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Article

Breaking the rules, but for whom? How client characteristics affect frontline professionals' prosocial rule-breaking behavior

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Abstract

Studies have shown that a client's characteristics can affect frontline professionals' decision-making and use of discretion. However, we do not know whether these dynamics also exist in frontline professionals' prosocial rule-breaking (PSRB): breaking rules to benefit clients. This study focuses on to what extent and how client characteristics affect PSRB by frontline professionals. Using an innovative within-person vignette experiment among professionals in social welfare teams in the Netherlands (N = 58 professionals; 424 observations), we focus on clients' earned, needed, and resource deservingness. The results show that all three elements of deservingness positively affect the willingness of professionals to engage in PSRB, but needed deservingness has the greatest effect. Through three focus groups (N = 21 respondents), we build on this finding to reveal how different motives for PSRB align with various dimensions of deservingness. The results contribute to theory development on the use of discretion among frontline professionals.

Abstract (Dutch)

Onderzoek heeft aangetoond dat cliëntkenmerken besluitvorming en het gebruik van discretionaire ruimte door uitvoerend professionals kunnen beïnvloeden. We weten echter niet of deze dynamiek ook voorkomt bij prosocial rule-breaking (PSRB) door professionals: het overtreden van regels ten gunste van cliënten. Dit onderzoek richt zich op de mate waarin en hoe cliëntkenmerken PSRB door professionals beïnvloeden. Met behulp van een vignetexperiment onder professionals werkzaam in het sociaal domein in Nederland (N = 58 professionals; 424 observaties) richten we ons op de inzet, hulpbehoevendheid en reputatie van cliënten. De resultaten tonen aan dat alle drie deze elementen de bereidheid van professionals om regels te breken in het belang van cliënten positief beïnvloeden, maar dat hulpbehoevendheid de grootste invloed heeft. Drie focusgroepen (N = 21 respondenten) bouwen op deze bevinding voort en laten zien hoe verschillende motieven voor PSRB samenkomen. De resultaten dragen bij aan de theorieontwikkeling over het gebruik van discretionaire ruimte door professionals.

Key words: prosocial rule-breaking; deservingness; vignette experiment; frontline professionals; discretion.

Introduction

Frontline professionals are not just tasked with policy execution; they can also be seen as *de facto* policymakers. To translate vague laws into actionable practices, they rely on organizational rules and procedures designed to ensure predictability and legitimacy toward citizens (Lipsky 1980; Møller, Pedersen, and Pors 2022; Oberfield 2009). These rules and procedures help reduce uncertainty (Bernards 2023; Raaphorst 2018), but they do not always capture the complexities of real-life situations. When rules feel burdensome, illogical, or misaligned with organizational goals, professionals may view them as illegitimate (Bozeman and Feeney 2014; Fleming and Bodkin 2023). Positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy, frontline workers are *"forced to resolve any ambiguity, vagueness, or conflict that exists in public policy"* (Zacka 2017, p. 25) and may choose to engage in prosocial rule-breaking (PSRB) rather than rule-following. PSRB refers to the deliberate violation of rules to better serve the public (Borry 2017; Morrison 2006). Unlike rule-bending, which exploits loopholes without outright violations (Homan et al. 2024), PSRB involves a conscious departure from official procedures to create public value Fleming and Bodkin 2023).

The likelihood that frontline professionals engage in PSRB behavior depends on three types of factors: (1) organizational factors, (2) factors related to individual professionals, and (3) client-related factors. To date, limited attention has been paid to this third factor. Client-related characteristics encompass a wide range of indicators related to who the client is (such as gender or race) and how the client acts (such as displaying deservingness or likability) in public encounters (Bartels 2013). Research has shown that frontline professionals sometimes use such client characteristics to decide which clients to prioritize (Jilke and Tummers 2018) or whether to trust clients (Davidovitz and Cohen 2022, 2023). Time pressures, a lack of resources, and a lack of information

lead frontline professionals to use client characteristics to develop stereotypes as mental shortcuts that help them categorize clients and decide on courses of action (Raaphorst, Groeneveld, and Van de Walle 2018).

Studies on the impact of client characteristics on decision-making among frontline professionals are often situated in contexts where frontline professionals have reasonable discretion. In this work, we argue that PSRB can be seen as one of the most critical uses of discretionary space. Since rule-breaking is often seen as deviant behavior (Hollibaugh Jr, Miles, and Newswander 2020) and may sometimes be sanctioned or punished (Morrison 2006), engaging in PSRB involves professionals taking a risk. The question is whether they are willing to take a risk for all citizens. While we have reason to expect that client characteristics impact the willingness of frontline professionals to engage in PSRB, there have been insufficient studies to determine a relationship. Therefore, the central research question of this study is:

> To what extent and how do client characteristics affect PSRB among frontline professionals?

This study focuses on deservingness as a critical client characteristic. Research has shown that deservingness may influence frontline professionals when prioritizing specific clients over others (Jilke and Tummers 2018), deciding whether to provide government resources to clients (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), or how much time to devote to clients (Lipsky 1980). Deservingness is often framed as worthiness in public administration research (Harrits and Møller 2014), yet it consists of three dimensions: (1) are clients likely to be successful when investing resources (resource deservingness), (2) are clients in need of help (needed deservingness), and (3) do clients show efforts (earned deservingness) (cf. van Jilke and Tummers 2018; Oorschot 2000)? Frontline decisions about what resources clients receive (time, money, or attention) to an extent depend on how frontline professionals construct the deservingness of their clients.

Our study combines a vignette experiment with focus groups to answer the research question. First, we use a quasi-experimental survey design to assess the within-person effect of deservingness on PSRB intentions through a full factorial design with nine scenarios. Developed in collaboration with practitioners, these scenarios present a realistic case of a client facing various health and welfare challenges and varying elements of deservingness when seeking help from a public organization. After each scenario, frontline professionals ($N = 58$) working in the social care domain in the Netherlands answered whether they would engage in PSRB behavior. We also conducted focus groups ($N = 21$) with frontline professionals, policymakers, and supervisors to understand the mechanisms behind the relationships we found, answering *how* PSRB is impacted by deservingness, and providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between deservingness and PSRB.

Our findings contribute to several research areas that have been prominent in recent years. First, our study shows that different dimensions of deservingness affect PSRB differently. So far, most research concentrates on needed deservingness (Chattopadhyay and Piatak 2023; Lu, Xu, and Wang 2021; Mikkelsen, Pedersen, and Petersen 2023) and, to a lesser extent, earned deservingness (Hansen 2024, 2025). In addition, these studies mainly focus on one dimension of deservingness (Dietrich et al. 2023; Mikkelsen, Pedersen, and Petersen 2023) or the interplay of one deservingness dimension with other client attributes like competence (Guul, Pedersen, and Petersen 2021) or demographic characteristics (Jilke and Tummers 2018). Our study adds to these studies by studying the interplay of different deservingness dimensions. By distinguishing between (1) resource, (2) needed, and (3) earned deservingness and measuring both the effects of one deservingness cue and the effects of combined deservingness cues, we show the importance of simultaneously taking multiple dimensions into account. For frontline professionals, understanding what type of deservingness generally impacts their decision-making could help them reflect on the desirability of considering such factors.

Second, our study contributes to a better understanding of frontline professionals' use of discretion and rule compliance behavior. The principle of treating clients equally is a core aspect of bureaucratic organizations, and rules play an essential role in safeguarding this principle. In practice, however, frontline professionals do not give all clients equal time, energy, and resources (Lipsky 1980; Tummers et al. 2015). This study shows the extent to which and how prosocial motivation leads to rule-breaking rather than rule-following, thus responding to the call by Bozeman (2022) for more research to better understand the choices and motivations behind compliance or noncompliance with rules. We explain the mechanisms underlying these differentiations based on the focus group findings and show how frontline professionals construct deservingness.

Third, our study provides more insight into the actual use of discretion by frontline professionals in a bureaucratic context. Møller, Pedersen, and Pors (2022, p. 152) argue that the use of discretion is "*best understood as case-based reasoning, or casuistry (…) [that] allows street-level bureaucrats to engage in a flexible and continuous balancing act when translating abstract policy and competing demands into concrete action.*" We add to this explanation by showing how deservingness is constructed through case-based reasoning and when PSRB is used as a form of discretion to benefit citizens (Meier 2019). We follow the work by Møller (2021) and Berg et al. (2024), who argue that frontline professionals should view client characteristics as collectively negotiated constructs. Thus, deservingness is not an objective marker that is viewed in the same way by all frontline professionals but a client attribute that is constructed in the interaction between frontline professionals and clients (LeRoux et al. 2019) and among teams of frontline professionals (Visser and Van Hulst 2024). Compared to earlier studies, we draw upon frontline professionals rather than samples of paid respondents (through services such as mTurk) or students to increase the validity of our study.

Conceptual framework

Rules in a bureaucratic context

From a Weberian perspective, public organizations rely on rules and procedures to ensure precision, reliability, calculability, and accountability of frontline work (Gajduschek 2003), providing the foundation for decision-making (Piatak, Mohr, and McDonald 2022) and ensuring that bureaucratic actions remain consistent and legitimate towards citizens. Rules not only protect citizens but also guide professionals, reducing uncertainty, and clarifying appropriate actions

(Bernards 2023; Raaphorst 2018). In this role, professionals serve as "policy translators," turning abstract directives into practical responses (Møller, Pedersen, and Pors 2022). Yet, research on street-level bureaucracy highlights that many frontline situations are too complex for rigid procedures (Lipsky 1980). In such cases, discretion becomes essential. Professionals must navigate the tension between rule compliance and the need to adapt to individual circumstances in delivering public services.

Prosocial rule-breaking to cope with the demands of public service delivery

Rule-breaking is often seen as deviant and unbureaucratic behavior (DeHart-Davis 2007), yet intentionally doing so for societal reasons is referred to as prosocial rule-breaking (PSRB) (Morrison 2006). Generally, PSRB is driven by any, or a combination, of three motives: (1) to increase organizational efficiency, (2) to help out colleagues, or (3) to ensure better public service delivery (Morrison 2006). Regarding the first motive, Brockmann (2017) showed that police officers sometimes break rules because this leads to increased efficiency or effectiveness. Breaking rules from this perspective may be seen as "workarounds" that help professionals cope with job demands (Bozeman, Youtie, and Jung 2021). The second motive usually refers to situations where managers help subordinates. Morrison's (2006) study identified different ways in which this type of behavior is enacted, for example, by paying employees in advance when "*strapped for cash*" (p. 11) or letting security staff warm up inside, even though they are supposed to stay outside even on cold days. The final motive, ensuring better public service delivery, is this study's primary interest and the motive that has been studied most often. Research in a variety of contexts, such as healthcare (Borry and Henderson 2020), education (Gofen 2014), social work (Fleming 2020), and local administrative organizations (Potipiroon 2022), shows how frontline professionals use PSRB to deliver better public services than if they would have followed standardized rules and procedures.

Whether professionals engage in PSRB is shaped by three types of factors: (1) factors at the organizational level, (2) factors at the level of the individual professional, and (3) by client characteristics. First, various organizational factors affect PSRB. For example, rule formalization (Borry et al. 2018) and rule consistency (Piatak, Mohr, and McDonald 2022) decrease the likelihood that frontline professionals engage in PSRB. Borry (2017) found that organizational norms influence whether PSRB is viewed as acceptable. When PSRB conflicts with these norms, professionals are less likely to engage in it. Bernards, Schmidt, and Groeneveld (2024) show that psychological safety is another important predictor of PSRB: professionals are more likely to engage in PSRB when they feel safe taking a risk within their organization.

The second factor relates to frontline professionals themselves. Most studies on PSRB, in some way, refer to the importance of risk-taking and prosocial motivations. Since PSRB can be seen as deviant behavior, professionals who break rules risk punishment (Dahling et al. 2012; DeHart-Davis 2007; Fleming 2020). Assadi and Lundin (2018) show that the likelihood of taking risks and engaging in PSRB increases with tenure because more experienced professionals can better predict how others will react to PSRB. Another individual factor is Public Service Motivation (PSM). Weißmüller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn (2022) show that individuals with a strong PSM are more likely to engage in PSRB. Similarly, Bøgh Andersen and Serritzlew (2012) find that professionals with a high level of PSM are more likely to help clients they see as needing help. Hansen (2025) argues that extra-role behavior (such as PSRB) results from individual motivation and client characteristics. This result is underlined by Chattopadhyay and Piatak's (2023) study, which shows how deservingness assessments and PSM relate.

Third, client characteristics may also influence whether frontline professionals engage in PSRB. Compared to research on organizational and individual factors, research linking client characteristics to PSRB is still in its infancy. Weißmüller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn (2022) show that a positive affect towards clients, triggering feelings of sympathy and deservingness, increases the likelihood of PSRB. Despite the lack of other relevant studies on client characteristics and PSRB, there are strong grounds for claiming that client characteristics matter when it comes to PSRB. This is based on studies on frontline professionals' decision-making and exercise of discretion more generally and can be used to develop hypotheses on how client characteristics affect PSRB behavior.

Client characteristics and decision-making at the frontline

Studies of frontline work show that professionals may hold preferential views of some clients over others and that clients' characteristics and behavior can affect how frontline professionals respond to them (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). We argue that this is particularly true for PSRB since this involves taking a risk and can have unknown consequences for the professional. As the interactions between clients and professionals impact frontline professionals' decision-making (Jensen and Pedersen 2023), we expect frontline professionals to advocate more for those clients they feel most deserving of their help.

Studies have focused on many different client characteristics, such as race (Keiser 2010), gender (Glyniadaki 2022; Piatak, Mohr, and McDonald 2022), social status (Raaphorst, Groeneveld, and Van de Walle 2018), and social class (Harrits and Møller 2014), in relation to discretion. Frontline professionals use these client characteristics to make decisions, such as whether to prioritize specific clients (Jilke and Tummers 2018), whether to trust them (Davidovitz and Cohen 2022, 2023), and whether to engage in PSRB (Weißmüller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn 2022). Public administration studies have focused extensively on how frontline professionals sometimes engage in discriminatory practices by stereotyping clients along ethnic and racial lines (Keiser 2010). Many public organizations, including in the Netherlands, acknowledge that bureaucratic discrimination is problematic and have taken measures to reduce and prevent it. While the effectiveness of different approaches to reducing bureaucratic discrimination is mixed (Thomann, James, and Deruelle 2024), public organizations seem to have the impact of such demographic client characteristics on frontline decision-making in the eye. However, research and practice have paid relatively less attention to discrimination based on non-demographic client characteristics (such as deservingness). Therefore, studies have called for (Guul, Pedersen, and Petersen 2021) and indeed incorporated non-demographic client characteristics and their impact on frontline decision-making (Davidovitz and Cohen 2022, 2023).

Deservingness consists of three dimensions: (1) resource deservingness, (2) needed deservingness, and (3) earned deservingness. Resource deservingness relates to whether a client is considered worthy of investment (Jilke and Tummers 2018). Whether a client is considered worth the investment of a frontline professional, and whether a frontline professional is willing to take a risk for a particular client, can be assessed in different ways. For some frontline professionals, it is about the likelihood of a "return on investment," meaning that they are only willing to stick their necks out for those clients where doing so will actually deliver a positive outcome. For example, a study in the long-term care sector in Israel showed that professionals allocate less time and energy to clients if they realize that these efforts will not lead to the desired outcome (Davidovitz et al. 2022). Given that PSRB can be motivated by a desire to both increase organizational efficiency and improve public service delivery, we would expect professionals to be more likely to engage in PSRB when clients score high on resource deservingness. That is, if they feel that going the extra mile for a client will both help the organization reach its goals, and help the client, they will be more inclined to break rules.

Needed deservingness relates to the extent to which clients need help from frontline professionals. The argument here is that the more challenging the circumstances in which a client finds themselves, the more deserving of help they are (Lu, Xu, and Wang 2021) Here, client circumstances can relate to different aspects of their life, such as their health, financial position, or housing situation. Jilke and Tummers (2018) show that teachers are likely to prioritize students who are seen as needing more than others (in terms of achieving poorer performance). Dietrich et al. (2023) supported these results in an experimental study and showed that needed deservingness shapes the prioritizing of welfare delivery to certain citizens by civil servants. Based on these studies, we would expect professionals to be more likely to break rules for clients that have a high degree of needed deservingness, as this appeals to the PSRB's motive of improving public service delivery.

Third, earned deservingness refers to whether clients are hardworking (Jilke and Tummers 2018; Loyens and Paraciani 2023), show effort (Hansen 2024), or are motivated (Hansen 2025). The argument is that hardworking clients are deemed more deserving of frontline professionals' help, with professionals wanting to repay the citizen's efforts by also showing extra effort themselves. Guul, Pedersen, and Petersen (2021), for example, showed that caseworkers were most willing to help motivated and competent clients, with motivation more important than competence. Hansen (2024) showed that professionals were less likely to sanction clients who put in effort to get a job. We, therefore, expect PSRB also to be affected by the extent to which clients are seen as having a high level of earned deservingness.

Based on the above, we expect all three dimensions of deservingness to increase the likelihood that professionals engage in PSRB. This leads to our three baseline propositions:

H1: Resource deservingness is positively related to PSRB.
H2: Needed deservingness is positively related to PSRB.
H3: Earned deservingness is positively related to PSRB.

While the hypotheses above are in line with studies that have focused on frontline decision-making, many of these studies have mainly tested the direct effects of a single dimension of deservingness (i.e., needed, resource, or earned deservingness) on frontline decision-making (Halling et al. 2024; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Mikkelsen, Pedersen, and Petersen 2023). The current study goes a step further by also considering combinations of deservingness dimensions.

Previous studies suggest that not all deservingness cues are equally important. Hansen (2025), for example, found that both effort (earned deservingness) and student wellbeing (needed deservingness) were important for teachers in Denmark in showing extra-role behavior, with relatively similar effect sizes, suggesting that both are important. Most studies, however, seem to show that needed deservingness is more critical than other deservingness cues, as helping clients with a high degree of needed deservingness is expected to align with their prosocial motivation (Dietrich et al. 2023; Guul, Pedersen, and Petersen 2021; Jilke and Tummers 2018). We thus hypothesize:

H4: Needed deservingness has a greater impact on PSRB than earned or resource deservingness.

Furthermore, different deservingness dimensions may reinforce each other. In particular, needed deservingness, which is likely most strongly associated with all kinds of bureaucratic behavior such as (not) sanctioning (Loyens, Schott, and Steen 2019; Lu, Xu, and Wang 2021), prioritization choices (Dietrich et al. 2023; Jilke and Tummers 2018), and extra-role behavior (Hansen 2025), may interact with earned and resource deservingness. In fact, needed deservingness may almost be a necessary condition for professionals to engage in PSRB (Loyens, Schott, and Steen 2019), meaning that when clients score high on needed deservingness, their scores on earned and resource deservingness will also have more weight in bureaucratic decisions. As such, we expect that professionals first check whether needed deservingness is present before considering earned and resource deservingness.

The presence of needed deservingness is expected to be important for the effect of resource deservingness on PSRB. Frontline professionals often work in environments characterized by limited resources (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012). In addition, many public organizations have strongly focused on cost-efficiency and effectiveness (Brodkin 2011) as core values. In the scarce competition for resources, the presence of needed deservingness may amplify the effect of resource deservingness on PSRB as frontline professionals must prioritize whom to assist, making it more justifiable to break rules when both resource availability and urgent need align. Hypothesis H5a, therefore, is:

H5a The effect of resource deservingness on PSRB is higher when needed deservingness is present.

A similar argument can be made for cases where earned and needed deservingness align. Dietrich et al. (2023) found that needed deservingness is more important than earned deservingness for prioritization decisions. Yet, other studies show that client effort plays a role alongside needed deservingness (i.e., Loyens, Schott, and Steen 2019), which can possibly be linked to frontline professionals feeling the need to balance compassion (thus responding to needed deservingness) with fairness (thus rewarding effort). H5b, therefore, is:

H5b The effect of earned deservingness on PSRB is higher when needed deservingness is present.

Methods[1]

Empirical setting

The study focuses on frontline professionals in social care in The Hague, The Netherlands. Since the 2015 Social Support Act (SSA), responsibilities have shifted from the national government to municipalities, aiming for more integrated care and support that fosters client self-regulation and self-reliance. This reform assumed local governments could better meet client needs than centrally organized public services. The focus on self-regulation and self-reliance of clients meant that access to municipal services was also based on the extent to which clients could take responsibility for taking care of themselves. Municipalities could design need assessment procedures to determine the eligibility of clients for assistance under the SSA (Maarse and Jeurissen 2016). An example of a needs assessment procedure is determining whether residents with disabilities qualify for home modifications or are eligible for (funding for) household assistance. Respondents in our study are responsible for such decisions and assessments. The SSA is a framework law and thus provides broad aims and directions to municipalities. Specifically, the SSA encourages municipalities to avoid a strong focus on rules and procedures and to allow professionals discretionary space to meet the individual needs of citizens. As such, the SSA encourages individualization, treating similar cases differently based on individual citizens' needs (Bernards, Schmidt, and Groeneveld 2024).

Quantitative vignette experiment

We have carried out a vignette experiment to examine to what extent deservingness affects frontline professionals' behavior. Vignettes are short stories, hypothetical scenarios, or descriptions of situations (Finch 1987). Vignettes resemble realistic situations and are used to trigger responses from participants, particularly to elucidate judgments and to assist in researching sensitive subjects (Finch 1987). Most studies on frontline decision-making that make use of vignettes or other fictional scenarios use a between-person approach (see, e.g., Guul, Pedersen, and Petersen 2021; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Weißmüller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn 2022). While such an approach has merits, we have different reasons for arguing that a within-person design can better elicit how particular factors affect decision-making.

First, a benefit of within-person designs is that the internal validity does not depend on the random assignment of respondents to one of the scenarios or vignettes, offering a relatively high degree of control over confounding factors. Second, a within-subject design aligns well with frontline professionals' everyday work practices. In our experiment, frontline professionals were presented with nine vignettes and had to make multiple decisions. Before starting the data collection, we tested the survey experiment to assess how long it would take respondents to answer all vignettes and the other questions. Based on this, we concluded that there was little risk of fatigue among respondents. Having to sequentially make multiple decisions reflects the everyday work of frontline professionals. Research suggests that, in such circumstances, professionals often take previous decisions into account (Charness, Gneezy, and Kuhn 2012) and that *"decisions about cases are not made in a vacuum, but are compared to each other"* (Raaphorst, Groeneveld, and Van de Walle 2018, p.139).

At the same time, within-subject designs run the risk that previous cues carry over and affect future reactions to new and similar cues (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston 2021). Several steps were taken to mitigate this risk. First, we mimic reality by not allowing respondents to go back to previous vignettes and answers, as they would also not be able to reverse decisions on citizens in practice. Second, the order of the vignettes was randomized to minimize the risk that the order of presentation would affect the responses. In a robustness check presented in Supplementary Appendix S10, we analyzed to what extent the order in which respondents were presented vignettes led to a priming effect (see, e.g., Moller 2016, on how such a priming effect may occur) and concluded that there is no such effect. This echoes recent work on within-subject designs by Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston (2021) and Mummolo and Peterson (2019), who argued that consistency or spillover and demand effects often do not seem to play out as much as expected, contrary to popular belief.

Validity

A vital element of the vignette approach is the degree of realism (Karren and Barringer 2002). We collaborated with public organizations to design vignettes representing realistic and significant cases where PSRB might play a role. In an iterative process, civil servants from the municipality of The Hague and the authors of this study discussed multiple options for the vignette storyline. In these discussions, we focused on the realism of the vignette, the likelihood that respondents would have dealt with a similar case, and what deservingness cues would in reality be possibly taken into account by frontline professionals from the organization. The vignette involves a short story about a man who is not entitled to certain benefits but might nevertheless be granted them if the frontline professional chooses to make an exception. In so doing, the frontline professional would be breaking organizational rules or procedures. Public sector employees checked the vignette for accuracy and realism and agreed that it represented a case professionals could encounter in their work. We also asked respondents about the realism of the deservingness scenarios. This score's mean, median, and mode are 4 out of 5. When asking respondent from the focus groups about their assessment of the realism of the scenario, they argued that the scenario is highly realistic and that similar cases have been handled and discussed in their work units. Some respondents argued that they gave a score of 4 (or lower) out of 5 because the scenario, despite its realism, is not something that they would encounter in their work on a daily basis.

Measures

Deservingness cues

We distinguish between three dimensions of deservingness: (1) earned, (2) needed, and (3) resource. Earned deservingness was manipulated by stating that the client had either already successfully followed a debt counseling trajectory (positive treatment) or had failed on this trajectory (negative treatment). Needed deservingness was manipulated by stating that the client has mobility issues and needed his car to get to

[1]During the preparation of the study, preregistration was not (yet) common practice in our department. The study was thus not preregistered. However, the study was specifically designed to analyze the hypotheses presented in this paper and followed the proper research cycle in every step of the research process.

the hospital (positive treatment) or by stating that the client was well-able to walk but still uses his car to go to the hospital (negative treatment). Finally, resource deservingness was manipulated by stating that the client was well-prepared, on time, and brought the relevant documents to a meeting (positive treatment) or that he was ill-prepared, late, and failed to bring any documents to a meeting (negative treatment). The complete vignette, including the different deservingness cues, is presented in the appendix and in the Supplementary Appendix s2.

Our study shares similarities and differences with previous research on how deservingness is measured. The most studied dimension, needed deservingness, is conceptualized in various ways. Some scholars rely on demographic indicators like age, gender, or ethnicity (Hansen 2024; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Lu, Xu, and Wang 2021), while others use performance-based measures such as client or student progression (Hansen 2025; Mikkelsen, Pedersen, and Petersen 2023), arguing that poor performance signals a greater need. However, we chose not to use performance as a proxy for needed deservingness, since performance may also reflect earned deservingness (e.g., effort) or resource deservingness (e.g., investment potential). A high-performing client, for example, may be seen as less in need but more deserving in other ways.

To better isolate each dimension, we designed cues that clearly align with a single type of deservingness. Following Hansen (2024) and Dietrich et al. (2023), we used indicators of prior effort and motivation for earned deservingness. For needed deservingness, we employed a health-related cue, based on work by Halling et al. (2024), which reflects the common intersection of health and social care needs. Lastly, for resource deservingness, we used a cue signaling likely success by bureaucratic standards, in line with Jilke and Tummers (2018).

Prosocial rule-breaking

To measure PSRB, we follow Weißmüller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn (2022), who measured PSRB intent using a three-item scale: (1) the likelihood of professionals breaking the rules to benefit the client (likelihood), (2) the extent to which they think this is justified (justification), and (3) how comfortable they would feel in doing so (affect). We opted for this measure rather than other measures of PSRB, such as the items introduced by Dahling et al (2012, and used in, amongst others, Bernards 2023; Fleming 2020; Potipiroon 2022) as the measure by Weißmuller et al. (2022) more adequately captures a reaction PSRB in reaction to a vignette, whereas the items used by Dahling et al. (2012) reflect a more general tendency of when PSRB is seen as appropriate behavior. The reliability of this scale is good (Cronbach's alpha = .908). Principal component analysis, presented in Supplementary Appendix S1, Table A1, shows that the different items load on one dimension.

The age, gender, and tenure of the respondents were also measured to describe our sample.

Data collection

The data were collected between April and October 2022 among social care professionals working for the municipality of The Hague and various social care organizations active in The Hague metropolitan region. In total, ninety-five professionals were approached. We received responses from fifty-eight professionals (60.1 percent response rate). These professionals have various functions, working in domains such as debt counseling, social work, probation, and employment. Sixty-six percent (38) of respondents are employed by a municipality; 24 percent (14) of respondents work for a social care organization, such as a probation office; while for six respondents we do not have data on the organization by which they are employed. Table 1 shows an overview of respondents' demographics. While our sample does not reflect the entire Dutch public sector, it is representative of the Dutch social care sector, where women make up 84 percent of the workforce (e.g., Bernards et al. 2021).

Analytical strategy

Our data have a hierarchical structure, with vignettes nested within individuals. Given this structure, we employ a mixed-effects modeling approach to account for the dependence of observations within respondents (Hox, Moerbeek, and Van de Schoot 2017). Specifically, we estimate a random-intercept model. This specification captures unobserved heterogeneity across respondents, through a random intercept, while the while the treatment conditions are included as fixed effects. To determine whether a random-intercept model was appropriate, we conducted a Hausman test, comparing a model with fixed intercepts (i.e., fixed effects for respondents) to a model with random intercepts. The test result ($\chi^2 = 1.64$, $P = .65$) indicated no significant difference between the two specifications, supporting the use of a random-intercept model as it provides consistent and efficient estimates (Cameron and Trivedi 2010).

We opted for a mixed-effects modeling approach rather than standard regression with clustered standard errors because mixed-effects models have been shown to reduce the over-rejection of the null hypothesis more effectively (Cheah 2009). However, to ensure robustness, we also conducted regression analysis with clustered standard errors, which yielded comparable coefficients and significance levels. This analysis is provided in Supplementary Appendix S9, Table A2.

Additionally, we estimated marginal means to further assess the interplay between different deservingness cues. These estimations provided similar results to our mixed-effects models, reinforcing the robustness of our findings. Full results

Table 1. Descriptive statistics ($N = 58$ professionals).

	Range	Mean	SD	α	1	2	3	4
1iPSRB	1-10	5.96	1.88	0.908	1			
2 Age	25-64	44.77	10.36	n/a	0.24	1		
3 Gender	(1 = female)	0.91	n/a	n/a	0.031	−0.168	1	
4 Tenure	1–28	11.19	6.98	n/a	0.053	0.242	0.041	1

Table 2. Multilevel random effects analysis predicting PSRB (*N* = 58 professionals; 424 observations).

Variable	Coef.	SE	*z*	*P*
Intercept	4.792	0.131	36.66	.000
Resource deservingness	0.463	0.131	3.53	.000
Needed deservingness	1.180	0.130	9.06	.000
Earned deservingness	0.481	0.130	3.71	.000
R square within	0.229			
R square between	0.017			
R square overall	0.077			
Sigma u	1.894			
Sigma e	1.332			
Rho	0.669			

of these robustness checks are reported in Supplementary Appendix S9, Tables A3–A6.

Qualitative focus groups

In addition to our vignette experiment, we organized three focus groups with professionals to address PSRB and deservingness to investigate *how* deservingness affects PSRB, and to better understand how professionals construct deservingness. Two focus groups (*N* = 6 and *N* = 7) were formed with professionals who interacted daily with citizens. These groups reflected the target population of the vignette experiment, although participation in the vignette experiment was not a prerequisite for participation in the focus groups. The other focus group (*n* = 8) involved policy advisors and supervisors of frontline professionals to provide further insight into contextual and organizational factors that may affect decision-making and PSRB among professionals. An anonymized overview of the participants is provided in Supplementary Appendix S4. In the focus groups, respondents were shown some of the results of the study, followed by a statement as a basis for the discussion. These statements can also be found in Supplementary Appendix S3. Using such statements helped to spark discussion on the question of *how* deservingness affects PSRB and in what way, thus helping us understand the mechanisms underlying the relationship between deservingness and PSRB. The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed.

The transcripts of the focus groups were analyzed thematically. In line with the "abductive analysis" approach developed by Tavory and Timmermans (2014), the analysis consisted of an iterative process of working with the empirical materials in relation to the literature on deservingness and PSRB. This approach included deductive and inductive reasoning, thus combining selective and open coding procedures. Atlas TI 22 was used for coding the data and the analysis. The selective coding procedure was based on the theoretical concepts underpinning our study. This phase focused on identifying coding statements reflecting the different dimensions of deservingness, as well as statements related to PSRB. This process was deductive in nature, as preexisting theoretical constructs guided it.

Conversely, some codes were generated inductively through open coding, a process that allowed for identifying new themes and insights directly from the data. For instance, codes regarding the capabilities of clients or the role of trust in frontline encounters were generated through this inductive approach. Combining deductive and inductive coding ensured that our analysis was both theoretically informed and open to novel findings that emerged from the empirical material. An overview of exemplary quotes relating to the different codes is provided in Supplementary Appendix S5.

The full research plan was approved by the ethical review board of Leiden University. All respondents in the quantitative and qualitative parts of this project signed informed consent forms (Supplementary Appendix S6–S8).

Results

In this section, we discuss the results of our study. We first consider the quantitative analysis focused on identifying *to what extent* deservingness impacts PSRB and then move to the qualitative analysis on how deservingness is constructed and *how* it impacts PSRB.

To what extent does deservingness affect PSRB?

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of our data. The descriptive statistics show how professionals view PSRB. The 5.96 out of 10 mean score indicates that professionals on average have a slightly positive view of PSRB.

The results of our multilevel random effects analysis are presented in Table 2 and illustrated in fig. 1. Hypotheses 1 to 3 posit that resource, needed, and earned deservingness all positively relate to PSRB and these hypotheses can thus be confirmed as resource (*coefficient* = 0.463, SE = 0.131, *P* = .000), needed (*coefficient* = 1.180, SE = 0.130, *P* = .000), and earned (*coefficient* = 0.481, SE = 0.130, *P* = .000) deservingness indeed positively relate to PSRB. As such, the professionals were more willing to engage in PSRB in scenarios where clients were presented as more deserving.

In addition, Table 2 shows that the *R squared within* is substantially higher than the *R squared between*, indicating that within-person differences to a larger extent than between-person differences explain the extent to which deservingness affects PSRB. This fits our expectation that an individual professional will change their PSRB intent based on the client's deservingness. As a robustness check, we ran the multilevel random effects analysis with controls for respondents' age, tenure, and gender. The results, reported in Supplementary Appendix S9 do not substantially alter our main findings.

Hypothesis 4 posits that needed deservingness has a greater impact than earned and resource deservingness on

PSRB. Based on the 95 percent confidence intervals of the coefficients, as presented in fig. 1, we can accept this hypothesis since the upper bounds of the estimated coefficients of earned and resource deservingness are lower than the lower bound of the estimated coefficient for needed deservingness.

Finally, Hypothesis 5A and 5B state that the different deservingness cues interact in such a way that the effects of resource (H5a) and earned deservingness (H5b) are stronger when needed deservingness is present. Table 3 shows that the effects of resource and earned deservingness are indeed stronger when needed deservingness is present (*coefficient* = 0.337, SE = 0.174 and *coefficient* = 0.565, SE = 0.144 for resource deservingness, and *coefficient* = .475, SE = 0.174 and *coefficient* = 0.497, SE = 0.142 for earned deservingness). A z-test shows that the coefficients do not significantly differ (z = .1.011, *P* = .311 for resource deservingness, z = 0.098, *P* = .922 for earned deservingness). This is also shown in fig. 2. We thus reject Hypothesis 5a and 5b.

The interactions between various dimensions of deservingness are also shown in Table 4, in which we tested all the vignettes that included cues against a neutral vignette that did not contain any treatment (i.e., deservingness cues). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 4 and show that an absence of a needed deservingness cue often leads to a significantly lower intent to engage in PSRB compared to the vignette without any manipulations (in vignettes 2, 3, and 6). However, the presence of just needed deservingness (as in vignette 1) does not significantly change the intent of the vignette without any manipulations. These results indicate that, although needed deservingness is the strongest predictor of PSRB, its presence needs to be combined with other deservingness dimensions to significantly boost professionals' willingness to engage in PSRB.

Only vignette 8, a scenario where all three deservingness cues were present, led to a significantly greater willingness to engage in PSRB than the baseline scenario. The results of this additional analysis underline the importance of needed deservingness as a factor that professionals consider when deciding whether to provide customized service delivery to citizens.

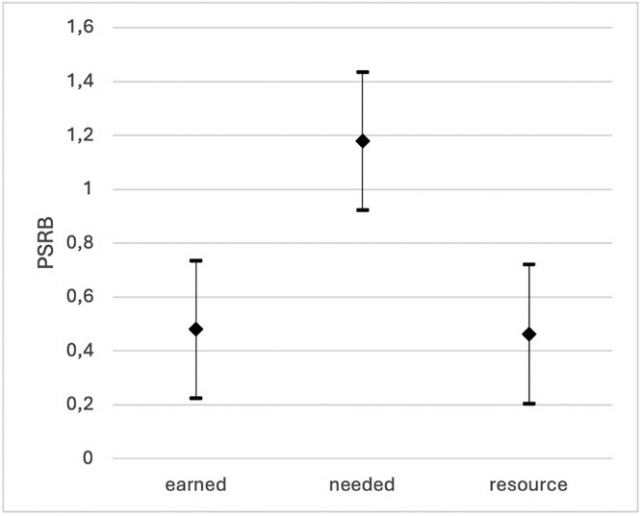

Figure 1. Effects of deservingness cues on PSRB with 95 percent confidence intervals.

How does deservingness impact PSRB?

Our focus groups provided additional insights into *how* deservingness matters for professionals when deciding to engage in PSRB. Particularly, the focus groups help identify how frontline professionals construct deservingness and how different deservingness dimensions in frontline encounters are assessed.

Needed deservingness is prioritized above other deservingness dimensions

One of the key results of the quantitative part of this study is that needed deservingness is emphasized over other deservingness dimensions. There are several explanations for this linked to how frontline professionals construct deservingness. First, the professionals argued that needed deservingness is, in their view, the most crucial deservingness dimension because frontline professionals can often be the last resort for citizens. The frontline professionals in our sample can sometimes help citizens who urgently need emergency financial aid, for example, when they do not have the financial resources to pay the rent and risk eviction. In such cases, citizens often have no one or nowhere else to go except the government.

A second explanation for the importance of needed deservingness is that going the extra mile for citizens who score highly on needed deservingness might be more cost-efficient for the organization in the long run. As one professional argued:

Table 3. Multilevel random effects analysis predicting PSRB for vignettes where needed deservingness is absent (*N* = 58 professionals; 211 observations) and present (*N* = 58 professionals; 213 observations).

	Needed = 0 (absent)				Needed = 1 (present)			
Variable	Coef.	SE	*z*	*P*	Coef.	SE	z	*P*
Intercept	4.954	0.306	16.19	.000	5.921	0.277	21.41	.000
Resource deservingness	0.337	0.174	1.93	.053	0.565	0.144	3.93	.000
Earned deservingness	0.475	0.174	2.72	.006	0.497	0.142	3.50	.000
R square within	0.070				0.156			
R square between	0.001				0.010			
R square overall	0.014				0.024			
Sigma u	2.014				1.860			
Sigma e	1.258				1.028			
Rho	0.719				0.766			

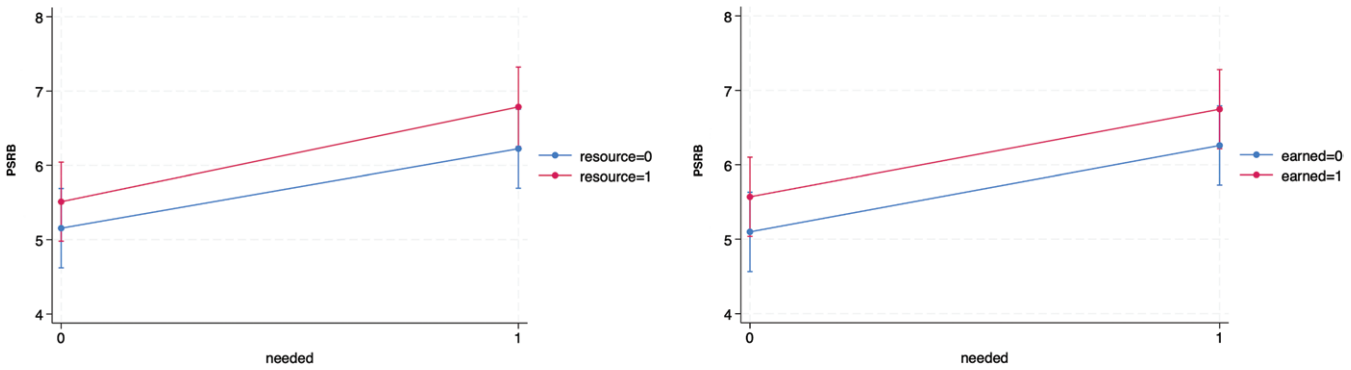

Figure 2. Marginal effects of earned and resource deservingness cues on PSRB with 95 percent confidence intervals when needed deservingness is either absent or present.

Table 4. Vignette Treatments (N = 58 professionals; 424 observations). In vignette 1, there is a treatment (+) for needed deservingness (the client scores high on needed deservingness) but not for earned (–) or resource deservingness (–) (the client scores low on both earned and resource deservingness), etc.

	Earned	Needed	Resource	Coef.	SE	z	P
Intercept				6.119	0.304	20.15	.000
Vignette 1	–	+	–	–0.155	0.259	–0.60	.550
Vignette 2	–	–	–	–1.300	0.260	–4.98	.000
Vignette 3	–	–	+	–0.613	0.261	–2.35	.019
Vignette 4	–	+	+	0.380	0.259	1.47	.142
Vignette 5	+	+	–	0.452	0.260	1.74	.082
Vignette 6	+	–	–	–0.736	0.258	–2.85	.004
Vignette 7	+	–	+	–0.475	0.258	–1.84	.065
Vignette 8	+	+	+	0.885	0.259	3.42	.001
R square within				0.210			
R square between				0.015			
R square overall				0.070			
Sigma u				1.850			
Sigma e				1.334			
Rho				0.658			
Wald chi2				108.79	.000		

To prevent them from hanging over the edge of the abyss, you would prefer to intervene earlier. Or provide an intervention that might prevent them from ending up there.

These two explanations show that deservingness is constructed from a means-to-an-end perspective ("if I do this for this citizen, we will get this") but also from a moral perspective linked to frontline employees' motivations to help citizens. While the number of respondents in the focus groups is too small to make a strong claim about these relationships or who prioritizes a certain construction of needed deservingness over another, it does show how professionals weigh factors related to both the input and the output of public service delivery.

Earned and resource deservingness interact

A second important result from the focus groups, is that earned and resources deservingness often interact, and that these dimensions are often intertwined in constructing the deservingness of clients. A clear illustration of this relationship between earned and resource deservingness can be found in the following quotes:

It is about assessing whether they have already made sufficient progress. However, in this case, the person should take the first initiative. They need to demonstrate something to me that convinces me they are genuinely committed. I will not suddenly invest much effort without them showing some commitment first.

For some clients, it is quite straightforward: they are highly motivated and do everything, complying with reporting requirements, job-seeking, and even expressing a desire to pursue further education. You are inclined to go the extra mile for clients like these because of their strong motivation. I believe I am not the only one who thinks this way. However, I also deal with clients who are reluctant to do almost anything. They say, 'Here it is; I have provided it. You need to resolve it.' In response, I say, 'These are not my debts, so I am not obligated to resolve them; it is your problem.'

These quotes illustrate that professionals consider how clients have behaved in the past (a reflection on earned deservingness), such as to what extent they have complied with reporting requirements and other responsibilities that come with specific aid. It is, however, noteworthy that past experience is not the only basis for deciding whether to deviate from the rules to help clients, but rather that earned deservingness is often combined with resource deservingness. The first quote particularly highlights that some professionals may ask clients to go the extra mile to show that they are motivated and willing to comply. This shows that rather than judging client deservingness based on individual dimensions, the construction of deservingness involves interactions between deservingness dimensions.

Interestingly, for some professionals, the interaction between resources and earned deservingness works the other way around. As the following quotes illustrate, some professionals use PSRB to create motivation among their clients based on the assumption that invested resources will lead to future returns:

> *So perhaps it is the other way around […] creating motivation by occasionally deviating from the rules.*
>
> *Yes, I believe that demonstrating a willingness to deviate from the rules or showing that you are willing to go the extra mile can significantly impact on someone, perhaps not immediately, but eventually. […] I do think that deviating from the rules can make a difference; it shows that you are not just treating everyone as a number or just one of a hundred cases and so on.*

This suggests that the relationship between deservingness and frontline decision-making is not as causal as it is sometimes presented. Rather, the actions of frontline professionals are not only based on how clients act but are sometimes also used to stimulate particular behaviors or actions among clients.

Client capability and trust precede deservingness constructions

A third insight from the focus groups is that several other client characteristics play an important role in how frontline professionals construct the deservingness of clients. These characteristics seem to precede the construction of deservingness. Among the most important ones is client capability. As such, the decision on whether to provide customized service delivery is not only based on whether the client is deemed to deserve it but also on their capabilities. Quotes from different professionals illustrate this relationship:

> *Some clients are also not realistic about what they would really like. They may lack the ability to fulfill their commitments. There have been enjoyable conversations in the past where you think, "It is all well and good that you want this, but when you ask how they plan to achieve it, there is simply no sound reasoning behind it."*
>
> *There are essentially two prerequisites for customization. On the one hand, it should genuinely contribute to helping someone progress, and on the other hand, the individual should be capable of taking it on. It should be in line with the person's capabilities.*

These quotes show that earned deservingness does not amount to a consistent bar that frontline professionals set for all clients but something that they adjust according to the client's capabilities and circumstances. In other words, a professional can construct deservingness in different ways based on client capabilities. This suggests that professionals judge their clients' capabilities first and, only after that, develop their expectations of clients. Both earned deservingness (to what extent a client shows motivation and willingness to cooperate with professionals) and resource deservingness (to what extent will going the extra mile for this client pay off) are preceded by a consideration of the client's capabilities. In their assessment, professionals who are looking to provide equal opportunities for clients do so by judging clients against different criteria.

Another important element that precedes the deservingness construction is trust in clients. Professionals state that they sometimes first need to invest in rebuilding a trusting relationship before they can help their clients. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> *Too much has happened, and someone has lost their trust. So, then you first have to work on their trust again and focus on that. Moreover, you can set a certain limit, but still, you go along with it at first, and then you can get commitment later. But not straight away.*

Deservingness extends beyond the client

Our fourth and final important finding from the focus groups is that deservingness extends beyond the client. To date, research has focused on deservingness as something related directly to the client (e.g., Jilke and Tummers 2018; Guul, Pedersen, and Petersen 2021). In contrast, the professionals in our focus groups argued that they see deservingness as something broader. One respondent phrased it in the following way:

> *So, this consideration changes when it is, let us say, an adult who is somewhat wrecking their own life as against someone who is terrorizing the neighbourhood or causing a family to suffer.*

The quote shows that professionals also consider how engaging in PSRB affects the client's immediate surroundings, whether it is the neighborhood or someone's family. To understand the relationship between client characteristics, such as deservingness, and frontline decision-making, we thus need to move from a client-centered perspective to a more holistic approach that also incorporates other relevant elements of a client's life, such as their family or neighborhood.

Theoretical implications

This study results in three main findings on *to what extent* and *how* deservingness affects PSRB.

First, our survey experiment shows that all forms of deservingness are positively related to the likelihood of professionals engaging in PSRB, indicating that professionals' willingness to provide customized service delivery is higher for those clients that they deem more motivated, in need, or to have earned customized service delivery based on past experience. This study thus deepens understanding of discretion and rule compliance behavior among frontline professionals. In particular, we show that professionals are willing to take a risk and break

rules for some clients but not all. While treating some clients differently, based on their circumstances, fits with the idea of responsive public service delivery, such responsiveness may also lead to inequity among citizens as to who is helped and who is not. Several authors have raised similar concerns (Dietrich et al. 2023; Weißmüller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn 2022), and ongoing debate about trade-offs between responsiveness and equity among frontline public services seems necessary to better understand and agree upon the merits of rule compliance vis-à-vis rule breaking at the frontline.

Second, even though all forms of deservingness play a role, the survey experiment shows that needed deservingness is the strongest predictor of professionals' willingness to engage in PSRB. In showing this, our study supports findings from other studies (e.g., Dietrich et al. 2023; Jilke and Tummers 2018). The explanations from the focus groups on the importance of needed deservingness show how frontline professionals use both goal conceptions (i.e., helping clients in need, achieving more effective public service delivery) (Zacka 2017) and role conceptions (i.e., we are a client's last resort) in constructing needed deservingness of clients. Both conception types resonate with the motivations that professionals have to engage in PSRB (Morrison 2006). While goal conceptions tie in with the motivation to use PSRB to increase organizational efficiency, role conceptions fit with the use of PSRB to ensure better public service delivery. Although research on PSRB generally acknowledges that client characteristics, such as deservingness, play a role in professionals' decision to engage in PSRB (Weißmüller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn 2022), our study provides a more detailed understanding by showing how different constructions of the same client characteristic align with different drivers for PSRB behavior, including prosocial motivations and concerns for organizational goals.

Furthermore, we add to the literature on deservingness and frontline decision-making by showing that the other dimensions of deservingness are also impacted by how clients' needed deservingness is constructed, thus going beyond studying the isolated effect of one deservingness dimension. The survey experiment already provides an indication that the presence or absence of needed deservingness may influence the impact of earned and resource deservingness on PSRB, albeit not significantly, the analysis of the focus groups does support the interaction between different deservingness dimensions. Rather than the dimensions being individual parameters that frontline professionals use in their assessments, the qualitative insights particularly show how earned and resource deservingness often interact, and are sometimes conceived as intertwined. Professionals sometimes use past performance (an indicator of resource deservingness), to determine what they expect from clients (an indicator of earned deservingness). Our study thus contributes to a more nuanced insight into how frontline professionals weigh the different dimensions of deservingness.

Third, the qualitative part of this study also has other important theoretical implications that extend insights from previous deservingness studies (Dietrich et al. 2023; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Weismuller et al. 2022). In essence, our study shows that deservingness is far from an objective marker used by frontline professionals in their decision-making. Rather, it is constructed over time through public encounters and within frontline professionals' team environments. In particular, the role of client capabilities is important in this regard. Professionals do not have the same standards in mind for all clients regarding, for example, earned deservingness. This means that professionals vary what they expect in terms of effort from clients, based on their capabilities. Previous work has found that client capability is important, and that professionals take into account the extent to which a client's capabilities and behaviors are malleable. Glyniadaki (2022), for example, showed that professionals consider whether they believe that the behavior and attitude of clients are changeable. This reasoning was also evident in our focus groups in relation to client capabilities. Even when a professional believes that a client is currently incapable of doing certain things (and therefore not deserving of extra help), a frontline professional who thinks this attitude is changeable may still decide that a client deserves to be helped and thus engage in PSRB.

Turning to trust, the importance of trust in frontline encounters has been documented elsewhere (see, e.g., Davidovitz and Cohen 2022, 2023). Our study adds to these findings by showing how the PSRB behavior of frontline officials is also used to create trust in their clients and to solicit certain behaviors from clients. In that regard, our study underlines how some frontline professionals go above and beyond in attempts to gain the trust of citizens (cf. Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 2012). The qualitative insights give rise to the idea that in breaking rules for clients, professionals try to create a form of reciprocity. While a client might be assessed as having a currently low degree of resource deservingness, a professional may expect that going above and beyond for a client may pay off in the end, thus leading to a higher expected resource deservingness in the future. This means that deservingness is not only constructed based on current views of the client but also on future expectations. We did not study whether PSRB actually leads to greater trust in government in general, or indeed in frontline professionals in particular, and this is an area that deserves further research attention given the importance of responsive governments, and declining levels of trust in government (Schuster et al. 2021).

Limitations and future research

This study has three main limitations. First, our study focused on just one factor that may impact PSRB: client characteristics. At the same time, an increasing number of studies on frontline decision-making in general, and PSRB in particular, argues for more integrated studies (Davidovitz and Cohen 2022). For PSRB, this would mean that studies should focus on the interplay between organizational, individual, and client-related factors in influencing professionals' decisions on whether to engage in PSRB. For example, an important question that deserves further research is whether the deservingness cues are equally important in an organizational environment where PSRB is not as enthusiastically acknowledged as in this study's context. When organizational support for PSRB is lower, deservingness cues might be even more important for frontline professionals to be willing to engage in PSRB as a client's deservingness may then play a more critical role in justifying PSRB behavior.

A second set of limitations relates to the research design. First, organizational scientists have argued for using duplicates to assess reliability (Aguinis and Bradley 2014). However, we did not include duplicates to reduce respondents' workload. By making our vignettes available, we hope to inspire replications of our approach and endorse duplicating

vignettes for within-subject designs. Second, while our study did not show an order or priming effect of the first vignettes on later judgments, we welcome studies using other designs to further assess to what extent our findings can be replicated. Particularly, between-subject designs with larger groups of respondents and balanced between-group treatment distribution could provide another way to test to what extent deservingness impacts PSRB.

This ties into the third and final set of limitations, relating to the context of this study. We acknowledge that the Dutch administrative culture may foster a more permissive stance toward PSRB compared to other public service settings. However, our results indicate that there is still substantial variation in PSRB in our sample (which is shown by the standard deviation on this variable of 1.88 on a scale of 1–10), and our experimental design allows us to examine the conditions under which professionals engage in PSRB. Moreover, the average scores on PSRB are not unusually high compared to previous studies in different settings: our results indicate a mean PSRB score of 5.91 on a 1–10 scale, which is 107 percent of the scale midpoint (5.5). Comparatively, previous studies using a 1–5 Likert scale report values ranging from 2.38 (Weißmüller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn 2022) to 3.3 (Borry and Henderson 2020), which are 79 percent to 110 percent of their respective scale midpoints. Only the study by Fleming (2020) reports substantially lower levels at 67 percent of the scale midpoint (15.97 on a scale from 6 to 42). At the same time, we encourage future research in other domains to test the external validity of our findings, particularly in contexts where PSRB is less encouraged. Future studies could compare whether the effects of deservingness on discretion differ between frontline professionals with repeated client interactions and those operating in one-off encounters (people-processing versus people-changing organizations; Hasenfeld 1972). Furthermore, our sample mainly consists of women. While our study, like others (Fleming 2020; Piatak, Mohr, and McDonald 2022), does not find that gender (congruence) impacts PSRB, research in more balanced samples remains important to test the robustness of the results. Additionally, we would welcome comparative research on frontline public service delivery in general, and PSRB in particular, to see how different administrative traditions and institutional logics impact bureaucratic behavior (cf. Kuhlmann 2019). Given that public organizations around the world and in a wide variety of sectors are looking for ways to become more responsive to client needs, there is ample opportunity for follow-up and replication studies.

Conclusions and practical implications

The main focus of this study was to investigate *to what extent* and *how* a client's deservingness affects PSRB behavior among frontline professionals in the Dutch social welfare domain. We used a vignette experiment to test to what extent the earned, resource, and needed dimensions of deservingness affect the willingness of professionals to engage in PSRB. We show that the different dimensions of deservingness all play a role in a professional's decision to engage in PSRB, and that needed deservingness has the most substantial role. By concentrating on PSRB among professionals, our focus was on a critical case in frontline decision-making, which strengthens our understanding of how a client's characteristics impact a professional's behavior at the frontline of public service delivery. Through focus groups, our study also shows the underlying mechanisms that explain how deservingness affects PSRB behavior. This provides a more detailed and nuanced understanding of deservingness in frontline decision-making.

In addition to the theoretical implications, this article has important practical implications. Our study shows that, alongside visible client characteristics, a client's (past) behavior and immediate environment (such as family) also affect the decision-making of frontline professionals. To ensure that public services remain as impartial as possible, public organizations need to find ways to calibrate how professionals take deservingness into account in decision-making. Research increasingly shows the importance of joint deliberation among frontline professionals in creating a shared understanding of when, and when not, to break rules (Møller 2021; Visser and Van Hulst 2024). Our study provides some insights into how deservingness is constructed by frontline professionals, and this topic could benefit from research that moves from individual to a more collective construction of deservingness. Public organizations that want to understand how deservingness impacts their professionals' actions should focus on facilitating an environment in which professionals can safely share how they deal with different types of clients and when they break rules for societal reasons. Although this study is situated in a particular policy field, professionals in many areas (such as healthcare, education, and other social services) have to make sometimes far-reaching decisions about citizens. We would therefore encourage public organizations that want to understand why some clients are treated differently from others to facilitate deliberation about this topic to better comprehend their professionals' viewpoints and decision-making rationales.

Supplementary material

Supplementary data is available at the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* online.

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Data availability

The quantitative data underlying this article are available in DANS Data Station Social Sciences and Humanities: "Replication Data for: Breaking the rules, but for whom? How client characteristics affect frontline professionals' prosocial rule-breaking behavior" https://doi.org/10.17026/SS/P4H3EM. Due to the confidentiality promised to participants of the focus groups, qualitative data from the focus groups cannot be shared beyond what appears in the manuscript and the appendices. Supplementary Appendices include

information about the focus groups, exemplary quote guides, and an anonymized overview of respondents.

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Appendix—vignette and PSRB measure

Vignette (translated into English)

You are a case manager in the field of social work and you have an appointment with one of your clients. The client is a 45-year-old male who has several medical conditions. Therefore, he needs to go to the hospital weekly. The client lives on a tight budget. He is well-known within the municipality as he has been participating in a debt counseling trajectory for many years (1) with considerable success; his debt has reduced substantially [OR] without any success; his debt is still substantial [Resource deservingness].

It turns out that your client has not paid his car insurance. So, he is now uninsured and can no longer use his car. In total, he is about 500 euros behind on his payments. (2) He has difficulty walking and uses his own car to go to the hospital [OR] despite being well-able to walk, he uses his car to go to the hospital [Needed deservingness]. He would like to talk to you about this issue. He tells you the following: his request for special financial assistance has been turned down, as this is not

paid out to cover debts. He has been sent to the department that offers social care based on the SSA. They are willing to grant him transport facilities on a monthly basis (either in the form of transportation by taxi bus or seated medical transport), but they are unwilling to pay his car insurance debt because this is not the purpose of the SSA. (3) He was well-prepared for the appointment, came on time, and brought all relevant documents with him [OR] He was ill-prepared for the appointment, came in late, and did not bring any documents with him [Earned deservingness]. Your client tells you that he prefers to use his own car to go to the hospital.

Despite the rules, by granting special financial assistance *or* paying for the car insurance debt using a budget from the SSA, you would enable your client to again go independently to the hospital. Both requests have now, however, been turned down.

Prosocial rule-breaking

1) In this scenario, how likely is it that you are willing to break the rules to help the citizen?

Answer categories: 1 "very unlikely"–10 "very likely"

2) In this scenario, to what extent do you think it is justified to deviate from the rules in order to help the citizen?

Answer categories: 1 "very unjustified"–10 "very justified"

3) In this scenario, how would you feel going against the rules?

Answer categories: 1 "very uncomfortable"–10 "very comfortable"