-client's alleged social group membership matters for street-level bureaucrats' discretionary judgements (Dubois, 2010; Harrits, 2019; Harrits & Møller, 2014; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018). These qualitative studies shed light on how reasoning about cases is affected by how street-level bureaucrats ascribe citizen-clients certain characteristics based on cultural stereotypes about those groups. Shifting the focus from processes of stereotypical reasoning to assessing the effect of stereotypes and biases, experimental and quasi-experimental studies have shown how cues associated with lower status groups, for example, minority-sounding names, affect frontline judgements and decision making differently than higher-status-group cues, for example, majority-sounding names (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Harrits, 2019; Raaphorst et al., 2018). Other studies analyse the actual decisions of frontline workers on concrete cases, for example, traffic police officers' decisions to stop drivers (Epp et al., 2014), or welfare workers allocation of welfare benefits (Thomann & Rapp, 2018), and show how these are affected by perceptions of citizen-clients' race and immigration status.

Different theories have been put forward, explored, and tested to explain the use of stereotypes or illegitimate discrimination by street-level bureaucrats. Focusing on the decision-making by street-level bureaucrats, theories focus on the cognitive processes leading to the use of stereotypes. Models from behavioural psychology have been adopted and tested within public administration contexts, proposing how discrimination is the result of street-level bureaucrats' coping strategies (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Jilke & Tummers, 2018; Lipsky, 2010). The assumption is that street-level bureaucrats' behaviour can be explained by how they deal with stress in their daily work (e.g., Tummers et al., 2015). From this approach, it is held that street-level bureaucrats search for options that are acceptable (satisficing) by relying on simple heuristics and cognitive shortcuts (Simon, 1976; Tummers, 2017). Stereotypes are

seen as such cognitive shortcuts which provide street-level bureaucrats information about groups of citizens, which they would otherwise not have. In street-level contexts characterised by information uncertainty and high workloads, it is held, street-level bureaucrats use biases as a way to deal with cognitive load (Andersen & Guul, 2019), or as the result of a conscious cost-benefit analysis where certain groups of citizen-clients are avoided as they are believed to create higher workloads (e.g., Jilke et al., 2018). In their survey and field experimental study on Danish teachers, Andersen and Guul (2019) find how teachers discriminate against students with ethnic minority names, and that this was minimised in the treatment group where teachers have actual reduced workloads. Other sociological studies also point to the role of implicit biases in street-level decision making and emphasise how broader cultural stereotypes are internalised by bureaucrats and reproduced in micro level interactions between bureaucrats and citizens (Harrits, 2019; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Raaphorst et al., 2018; Schram et al., 2009). For example, the study by Schram et al. (2009) developed and tested the Racial Classification Model, proposing how bureaucrats seek cues to confirm their expectations, based on social classifications and group reputations. In using an experimental vignette study, they show how case managers in the Florida WT Program, judge black welfare clients more harshly than white welfare clients when rules have been violated.

This study is not focused on explaining why bureaucrats discriminate in the first place. As such, this research is not able to test the specific mechanisms of direct discrimination effects—whether it is the result of for example, conscious racial animus or stereotypical beliefs, statistical discrimination, or implicit biases. Regardless, street-level discrimination studies consistently show how citizen-clients from lower status groups are treated more harshly or evaluated more negatively than citizen-clients from higher status groups (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Epp et al., 2014; Harrits, 2019; Harrits & Møller, 2014; Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018; Schram et al., 2009; Thomann & Rapp, 2018, but see some exceptions: Jilke and Tummers (2018) on positive discrimination and Raaphorst et al. (2018) on reversed double standards). Based on these studies, we posit that citizen-clients of lower status groups in society will be evaluated more negatively than citizen-clients from higher status groups in society.

This study focuses on two different social groups that are typically associated with strong cultural stereotypes: ethnicity and level of education. Existing research has shown how members of migrant groups are being discriminated against at the Dutch labour market, are less likely to be invited for a job interview, and that especially Turkish and Moroccan Dutch people often experience discrimination in the public space, job market, contacts with authorities or in education (Vrooman et al., 2014). Previous research in the Dutch context has furthermore shown how a citizen-client's level of education is associated with different cultural beliefs with regards to competence and intentions (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018). Moreover, existing research on class stereotypes focused on occupational positions, often refer to stereotypes related to level of education (e.g., Harrits, 2019). We hold that, while level of education and class position are strongly related, as the former is determinative of the latter, level of education is a better indicator of someone's cultural status in society (van der Waal & de Koster, 2015). Existing research has provided evidence that low levels of education form the basis for a social status and stigma, because it is defined by 'an absence of something, that is, a lack of education' (Kuppens et al., 2015: 1261).¹ Moreover, while discrimination based on level of education is often considered more legitimate, as it is seen as a reflection of someone's merit (personal achievement, skill, or ability), allocating social and economic rewards based on someone's abilities and proclivities is just as arbitrary as discrimination based on other social statuses, such as gender and ethnicity (Tannock, 2008). More importantly for this study, differentiation based on level of education is not obvious in the provision of social services. Based on this we expect the following:

Hypothesis 1. Citizen-clients of Moroccan origin will be evaluated more negatively than citizen-clients of Dutch origin.

Hypothesis 2. Citizen-clients with a lower level of education will be evaluated more negatively than citizen-clients with a higher level of education.

2.2 | The effect of bureaucrats' background

Representative bureaucracy theory holds that if bureaucracies are representative of the public they serve, citizens are more likely to identify with those public officials, which may have a positive effect on their attitudes towards those bureaucracies (Krislov, 1974; Theobald & Haider-Markel, 2009). While passive representation refers to the numerical demographic composition of the bureaucratic workforce, active representation refers to bureaucrats from socially disadvantaged groups who take up a minority representative role and make decisions that are informed by their social group memberships (Meier & Morton, 2015; Mosher, 1968; Watkins-Hayes, 2011). The theory assumes that individuals with a same social background share a common history, values, and a collective social identity, through early socialisation processes (Meier, 1975; Watkins-Hayes, 2011). It moreover holds that public officials will act in line with this and 'seek to maximize the values that are salient to [them] at the time of the decision' (Meier & Morton, 2015: 99). As such, congruence between social backgrounds in official-citizen interactions at the individual level, will directly affect minority group outcomes through 'affinity (...) grounded in the cultural knowledge of the actors involved' (Watkins-Hayes, 2011: i241).

Existing research explicitly examining the link between representation and discrimination is limited and shows mixed results. Analysing panel data on representation and on stop and searches in English and Welsh police forces, Hong (2017) finds that an increase in the proportion of police officers of ethnic minorities is negatively associated with racial profiling in vehicle stops. The study moreover finds that this effect is more pronounced in police forces where racial profiling is more intensively used as a policing tactic, showing how the effect of representative bureaucracy varies as a function of pre-existing discrimination (see also Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2011). Contrary to this finding, Wilkins and Williams (2008) find that increasing Black police officer representation increases racial disparity in vehicle stops, which is attributed to strong organisational socialisation within police forces where officers identify as 'blue' instead of 'black'. Both studies, however, relied on aggregate data at the level of divisions or departments, making it difficult to establish through which micro-level mechanisms decision making is affected. Recently, research within the US policing context has found evidence on the effects of congruence between social statuses of bureaucrats and citizens on discrimination (Headley & Wright, 2020; Wright & Headley, 2020). This research shows that Black officers were less likely to use higher levels of force compared to White officers when interacting with Black citizens, and that Black officers were less likely to arrest a white citizen than White officers were to arrest a Black citizen (Headley & Wright, 2020).

Preventing or minimising discrimination of clients based on their alleged group belonging can be seen as a form of active representation. Postulating from representative bureaucracy theory, we could argue that when there is congruence between social backgrounds of bureaucrats and clients, bureaucrats are less likely to discriminate against those clients. Identifying their shared social group membership, a minority bureaucrat recognises a client's past and present-day experiences of subjugation and discrimination (Watkins-Hayes, 2011). Following from this, it is expected that this experience-based knowledge about clients from specific minority groups makes minority bureaucrats less inclined to use double standards that would disadvantage those clients. In doing so, they will act in line with their minority representative role aimed at advancing the interests of socially disadvantaged groups (Selden et al., 1998). Following Miller and Keiser (2021) who use the theory of white privilege to theorise on the saliency of race for white citizens in police encounters, we argue that majority group bureaucrats more generally do not experience negative discrimination and even receive advantages due to their group membership. The theory of white privilege is thus extrapolated to majority statuses more generally. Here, we do not refer to majority and minority status in numerical sense, but rather to relative differences in access to valued resources and power (Seyranian et al., 2008). As such, having a higher level of education constitutes a majority status, as it provides the means to acquiring positions of power and influence, while lower or non-educated persons have less access to these valued resources in society (Tannock, 2008). Likewise, women are disadvantaged in society compared to men on various economic indicators (Schmitt et al., 2002). For majority group bureaucrats, we therefore expect that their group status will not be as

salient as it is for minority group bureaucrats in encounters with citizens, where decisions are made regarding who is deserving of government support and hence is granted access to resources.

We furthermore expect that this type of active representation is not limited to bureaucrat-citizen interactions where there is a shared group membership² (e.g., both lower educated) but is also likely when both a bureaucrat and citizen are part of a lower status group in society more generally. Merritt et al. (2020) expand the representative bureaucracy theory to also include bureaucrats' lived experiences 'or their interactions with an idiosyncratic environment, including those that have formed their worldview and attitudes' (p. 434). The Cambridge Dictionary defines lived experience as 'the things that someone has experienced themselves, especially when these give the person a knowledge or understanding that people who have only heard about such experiences do not have' (2022). In their study, Merritt et al. (2020) find bureaucrats with lived experience in behavioural health facilities (as former recipients of mental health services) elevated trust between service recipients and bureaucrats, by relying on their personal knowledge and experience of a particular issue. Following from this, we argue that bureaucrats from lower status groups likely have experienced a form of discrimination themselves and use this lived experience in encounters with citizens. As such, through their lived experience, they will have an increased awareness of dominant societal stereotypes and will therefore be less inclined to rely on these in their evaluations of citizens. We thus expect that having a lived experience of discrimination travels between different minority positions, leading to a shared identity as minority group.

At the same time, existing research on class perceptions and attitudes towards immigrants in the United States shows how some working-class groups do not consider immigrants and racial out-groups to be part of their working-class identity (McDermott et al., 2019). This indicates possible barriers towards the experience of a shared identity between lower educated bureaucrats and citizen-clients of Moroccan origin. In addition, research in the United States shows that workers with the least education perceive immigrants least favourably, and that higher educated people have more favourable views of immigrants (Haubert & Fussell, 2006). This suggests that higher education exposes people to ideas and values that are appreciative of other cultures and that question negative stereotypes, indicating that higher educated bureaucrats might be less inclined to discriminate against ethnic minorities. Although research on anti-immigration sentiments cannot be translated directly to ethnic discrimination in the context of bureaucratic decision-making, other mechanisms than having a shared lived experience of discrimination could be at play for level of education. We formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3. Bureaucrats with a lower level of education will be less inclined to discriminate to the disadvantage of the lower educated citizen-client and the citizen-client of Moroccan origin than bureaucrats with a higher level of education.

Hypothesis 4. Female bureaucrats will be less inclined to discriminate to the disadvantage of the lower educated citizen-client and the citizen-client of Moroccan origin than male bureaucrats.

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Survey experiment

To assess to what extent bureaucrats discriminate in the evaluation of citizen-clients, a vignette-based survey experiment among Dutch public officials was conducted in October 2019. We chose for a between-subject experimental design suitable to study a sensitive topic such as discrimination. The use of within-person designs, where one is asked to answer direct questions or to evaluate different decision-making scenarios in a row could lead to rationalised answers, potentially involving socially desirable answers. While within-person designs would allow for studying more nuanced ways of discrimination involving multiple cues (e.g., Raaphorst et al., 2018), a

between-person design fits the purpose of this study focused on the effect of bureaucrats' social background on direct forms of discrimination. The vignette-based survey experiment allowed to portray a realistic situation and combine multiple factors to test for different client statuses and possible interactions with bureaucrats' backgrounds. Furthermore, using a vignette experiment contributes to the internal validity of the study, as it allows for isolating factors at the micro level of frontline decision making, which are more difficult to examine in studies using aggregate level data.

Accordingly, respondents were presented with a vignette about a case in the context of the Dutch Employee Insurance Agency (UWV). It portrays a hypothetical case of a client in need of employment. We chose for this organisational context because the UWV is a large organisation responsible for the provision of employee insurance schemes, for example, when people become unemployed, fall ill, or take pregnancy or maternity leave. The context of the vignette portrays someone who is eligible for unemployment benefit (WW benefit) under the Unemployment Insurance Act. Opposed to social assistance benefits which constitute a basic right, focused on only a subset of the population which is dependent on a benefit for basic living (the neediest), unemployment benefit provides temporary income until one returns to work. One is eligible for this benefit when one is involuntarily unemployed, has sufficient work history and is available for work. We chose for this organisation and benefit as these are widely known to the general population, making it easier for respondents employed in various settings to familiarise with the decision-making task.

There were two experimental treatments based on (1) assumed ethnicity (Moroccan and native-Dutch) and (2) level of education (lower versus higher). This 2×2 design resulted in four experimental conditions to which participants were randomly assigned (see Figures 1 and 2). In line with other experimental research on discrimination and representative bureaucracy we manipulated ethnicity by using different (sur)names for citizen-clients (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Baekgaard & George, 2018). We chose surnames that are common in the Netherlands and suggest either Dutch or Moroccan descent: de Vries and El Alaoui respectively. For level of education, we distinguish secondary vocationally trained citizen-clients (in Dutch: MBO) from university educated citizen-clients, to respectively signal lower and higher educated citizen-clients.

This research, including hypotheses, exploratory analyses, design, and analyses, was pre-registered on Open Science Framework (OSF): <https://osf.io/xm3qs>. Besides testing our hypotheses, the preregistration included exploratory analyses to analyse whether sector, age, tenure, and having contact with citizen-clients in daily work or not

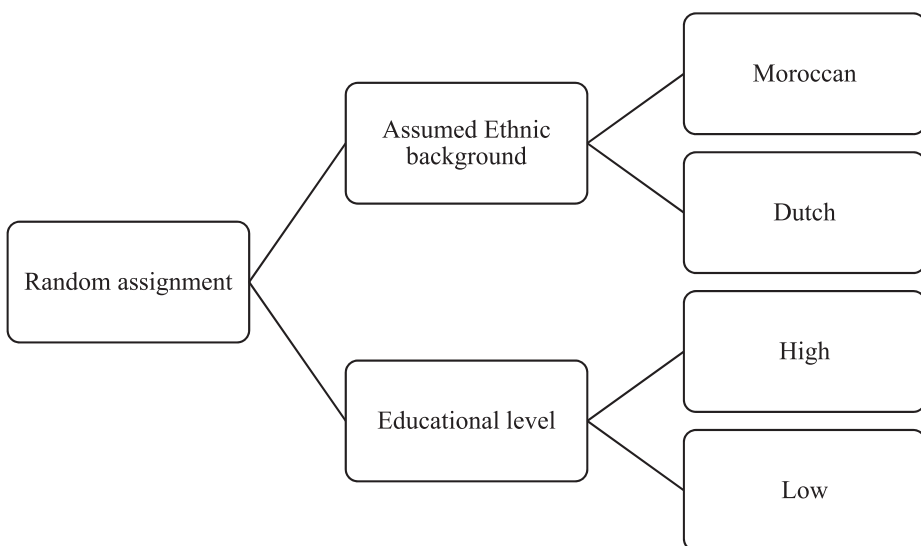


FIGURE 1 Experimental design of client vignettes.

You are conducting a home visit at a client who already received unemployment benefits for five months. Mr. **El Alaoui / De Vries** has lost his job after a reorganization of the accounting office he worked at. He is entitled to a maximum of 12 months unemployment benefits. During the home visit, you find out that the **secondary vocationally educated / university educated** client has done some paid jobs as a freelance bookkeeper last month. However, this is not known to the UWV. The client indicates that he has forgotten to report this within the mandatory period of one week.

FIGURE 2 Vignette and cues.

makes a difference in patterns of discrimination. However, since the randomisation check showed no systematic differences across experimental groups, we did not include these control variables to our analyses (see also next section). To explore potential explanations of our null findings, we conducted additional exploratory analyses to those that are pre-registered, to examine possible interactions between status characteristics of a client between status characteristics of bureaucrats. The research was moreover reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs of Leiden University, and was granted ethical clearance prior to the data collection [Ref. no 2019-011-BSK-Raaphorst].

This study focuses on discrimination in the decision-making process, i.e. how bureaucrats differentiate citizen-clients with different social backgrounds in evaluating unobservable characteristics (e.g., competence and intentions) which are essential to reach a final decision. To that end, respondents were asked to evaluate the hypothetical client on three trust items that were derived from previous research (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018): (1) the 'Trust' evaluation: 'I have the impression the client is to be trusted', (2) the 'Good intentions' evaluation: 'I have the impression that the client had good intentions', and (3) the 'Knowledge of the rules' evaluation: 'I have the impression that the client has knowledge of the rules' all measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = 'Strongly disagree' to 7 = 'Strongly agree'). Besides a self-report measure of trust, the other two items align with dominant conceptualizations of trustworthiness or sources of trust, distinguishing two dimensions: goodwill and competence (Barber, 1983; Das & Teng, 2004; Nooteboom, 1996). The former refers to having the intentions to act in line with agreements, while the latter concerns a person's ability to do so (Nooteboom, 1996).

3.2 | Sample

The experiment was conducted as an online survey administered via 'Flitspanel' in different sectors, such as municipalities, judiciary, primary, secondary, lower and higher education, and the police. This panel was used as it gave us access to bureaucrats with a range of different core tasks, but all contributing to the delivery of services to citizen-clients. Flitspanel exists of more than 20.000 members who applied voluntarily to participate in frequent surveys about a range of topics covering work and employment in the public sector. Data were collected from 11 October 2019 until 30 October 2019 and yielded a response of $N = 3109$, a response rate of 22%. Table 1 gives an overview of the descriptive statistics.

To check whether the randomisation across the four experimental groups was successful, we conducted F -tests across the experimental groups for equality in means of the variables as shown in Table 1. To test the distribution across the different sectors, Chi-square tests were performed. As shown in Table 2, the differences across groups

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics.

	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Trust	1	7	3.99	1.32
Good intentions	1	7	4.10	1.37
Knowledge of rules	1	7	4.74	1.48
Gender (0 = Male, 1 = Female)	0	1	0.42	0.49
Educational level ^a (0 = Low, 1 = High)	0	1	0.83	0.37
Age	26	75	55.29	8.14
Face-to-face contact in job (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0	1	0.78	0.41
Make decisions about citizens (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0	1	0.64	0.48
Worked at UWV (No = 0, 1 = Yes)	0	1	0.01	0.12
Supervisory function (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0	1	0.17	0.38
Years worked in public sector	0.00	52.00	25.55	10.89

Note: *N* = 3109.

^aLow: includes basic and senior secondary vocational education; High: includes higher vocational (applied university) and university education.

TABLE 2 Distribution across experimental groups.

Variable	Moroccan, low		Moroccan, high		Dutch, low		Dutch, high		<i>F</i> (<i>p</i> -value)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Gender (0 = Man, 1 = Woman)	0.43	0.50	0.41	0.49	0.43	0.50	0.40	0.49	0.706 (0.549)
Educational level (0 = Low, 1 = High)	0.85	0.36	0.81	0.39	0.83	0.37	0.83	0.37	1.215 (0.303)
Age	55.37	8.31	55.64	8.02	54.97	8.26	55.19	7.96	0.951 (0.415)
Face-to-face contact in job (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0.79	0.41	0.78	0.41	0.79	0.41	0.78	0.42	0.158 (0.924)
Takes decisions about citizens (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0.62	0.49	0.64	0.48	0.63	0.48	0.67	0.47	1.503 (0.212)
Worked at UWV (No = 0, 1 = Yes)	0.02	0.13	0.01	0.11	0.01	0.10	0.01	0.12	0.422 (0.738)
Supervisory function (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	0.16	0.37	0.17	0.38	0.17	0.38	0.17	0.37	0.095 (0.963)
Years worked in public sector	25.28	10.92	25.97	10.99	25.22	10.79	25.73	10.86	0.857 (0.463)
<i>N</i>	779		775		781		774		

Abbreviations: *M*, mean; *SD*, standard deviation.

are not large and the *p*-values indicate that there are no significant differences in means. Similarly, the Chi-square tests showed no significant differences between the different public sector domains. Based on this, it can be concluded that there are no systematic differences across the four groups and randomisation was successful. Given these results, we did not employ control variables in our analyses.

4 | FINDINGS

ANOVA (SPSS 27) was used to compare the experimental groups and the different sub-groups (gender and education) on the three evaluation measures ('Trust', 'Good Intentions' and 'Knowledge of Rules').

4.1 | Discrimination in evaluating citizen-clients from different status groups

To compare the means between the experimental groups and test Hypotheses 1 and 2 we conducted an independent samples *t*-test for each of the three dependent variables (see Tables 3 and 4). The test for homogeneity of variances shows equal variances between groups for all three dependent variables, except for 'Trust' between the two educational levels. The analyses show a more positive evaluation of Trust and Good Intentions for the client with an assumed Moroccan background relative to the client with an assumed native Dutch background, with mean differences of 0.268 ($p = 0.000$) and 0.285 ($p = 0.000$). There is no statistically significant difference between the two groups for Knowledge of Rules ($p = 0.120$). Based on these results, hypothesis 1 is rejected.

A second set of analyses was performed comparing clients with low and high educational levels. Clients with a higher educational level are evaluated more positively on their Knowledge of Rules compared to clients with a lower educational level with a mean difference of 0.324 ($t(3107) = -6.132$, $p = 0.000$). No significant differences were found for Trust and Good Intentions. Hence, we only find support for hypothesis 2 for Knowledge of Rules.

4.2 | Status characteristics of bureaucrats

Based on representative bureaucracy literature, we expected that status characteristics of bureaucrats play a role in their biased decision-making regarding clients from diverse status backgrounds. To test whether bureaucrats' educational background influences their evaluation of clients we performed a series of two-way ANOVA analyses (see Table 5). The analyses, however, revealed non-significant interaction effects between bureaucrats' educational background and clients' educational level, respectively for Trust $F(1, 3030) = 0.201$, $p = 0.654$, Good Intentions

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics on dependent variables for the experimental groups.

		N	M	SD
Trust	Moroccan descent	1554	4.12	1.33
	Dutch descent	1555	3.85	1.30
	Low educational level	1560	4.01	1.28
	High educational level	1549	3.96	1.36
Good intentions	Moroccan descent	1554	4.24	1.36
	Dutch descent	1555	3.95	1.37
	Low educational level	1560	4.12	1.36
	High educational level	1549	4.07	1.39
Knowledge of rules	Moroccan descent	1554	4.69	1.46
	Dutch descent	1555	4.78	1.50
	Low educational level	1560	4.57	1.47
	High educational level	1549	4.90	1.48
	Total	3109	4.74	1.495

TABLE 4 Independent t-test for equality of means.

Dependent variables	Experimental groups	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean diff.	Std. error diff.	95% confidence interval of the difference		Cohen's d
							Lower	Upper	
Trust	Moroccan versus Dutch descent	5.681	3107	0.000	0.268	0.047	0.175	0.360	0.204
	Low versus higher educational level	0.980	3090.158	0.327	0.046	0.047	−0.046	0.139	0.035
Good intentions	Moroccan versus Dutch descent	5.821	3107	0.000	0.285	0.049	0.189	0.381	0.209
	Low versus Higher educational level	0.914	3107	0.361	0.045	0.049	−0.052	0.142	0.033
Knowledge of rules	Moroccan versus Dutch descent	−1.555	3107	0.120	−0.083	0.053	−0.187	0.022	−0.056
	Low versus higher educational level	−6.132	3107	0.000	−0.324	0.053	−0.427	−0.220	−0.220

TABLE 5 Means across experimental groups and bureaucrats' educational level (H3).

Dependent variable	Bureaucrats' educational level	Assumed ethnicity		Clients' educational level	
		Moroccan	Dutch	Low	High
Trust	Low	3.89 (1.41)	3.78 (1.33)	3.88 (1.39)	3.80 (1.35)
	High	4.18 (1.31)	3.88 (1.28)	4.04 (1.25)	4.01 (1.36)
Good intentions	Low	4.02 (1.33)	3.81 (1.39)	3.95 (1.40)	3.89 (1.32)
	High	4.29 (1.36)	3.99 (1.36)	4.16 (1.34)	4.11 (1.40)
Knowledge of rules	Low	4.93 (1.40)	4.86 (1.51)	4.79 (1.46)	4.98 (1.45)
	High	4.65 (1.47)	4.76 (1.50)	4.53 (1.46)	4.88 (1.49)

Note: Means and standard deviations in parentheses.

$F(1, 3030) = 0.019$, $p = 0.891$, and Knowledge of Rules $F(1, 3030) = 1.334$, $p = 0.248$. Furthermore, the analyses showed non-significant interaction effects between bureaucrats' educational background and clients' assumed ethnicity, respectively for Trust $F(1, 3030) = 2.361$, $p = 0.124$, Good Intentions $F(1, 3030) = 0.376$, $p = 0.540$, and Knowledge of Rules $F(1, 3030) = 1.393$, $p = 0.238$. While higher educated bureaucrats tend to have more positive evaluations of Trust and Good Intentions of clients compared to lower educated bureaucrats, this difference as to the evaluation of clients is not dependent on clients' ethnic or educational background. Hence, hypothesis 3 should be rejected.

To test Hypothesis 4, two-way ANOVA analyses were performed comparing the evaluations by male and female bureaucrats of clients from diverse ethnic and educational backgrounds (see Table 6). The interaction effects between bureaucrats' gender and clients' educational level were, however, not statistically significant (respectively for Trust $F(1, 3105) = 0.000$, $p = 0.987$, Good Intentions $F(1, 3105) = 0.088$, $p = 0.767$, and Knowledge of Rules

TABLE 6 Means across experimental groups and bureaucrats' gender (H4).

Dependent variable	Bureaucrats' gender	Clients' assumed ethnicity		Clients' educational level	
		Moroccan	Dutch	Low	High
Trust	Male	4.03 (1.39)	3.76 (1.33)	3.92 (1.32)	3.88 (1.41)
	Female	4.24 (1.24)	3.98 (1.23)	4.13 (1.20)	4.09 (1.29)
Good intentions	Male	4.12 (1.39)	3.83 (1.40)	3.99 (1.38)	3.96 (1.41)
	Female	4.40 (1.30)	4.13 (1.32)	4.29 (1.30)	4.24 (1.34)
Knowledge of rules	Male	4.79 (1.47)	4.84 (1.50)	4.68 (1.47)	4.95 (1.49)
	Female	4.56 (1.42)	4.69 (1.50)	4.44 (1.45)	4.82 (1.46)

Note: Means and standard deviations in parentheses.

$F(1, 3105) = 1.011, p = 0.315$). Furthermore, the analyses showed non-significant interaction effects between bureaucrats' gender and clients' assumed ethnicity, respectively for Trust $F(1, 3105) = 0.001, p = 0.971$, Good Intentions $F(1, 3105) = 0.039, p = 0.844$, and Knowledge of Rules $F(1, 3105) = 0.723, p = 0.395$. Female bureaucrats tend to have more positive evaluations of Trust and Good Intentions compared to male bureaucrats, but this gender difference as to the evaluation of clients is not dependent on clients' ethnic or educational background. Hence hypothesis 4 is rejected.

4.3 | Exploratory analyses

Our null findings give rise to a further exploration of (1) possible effects of the interaction between the status characteristics of a client and (2) the role of characteristics of the study participants. To this purpose, we conducted several exploratory analyses. First, we examined whether bureaucrats' evaluations are associated with the intersection of the two client statuses. Using multiple two-way ANOVA analyses, we tested evaluations across the experimental groups combining assumed ethnic and educational status of clients. For the dependent variables Trust and Good Intentions, the test showed equal variances between groups. For Knowledge of Rules the variances were unequal and additional Welch and Brown-Forsythe tests were performed. The F -tests indicated significant mean differences across groups for Trust $F(3, 3105) = 11.109; p = 0.000$, Good Intentions $F(3, 3105) = 12.152; p = 0.000$, and Knowledge of Rules $F(3, 3105) = 13.936; p = 0.000$. The post-hoc-Tukey test indicated more positive evaluations of Trust and Good Intentions for clients with an assumed Moroccan background compared to those with an assumed native-Dutch background regardless their educational levels. For knowledge of rules, clients with a high educational level were evaluated more positively than clients with a low educational level regardless their assumed ethnic background. Furthermore, educational level and gender of the bureaucrat did not affect these findings. From these explorations we conclude that the intersection of two different client statuses does not play a role, and, thus, do not explain our null findings. Second, we explored whether the study's findings may be different when the analysis is exclusively focused on bureaucrats who reported to have contact with citizens in their work. We therefore replicated the analyses on this subsample and found similar results.³

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

By using a survey experiment, this study examined whether and how bureaucrats' own status background affects their biased evaluations of citizen-clients with various social statuses. Relying on research on street-level discrimination and on representative bureaucracy literature, hypotheses were formulated on the influence of clients' social

status backgrounds on bureaucrats' evaluations, and on the effect of bureaucrats' own social status backgrounds on their biased evaluations. Most of our hypotheses could not be confirmed. Only for Knowledge of Rules and level of education, our hypothesis was supported by the data: clients with a higher educational level are attributed more knowledge of rules than clients with a lower level of education.

Contrary to our expectations, our study showed more positive evaluations of Trust and Good Intentions for clients with an assumed Moroccan background compared to clients with an assumed native Dutch background. These results are similar to those found in previous survey experiments on ethnic discrimination (Baekgaard & George, 2018; Wulff & Villadsen, 2020). Theoretically, these findings might indicate the use of reversed double standards, implying a stricter treatment of majority groups with assumed high capabilities 'to game the system' (e.g., Raaphorst et al., 2018). Our exploratory analyses have shown, though, that intersectionality of client characteristics does not play a role here: clients with an assumed Moroccan background are more positively evaluated than clients with an assumed Dutch background, regardless of their level of education.

As to the role of bureaucrats' own status background, the findings are not that clear cut and show that multiple characteristics of bureaucrats and of clients play a role in their evaluation. Both gender and educational level of bureaucrats affect how they evaluate clients. Women tend to evaluate more positively compared to men, while bureaucrats with a lower educational level had a more negative evaluation of clients. The results, however, did not support our hypotheses with regards to the effect of bureaucrats' own background characteristics on discrimination in the evaluations of citizen-clients with diverse backgrounds. Put differently, bureaucrats from low and high-status backgrounds show similar patterns as to differences in their evaluations of clients from low and high-status groups.

These findings imply that bureaucrats with a low-status background may have a lower inclination to take a minority representative role than assumed. The extent to which bureaucrats with low-status backgrounds are inclined to take a minority representative role can be dependent on the salience of the bureaucratic status in professional and organisational socialisation (Groeneveld & Meier, 2022; Watkins-Hayes, 2011). When bureaucrats' bureaucratic status is more salient to their social identity in the work context compared to their social status background, bureaucrats from low status backgrounds will identify to a lesser extent with clients from low status groups. Hence, their efforts to minimise discrimination will not differ from bureaucrats from higher status backgrounds which may explain our null findings.

Furthermore, diversity and anti-discrimination have received increasing attention in Dutch government bureaucracies. It can therefore be assumed that bureaucrats' sensitivity to diversity and anti-discrimination intentions have also increased. This may imply that while bureaucrats from high-status backgrounds lack the lived experience of belonging to a low status group in society, they have become more aware of status discrimination in their professional environment. Consequently, they may be more inclined to take a minority representative role. Although this does not evidently lead to changes in their behaviour, it may at least lead to higher awareness when processing information on clients. This line of argumentation is corroborated by the more positive evaluation of clients with an assumed Moroccan background for both bureaucrats from low and high-status groups. Alternatively, it is possible that the presence of minority bureaucrats in the studied organisational contexts affect the attitudes and behaviours of majority bureaucrats and organisational policies. These so-called 'contagion effects' (Meier, 2023) could explain our null findings, but this study does not have the aggregate data on the share of female and lower educated bureaucrats in the working contexts of respondents, which is a limitation of this study. Future research should combine individual level and aggregate data at the team or organisational level to examine through which mechanisms bureaucrats' background could affect discriminatory decision-making.

In addition to these general arguments about the role of status characteristics and discrimination in street-level organisations, our null findings could also be related to the focus on gender and educational level as status group characteristics of bureaucrats. While microlevel studies of gender representation in street-level bureaucracies have provided evidence for the positive effects of gender congruence between bureaucrat and client (Pedersen & Nielsen, 2020; Zhang, 2019), our null results raise the question to what extent minority representative role taking spills over to other low status identities.

Moreover, while the representative bureaucracy literature typically focuses on *ascribed* social statuses, such as ethnicity and gender, someone's level of education is an *achieved* status characteristic, which reflects one's efforts and is part of someone's cultural capital. As such, bureaucrats' level of education could affect their decision making not only by means of their lived experiences of being part of a minority or majority group in society, but also by means of acquired values and competences in recognising and responding to inequalities in society, and in questioning negative stereotypes about minority groups (Haubert & Fussell, 2006). Within street-level bureaucracies, these competences are possibly deployed in different types of core tasks, requiring different types of evaluations (e.g., varying levels of complexity). This may explain why higher educated bureaucrats have more positive evaluations of Trust and Good Intentions of clients compared to lower educated bureaucrats. At the same time, we do not find evidence that bureaucrats' educational background affects their tendency to discriminate between minority and majority clients in any direction.

This study is not able to distinguish between the different proposed mechanisms that may explain our null findings. It has some other limitations as well which need further reflection. While the use of a survey experiment allows for isolating individual level effects, it seems to be prone to social desirability bias when examining sensitive organisational topics like ethnic discrimination (Wulff & Villadsen, 2020), and asking respondents to evaluate a clients' character (Good Intentions and Trust). This is corroborated by our findings, only showing reversed discrimination with regards to assumed ethnicity, and not for level of education which could be a more socially accepted signal for competence in a meritocratic society. Asking respondents to read a short description, makes the evaluation primarily a cognitive task and could make it hard to generate real emotions which often play a role in ethnic discrimination (Wulff & Villadsen, 2020). Because of the heightened focus on ethnic discrimination by public organisations within the Netherlands, it could well be the case that bureaucrats would act in a socially desirable way to decision making situations involving ethnic minorities in real life too. This study is not able to give insight into the source of social desirability but underlines the need for using other methodologies for studying less socially acceptable forms of discrimination.

In addition, while a vignette experiment contributes to the internal validity of the study, it might pose challenges for achieving ecological validity. The vignette represented a hypothetical case with specific cues in a certain context. In practice, public officials could have more information, workplace distractions, identities, or consult with colleagues that could affect their decision-making. Moreover, while vignettes represent decision-making situations similar to work situations of the street-level organisations in this study, the decision-making scenario in this experiment was situated in a particular setting (employment benefits) which differed from bureaucrats' own core task in the field of education, policing, municipal work, and the judiciary, who were also placed at different hierarchical levels in street-level organisations. However, our exploratory analyses for the subsample of only street-level bureaucrats who have contact with citizens, show no differences in findings. Furthermore, while including various core tasks including different policy domains increases the generalizability of our findings, future research could theorise and empirically explore differences between core tasks in patterns of discrimination.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request from the authors.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs of Leiden University, and was granted ethical clearance prior to the data collection, at October 1st, 2019 [Ref. no 2019-011-BSK-Raaphorst].

ORCID

Nadine Raaphorst  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6189-6451>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In this paper we use the labels 'lower educated' and 'higher educated' to be able to examine existing, societal status hierarchies. In using these labels, we do not endorse the underlying status beliefs related to inferiority or superiority.
- ² In designing this study, we preferred to include the ethnicity of the bureaucrat to be able to test whether a match in these background characteristics in the encounter with citizens makes a difference in evaluations. Due to internal rules of the organisation administering the panel, we were not allowed to measure this.
- ³ An overview of findings is available upon request.

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