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Disciplining the Strong? Discrimination of Service Users and the Moderating Role of PSM and Ability to Cope

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Abstract

Ethnic stereotypes influence frontline workers' decision-making, which challenges the legitimacy of public organizations. In this article, we examine how ethnic stereotypes affect caseworkers' sanctioning behavior in a context where the client group consists of highly vulnerable clients. Using survey experimental vignettes and qualitative interviews, we find that social caseworkers use ethnic classification in their decision-making. However, contrary to our expectations, caseworkers are less likely to sanction clients with a non-western ethnicity compared to ethnic Danish clients. In addition, the article finds novel evidence indicating that employee traits mitigate the use of ethnic stereotypes.

Key words: Frontline workers, stereotypes and discrimination, Public Service Motivation, ability to cope, experimental research

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Introduction

Numerous studies have shown that stereotypes influence people's evaluation and judgment of different social, racial and ethnic groups (Bodenhausen 1990; Butler and Broockman 2011; Harrits and Møller 2013). The influence of stereotypes is highly problematic from a democratic and organizational perspective, as stereotypes can lead to discrimination of service users and consequently delegitimize public organizations' decision-making (White, Nathan and Faller 2015). Racial discrimination refers to the "unequal treatment of persons or groups on the basis of their race or ethnicity" (Pager and Shepherd 2008, 182). The seminal work of Soss, Fording and Schram (2011) demonstrated that frontline workers' (or what Lipsky [2010] labeled "street level bureaucrats") decision-making is biased by racial and ethnic stereotypes even though frontline workers are legally bound to give citizens equal treatment regardless of differences in demographic characteristics. However, we know little about whether these results can be generalized to other settings and how employee traits condition frontline workers' use of stereotypes. This is unfortunate, as we need more knowledge about what triggers stereotypes in order to eliminate them. This article examines Soss and colleagues' Racial Classification Model in a completely new and different setting to ascertain whether it is generalizable to a Danish context, where the client group is highly vulnerable. In addition, the article examines the moderating role of frontline workers' ability to cope and Public Service Motivation (PSM) and whether these two key employee traits mitigate the use of stereotypes. Examining whether employee traits mitigate the use of stereotypes is important, because it provides us with an understanding of how discrimination in public organizations can be reduced.

Soss and colleagues argue that ethnic demographics are linked to different group reputations and characteristics that are used when frontline workers handle clients. The Racial Classification Model predicts that frontline workers discriminate against clients when the clients are black (in the United States) or have a non-western ethnicity (in Europe) (Pedersen, Stritch and

Thuesen 2018). However, stereotypes are socially constructed representations of groups and thus particularistic by definition (Augoustinos and Walker 1998; Casper, Rothermund and Wentura 2011). Consequently, stereotypes may work differently contingent on the contexts.

The empirical setting of this study differs from that of Schram et al. (2009) in at least two important ways. First, the study is situated in Denmark. Compared to the United States, welfare recipients in Denmark are generally perceived more positively. Thus, one study shows that American citizens are much more likely than Danish citizens to perceive welfare recipients as "lazy" (Aarøe and Petersen 2014). One important explanation for the different perceptions of welfare recipients can be ascribed to the differences in welfare models in Denmark and the United States. Thus, citizens in the Danish universal welfare system receive broader and more generous welfare services compared to the residual welfare system in the United States that is primarily focused on helping the poorest people in society (Esping-Andersen 1990).

Second, the present study examines the Racial Classification Model on frontline workers who work with highly vulnerable clients that are unable to work due to either psychological and/or physical health issues. Examining whether frontline workers discriminate clients of different ethnicities when the clients have psychological and/or physical health issues is important in itself. However, examining whether the model extends to an exposed client group may also provide us with important insights on how stereotypes and perceptions of deservingness differ across client groups. Indeed, if the Racial Classification Model can be conceptually replicated in a universal welfare state on one of the most exposed client groups in the Danish unemployment system, it lends strong support to the generalizability of the model.

To test this, we conduct a survey experiment similar to that of Schram et al. (2009). In our survey experiment, 175 Danish social caseworkers who work with vulnerable unemployed clients receive a vignette describing how one of their clients has failed to comply with the

regulations of the unemployment system and thus faces a potential economic sanction. However, the ethnicity of the client is manipulated, which allows us to examine how the caseworkers sanction clients with different ethnicities. The experiment is followed by qualitative interviews to gain a better understanding of the results from the quantitative material. By examining the caseworkers' perceptions of the clients, we can shed light on the potential factors driving the caseworkers' decision-making.

Overall, the results of the quantitative analysis show that frontline workers use ethnic stereotypes in their decision-making. However, contrary to previous results in the literature and the expectations derived from the Racial Classification Model, the results indicate that Danish caseworkers are more likely to sanction ethnic Danish clients than clients with a non-western ethnicity. This suggests that stereotypes work differently depending on the context. The findings in the qualitative interviews indicate that caseworkers are less likely to take a tough position towards clients with non-western ethnicities as the caseworker considers these clients to be more vulnerable than ethnic Danish clients. In addition, the quantitative analysis shows that individual caseworker traits can mitigate ethnic discrimination. More concretely, the results show that caseworkers' ability to cope and to some extent their PSM contingent the use of ethnic stereotypes in decision-making. The findings are integrated with the Racial Classification Model to form one theoretical model.

Stereotypes, Discrimination and the Racial Classification Model

Stereotypic beliefs are expectations about the behavior and personal skills of a member of a particular social category (Ashmore and Del Boca 1981, p. 13). This means that social stereotypes contain "the perceiver's knowledge, beliefs and expectations about human groups" (Hamilton and Trolier 1986, p. 113). When people categorize based on ethnic cues, they attribute to other individuals or groups a set of skills, assumptions and expectations that are associated with a particular social category. A number of studies have shown that citizens (DeSante 2013), employers

(Mullainathan and Bertrand 2004) and even politicians (Butler and Broockman 2011) rely on racial and ethnic heuristics in their decision-making. Thus, although this article focuses on frontline workers, the reliance on heuristics and stereotypes in decision-making is a general psychological mechanism that is essential for people's ability to navigate in a social world with constant streams of information (Bobo 2001). Nonetheless, stereotypic beliefs are particularly problematic when they influence frontline workers' behavior, as frontline workers' decisions are *de facto* public policy (Lipsky 2010) that influence "who gets what when and how" (Lipsky 2010, p. 84 quoting Laswell).

In this article, we examine the generalizability of Soss and colleagues' (2011) Racial Classification Model (RCM). The overall expectation of the RCM is that racial and ethnic group reputations influence the design and implementation of policy. This means that the RCM is important for understanding decision-making and discrimination throughout the political hierarchy. However, in this article, the focus is on the implementation of public policy. Here, the RCM provides a theoretical framework for understanding how race and ethnicity lead to cognitive biases and discrimination in frontline workers' decision-making. The model states that frontline workers use stereotypic beliefs about clients' deservingness when evaluating clients. Some racial and ethnic groups are associated with negative attributes such as being less motivated and responsible and more "lazy" than others (Pager and Shepherd 2008). For instance, Gilens (2000) shows that white Americans perceive black Americans as being lazy, and that this perception is the primary driver of many white Americans' opposition to social benefits. These general perceptions of different racial and ethnic groups as being unmotivated or lazy translate to frontline workers, who then use the stereotypes when evaluating their clients.

Schram et al. (2009) test the RCM in an American context on social caseworkers working under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. Using vignette experiments, the authors show that when the vignettes contain stereotypic-consistent cues,

caseworkers are more likely to sanction clients with black-sounding names compared to clients with white-sounding names. According to Schram et al. (2009), clients perceived as underserving are more likely to be sanctioned by caseworkers, because the "clients are perceived as needing a stronger push to follow rules and to achieve welfare-to-work goals" (Schram et al. 2009, p. 401). In this way, sanctions are used as a tool for "motivating clients, stimulating work efforts, and enforcing responsible behavior" (Schram et al. 2009, p. 401). Based on the RCM, we may hypothesize that:

H1: Frontline workers use ethnic stereotypes in their decision-making, which leads to a harsher treatment of ethnic minorities.

However, stereotypes are particularistic and may therefore depend on the context (Augoustinos and Walker 1998; Casper et al. 2011). This notion is supported by mixed findings in recent studies of ethnic discrimination. For instance, Einstein and Glick (2017) examined discriminative behavior in the housing sector and did not find noteworthy differences in how bureaucrats treated Americans with different ethnicities. Similarly, Grohs, Adam and Knill's (2016) study in German local government only found limited effects of ethnic discrimination. Interestingly, the study indicated that female citizens with a non-western ethnicity were positively discriminated. One explanation for these mixed findings may be that the social welfare context influences how frontline workers perceive and thus respond to different client groups. For instance, black American clients in the TANF program may differ from black American clients in the housing sector. Over time, these client group differences could (re)shape frontline workers' stereotypes that, in turn, influence decision-making.

The Role of Employee Traits: Ability to Cope and PSM

Scholars have called for research on "practical means" (Grohs et al. 2016, p. 164) to reduce both positive and negative discrimination in public organizations. In this study, we examine whether two key frontline worker traits mitigate discriminatory behavior. Building on research in psychology and public administration, we argue that frontline workers' ability to cope and PSM are important determinants of whether or not frontline workers use stereotypes to ease their decision-making.

First, psychologists argue that people generally use stereotypes to facilitate the processing of information (Bobo 2001; Bodenhausen 1990). According to Macrae and colleagues (1993), stereotypes are necessary, as they simplify cognitive structures and guide "information processing and response generation in difficult or demanding task environments" (Macrae, Hewstone, and Griffiths 1993, p. 85) leading to an "easier and more efficient processing of information" (Hilton and von Hippel 1996, p. 238). Studies have demonstrated how people are more likely to use stereotypes when judgmental processes are difficult or demanding (Stangor and Duan 1991). When individuals find themselves in situations where they have a limited ability to process the information at hand, they are more likely to rely on automatic and intuitive, rather than deliberative, thinking, which requires more effort (Kahneman 2011). This point is also central in Lipsky's (2010) work on street-level bureaucracy. Lipsky argued that when frontline workers were unable to cope with their daily tasks, they developed routines of practice such as "shortcuts and simplifications" (Lipsky 2010, p. 18). Applying stereotypes is thus one way of psychologically simplifying clients to ease the decision-making process. However, frontline workers differ in their ability to handle pressured situations (Jakobsen and van Loon 2018). Some feel overwhelmed in situations where others are not. We define ability to cope as frontline workers' ability to handle daily work tasks and hypothesize that frontline workers' ability to cope influences whether or not they turn to heuristic processing to ease decision-making:

H2: Frontline workers' ability to cope reduces the use of ethnic stereotypes in decision-making processes.

Second, since Perry and Wise (1990) introduced PSM, the concept has received large scholarly interest. PSM can be understood as "an individual's orientation to delivering services to people with a purpose to do good for others and society" (Perry and Hondeghem 2008, p. vii). In particular, scholars have been interested in identifying the effects of PSM on frontline workers' behavior (Perry et al. 2010). Here, research has demonstrated how higher levels of PSM among public employees are associated with a willingness to set aside self-interest in order to promote the public good. For instance, a study by Brewer and Selden (1998) shows that PSM positively affects employees' likelihood of engaging in whistleblowing. Relatedly, Andersen and Serritzlew (2012) show that physiotherapists with high levels of "commitment to the public interest", a sub dimension of PSM, are more likely to consult more disabled patients, although economic incentives induce physiotherapists to consult ordinary patients. Finally, a recent study finds a negative association between medical practitioners' PSM and their inclination to prescribe broad-spectrum antibiotic to patients (Jensen and Andersen 2015). The researchers argue that while broad-spectrum antibiotics might benefit the individual patient, it increases the overall societal risk of bacteria resistance. Overall, evidence suggests that PSM leads to a higher commitment among public employees to do good for society and set aside self-interest. Drawing on these insights, we expect that frontline workers' PSM influence whether they use ethnic stereotypes as heuristic cues. Using stereotypes only benefits the individual frontline worker, as it eases the decision-making process. Yet, stereotypes also lead to discriminatory behavior, which is not in the public interest (Soss et al. 2011). We therefore hypothesize that:

H3: Frontline workers' PSM reduces the use of ethnic stereotypes in decision-making processes.

Research Design: The Empirical Setting

If stereotypes are particularistic, changing the context may influence how frontline workers discriminate between clients with different ethnicities. In this study, we examine the RCM in a least likely setting by testing the model in Denmark on a client group that is considered highly vulnerable. Hence, the empirical context differs from previous studies in the US in at least two important aspects.

First, the study is situated in a Danish context. In comparison with the United States, Denmark is a more ethnically homogeneous country with a far more generous welfare model. The universal welfare system in Denmark provides citizens with a high, guaranteed minimum income and universal health care (Esping-Andersen 1990). In contrast, the residual welfare system in the United States only provides a minimum safety net for the poorest in society, and people are instead expected to rely on private insurance rather than government aid. According to the literature on opinion formation, the different welfare models have affected how people perceive welfare recipients. For instance, Larsen and Dejgaard (2013) argue that since the 1980s, the paternalistic and neoliberal model in the United States has created negative stereotypes about welfare recipients, resulting in a general perception of welfare clients as being lazy and undeserving of public benefits. By contrast, welfare recipients have been depicted more positively in Denmark (Larsen and Dejgaard 2013), leading to a more positive general perception of welfare clients (Aarøe and Petersen 2014).

Yet, although perceptions about welfare clients are different in the United States and Denmark, stereotypic beliefs about welfare clients with non-western ethnicities in Denmark have

developed very similarly to the stereotypes of black Americans in the United States. For instance, citizens in Denmark with non-western ethnicities are perceived as being lazy and undeserving of social benefits to the same degree as black Americans in the United States (Larsen 2012). Thus, research have shown that even in Denmark, caseworkers discriminate clients based on their ethnicity and gender (Pedersen et al. 2018; Nielsen and Pedersen 2019).

Another important difference between the setting of this study and previous studies (Schram et al. 2009; Pedersen et al. 2018) is that the client group of interest consists of highly vulnerable clients. In Denmark, clients receiving social benefits are divided into "job-ready" clients and "activity-ready" clients. The job-ready clients are able to work, while the activity-ready clients are unable to work due to either physical and/or psychological health issues. We know little about how this contextual change influences the frontline workers' decision-making, as previous studies have only examined the RCM on ordinary welfare recipients. Yet, as argued in the theory section, stereotypes are particularistic and may work differently across client groups. Therefore, if frontline workers use ethnic stereotypes to discriminate vulnerable clients in one of the most generous welfare systems in the world, it lends strong support to the generalizability of the RCM.

However, our study also have a number of similarities to Schram et al. (2009). Concretely, this study uses caseworkers' sanctioning behavior in situations where the welfare recipients have failed to comply with the requirements for receiving unemployment benefits. In the United States and in Denmark, social caseworkers can use economic sanctions as a tool to make clients comply with rules and regulations (Caswell et al. 2011, p. 35). For instance, a caseworker may sanction a client if the client fails to show up for an assigned activity such as a job-training program, an internship or a status meeting with the caseworker. The sanctioning system thus provides a concrete tool for incentivizing or disciplining clients. Specifically, the caseworkers may sanction clients when they believe that the clients do not have a sufficiently *fair* or adequate

explanation for not complying with the rules (LAS 2014: § 36 stk.). This gives the caseworkers a high degree of discretion in cases of non-compliance because the decision of whether or not to sanction clients depends on the caseworkers' perception or assessment of the *fairness* of a client's excuse. In this way, the Danish and American sanctioning systems are fairly comparable.

Survey Experiment

Similar to Schram et al. (2009), this study applies a survey experiment including vignettes. In the vignettes, the caseworkers are presented with a description of a client who failed to appear at a job training program and who did not cancel the appointment. The client is therefore at risk of receiving an economic sanction. However, the ethnicity of the client is manipulated so that half of the caseworkers randomly receive a vignette with an ethnic Danish client (the control group), while the other half receives an identical vignette except that the client in this group is of non-western ethnicity (the treatment group). To vary the clients' ethnicity, the name of the client is manipulated by giving the client either a typical Danish-sounding name (Thomas) or a typical non-western-sounding name (Ahmad), where the latter is common among Danish citizens with non-western ethnicities. This design has previously been used by Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004), who used the method to test how "black-sounding" and "white-sounding" names affected employers' responses to job candidates. Schram et al. (2009) also successfully applied the same procedure in their study. The main advantage of randomly assigning the client's ethnicity is that we can exclude issues of endogeneity and hereby make causal claims about the treatment effect (Munck and Verkuilen 2005, p. 385). The full vignette is shown below in Figure 1.

[FIGURE 1 here]

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As Figure 1 shows, the vignette contains several pieces of important information such as the client's age, gender, residence, working experience, medical history and unemployment status. As in Schram et al. (2009), these pieces of information are only vaguely described in order to allow stereotypic beliefs to fill the gaps in the caseworkers' knowledge about the client. For example, the vignette does not specify what psychological disorder the client has or why the client has been sanctioned previously. Furthermore, as Schram et al. (2009) only identified discrimination when stereotypic-consistent markers were present, the vignettes contain discrediting social markers intended to activate and confirm the caseworkers' stereotypic beliefs. Specifically, the caseworkers are told that the client lives in Vollsmose, which is a well-known Danish ghetto associated with major integration problems. Certainly, providing several pieces of information about the client means that there are several contextual factors that could potentially confound the treatment. This is, however, a tradeoff in all survey experiments. On the one hand, introducing different pieces of information makes it less clear what triggers the treatment. On the other hand, adding information and contextual richness to the vignettes strengthens the realism and provides the caseworkers with a case that they can more easily recognize from their daily work.

In order to further strengthen the realism of the vignette, an attorney from the Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment and two social caseworkers from a Danish job center provided feedback on the vignette. This validation process led to changes in the language used in the vignette to make it reflect the professional language used by caseworkers in Danish job centers.

After reading the vignette, the caseworkers were asked to "Imagine that you are [Thomas'/Ahmad's] caseworker. Based on the information above, would you sanction [Thomas/Ahmad]?" The caseworkers could then answer either 1) "Yes", 2) "Yes, probably", 3) "No, probably not" or 4) "No". To force the caseworkers to make a decision, there was no "Don't know" option. However, only 14 respondents in the control group and 23 respondents in the

treatment group answered "Yes" or "No". Therefore, the response categories of "Yes" and "Yes, probably" on the one hand and "No" and "No, probably not" on the other hand were collapsed, leaving us with a binary dependent variable reflecting the binary decision that caseworkers in the real world have to make when deciding whether or not to sanction clients who have not complied with the rules.

To measure caseworkers' ability to cope, we asked them whether they "find it difficult to quickly get a handle on new tasks" and whether they are "good at keeping sight of the big picture" in their work. The caseworkers could reply on a scale ranging from 1-5. We used the two questions to create a formative index. To measure the caseworkers' PSM, we used 13 validated questions from the literature (Jensen and Bro 2017). The full wording of the questions and variable statistics are displayed in the appendix. It is important to note that the Cronbach's alpha values for ability to cope index and for some of the items in the PSM index (in particular the items in sub-dimension of compassion) are rather low. One explanation for the relatively low values may be our limited number of items. Thus, the ability to cope index only consists of two items, while our 13-item PSM index is considerably smaller than the original 24-item index suggested by Perry (1996). In all, the low reliability means that we should interpret the results of the moderation analysis with caution.

Data and Randomization Check

The survey experiment was sent out via e-mail in late November 2015, and the last data was retrieved a month later, in late December 2015. The e-mails were first sent to all job center managers working in the 94 Danish job centers, who then redistributed the survey experiment to their employees. Participation was voluntary, but the Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment encouraged the job center managers to participate. Two reminders were sent out to the

job center managers, and the managers who did not respond to the reminders were contacted by telephone. Importantly, to reduce the risk of social desirability bias, job center managers were only informed that the survey examined "evaluation practices" in job centers. The survey-experiment contains 175 full responses from caseworkers. The balance check in Table 1 shows that the caseworkers were successfully randomized, as all potential observable confounders except caseworker experience balance between the control and treatment groups. However, controlling for caseworker experience in the analysis does not change the results.

[TABLE 1 here]

Understanding the Driving Factors: Qualitative interviews

In addition to the quantitative analysis, a supplementary qualitative study of interviews with social caseworkers was conducted. The main purpose of the qualitative study is to enhance our understanding of the quantitative material by shedding light on the driving factors at play. Thus, although we may detect discriminatory behavior from the caseworkers in the survey experiment, we do not know whether this behavior is a result of stereotypes and perceptions of deservingness or simply favoritism, e.g., due to shared demographic characteristics (see Bradbury and Kellough's [2011] assessment of the evidence on active representation). However, conducting a small-n study will provide us with an indication of what kind of stereotypes caseworkers have about clients of different ethnicities and hereby allow us to better comprehend the reasoning behind the caseworkers' decision-making. For this reason, six caseworkers from two different job centers were selected for an interview. The caseworkers were selected by contacting two job center managers, who provided us with contact information on three caseworkers who were willing to be interviewed. The primary selection criteria for the caseworkers were the fact that they worked with

the same vulnerable client group described in the survey experiment. To be sure, the selection of caseworkers does not represent the entire population of caseworkers and there may be important geographic differences in caseworkers' perceptions of clients that the qualitative study does not capture. However, the interviews may still provide us with an indication of the caseworkers' perceptions and thoughts about the clients. In the interviews, the caseworkers were provided with the same vignettes as those used in the survey experiment. More specifically, two caseworkers at job center A[2] (IP1 and IP3) and one caseworker from job center B (IP5) received the vignette with the client with the non-western ethnicity, while one caseworker from job center A (IP2) and two caseworkers from job center B (IP4 and IP6) received the vignette with the ethnic Danish client. Although we cannot state *a priori* what kind of measures or factors are important to focus on when examining caseworkers' stereotypic beliefs, it seems relevant to dive into the ambiguous pieces of information provided in the vignette, such as the information concerning the client's psychological issues, their choice of residence and their excuse for failing to appear at the job training program. Here, we should especially expect stereotypes to "fill in" the gaps for the caseworkers' assessments when information is ambiguous.

Overall, the main purpose of the qualitative study is twofold. First, the study allows us to examine whether caseworkers actually have different stereotypic beliefs about clients with different ethnicities. Our quantitative survey experiment only shows how frontline workers treat clients with different ethnicities, but not whether this is due to stereotypes and perceptions of deservingness or favoritism. Second, a qualitative study can provide us with insights on the mechanisms at play.

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[2] Caseworkers were promised full anonymity.

Analysis

Table 2 shows the results from the quantitative study. All models are estimated using logistic regression analysis due to our binary dependent variable. Models 1 and 2 test whether ethnic stereotypes affect caseworkers' sanctioning behavior (H1), while Models 3-6 test whether caseworkers' ability to cope (H2) and PSM (H3) moderate the effect.

[TABLE 2 here]

In Models 1 and 2, the results indicate that caseworkers use ethnic stereotypes in their decision-making, which lends support to the RCM. However, contrary to previous findings in the literature (Schram et al. 2009; Pedersen et al. 2018), Models 1 and 2 show that having a non-western ethnicity significantly *decreases* the likelihood of receiving a sanction (p<0.053 in Model 2). Specifically, for ethnic Danish clients, the predicted likelihood of receiving a sanction is 63 percent, while it is only 49 percent for clients with a non-western ethnicity. This is a substantial difference of 14 percentage points between the two groups' likelihood of receiving a sanction, solely due to a difference in ethnicity. As the statistical significance is slightly outside the normal level of statistical significance (p<0.053 in Model 2), we should interpret the result with some caution. Overall, although we do not find support for H1, we do find that the caseworkers use ethnicity to classify clients. We will return to this result in the qualitative interviews and the discussion, where we shed light on the mechanisms.

In Models 3 to 6, we test whether caseworkers' ability to cope and PSM moderate the effect of ethnicity on caseworkers' sanctioning behavior by constructing two interaction terms: "Non-western ethnicity X ability to cope" and "Non-western ethnicity X PSM". Models 3 and 4 show that caseworkers' ability to cope moderates sanctioning behavior, as the interaction term in the models are significant (p<0.005 in Model 4). Specifically, the results show that higher levels of

ability to cope reduce the effect of ethnic stereotypes. Yet caseworkers' PSM does not seem to moderate the effect of ethnicity on caseworkers' sanctioning behavior, as the interaction terms in Models 5 and 6 are insignificant. The two moderating effects are illustrated in Figure 2.

[FIGURE 2 here]

Figure 2 shows that while caseworkers with a high ability to cope do not discriminate between clients with different ethnicities, caseworkers with a low ability to cope are more likely to discriminate against ethnic Danish clients. Interestingly, Figure 2 also shows that while caseworkers with a PSM below 0.6 discriminate citizens based on ethnicity, caseworkers with a PSM that is above 0.6 do not discriminate based on ethnicity. Thus, although the interaction term of PSM was statistically insignificant, Figure 2 reveals that the marginal effect of client ethnicity on caseworkers' sanctioning behavior is significantly different from zero for low levels of PSM and insignificantly different from zero for higher levels of PSM. This indicates that PSM may condition caseworkers' use of stereotypes, as suggested by H3. Looking at the different sub-dimensions of PSM (commitment, attraction of public policy-making, self-sacrifice and compassion), it seems to primarily be commitment to the public interest that drives the marginal effect (see Figure A1 in the appendix).

Overall, our findings indicate that frontline workers use ethnic classifications to discriminate clients, as was also hypothesized by the RCM. However, contrary to our expectations, caseworkers treat the ethnic majority more harshly than the ethnic minority, which suggests that contextual differences may be central to understanding caseworkers' decision-making. Importantly, our results also show that discrimination can be mitigated.

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Why the "Positive" Discrimination?

The results in Models 1 and 2 are surprising given the expectations derived from the RCM (Schram et al. 2009) and previous findings in the literature (Pedersen et al. 2018). However, our qualitative interviews may help us understand the behavior of the caseworkers by examining their perceptions of their clients. The main findings from the qualitative study are illustrated in Display 1 below. The display summarizes the most important differences and similarities in the caseworkers' perceptions of clients with non-western and Danish ethnicities.

[DISPLAY 1 here]

First, the display shows that the caseworkers' perceptions concerning the cause of the client's unstable psychological state differ greatly depending on the ethnicity of the client. The caseworkers believe that the psychological issues of the ethnic Danish client stem from the divorce and the loss of a job mentioned in the vignette. For instance, one caseworker refers to the psychological problems as "an acute crisis, because he has been divorced and is receiving unemployment benefits and he has lost his job" (IP6). Another caseworker said that "you can easily re-enter the job market and work 37 hours a week with that psychological disorder" (IP2), when referring to the client with the Danish ethnicity, while IP4 referred to the psychological issue as "that anxiety-depression-muddy-something that no one really can put a label on" (IP4). The statements indicate that the caseworkers did not worry a great deal about the ethnic Danish client's psychological issues nor consider them to be a serious barrier for re-entering the labor market.

However, when the citizen had a non-western ethnicity, the caseworkers took the psychological disorder more seriously. IP5 said: "Well, I could imagine that it [the psychological disorder] came from some sort of trauma" (IP5), while IP3 said that "He could have PTSD for

example. That is very common for someone with his background" (IP3). Hereby, the caseworkers used stereotypic beliefs in order to assign meaning to the otherwise ambiguous information concerning the client's psychological disorder. Indeed, the caseworkers clearly had different perceptions of the clients' psychological condition depending on the ethnicity of the client. This stereotypic belief may be well-founded, as studies have shown that the prevalence of PTSD is 10 times more likely among resettled refugees in western countries compared to the age-matched general populations (Fazel, Wheeler and Danesh 2005). In Denmark, a report from the Danish Council of Appeal also found that PTSD made up 54 percent of all psychological disorders that led to early retirement among Danish citizens with a non-western ethnicity. In comparison, this number was only 6 percent among ethnic Danes (Ankestyrelsen 2009).

Second, regarding the caseworkers' perceptions concerning the client's choice of residence, Display 1 also shows large differences. As mentioned earlier, the client's residence (Vollsmose) is a Danish ghetto associated with major integration problems. The residence of the client was therefore used as a stereotypic-consistent marker to activate negative stereotypes. Concretely, the interviews showed that the caseworkers presented with the ethnic Danish client considered the choice of residence to be the result of practical and economic circumstances. One respondent said: "It is probably not by his own free will that he lives there, but it is something he is forced to […] something practically, I would call it" (IP2). This perception was echoed by IP6, who said that "It might be purely practical; it was his residence because of his finances" (IP6). By contrast, when the client had a non-western ethnicity, the caseworkers perceived the choice of residence as an indication of integration problems. One said: "One could think, or I could think, well there might be some integration problems. Because there is so much with the culture and integration in Vollsmose or lack thereof" (IP5). IP3 said: "Well it is because, it is very cheap to live there, right? And they don't have very many resources, and it is perhaps also where they have their

network" (IP3). Again, we observe stereotypic perceptions of the clients depending on their ethnicity. Generally, it seemed that the stereotypic-consistent cue brought forth negative associations for the caseworkers when the client had a non-western ethnicity. They mentioned integration issues, the culture and networks in the ghetto when the client had a non-western ethnicity, whereas the caseworkers perceived the ethnic Danish client's choice of residence as a more practical and temporary matter.

When looking at the caseworkers' general evaluations of the client, the qualitative study shows that the caseworkers generally perceive the client with the Danish ethnicity as a strong client with only short-term issues that are keeping the client from getting a job. For instance, IP4 said that "I actually think that he (the ethnic Dane) has a lot of things going in the right direction for him compared to other clients in this group" (IP4), while IP2 said that "the faster he gets back on the job market, the easier it will be for him that he has had a down period". However, the caseworkers had more mixed perceptions about the client with the non-western ethnicity. Thus, one caseworker said "he is in the good group" (IP5), while IP3 said that he/she would "lower the demands" (IP3) for the client. Finally, the interviews revealed that the caseworkers perceived the non-western and ethnic Danish clients as more or less equally motivated to find a job, which suggests that the differences in the caseworkers' sanctioning behavior are not a result of different perceptions of the client's motivation.

Overall, the qualitative analysis reveals at least two interesting findings. First, it shows that the caseworkers indeed use stereotypes when interpreting the different pieces of information in the vignettes. Second, and more importantly, the qualitative analysis provides us with an indication of why we observe the surprising results in the quantitative study. Concretely, it would seem that the caseworkers treat the ethnic Danish client more harshly because the caseworkers perceive the client as being in a stronger position compared to the client with the non-

western ethnicity. They believe that the non-western client faces more serious challenges than the ethnic Danish client, such as PTSD and integration issues.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article delivers several important contributions to our understanding of race and ethnicity and adds to a growing literature about the role of frontline workers' stereotypes and discrimination in public organizations (Einstein and Glick 2017; Schram et al. 2009; White et al. 2015). Using survey experimental vignettes, the article tests the RCM in a Danish context where the client group of interest consists of highly vulnerable clients with psychological and/or physical health issues. The article shows that caseworkers use ethnicity to classify clients. However, contrary to our expectations derived from the RCM, caseworkers are more likely to sanction ethnic Danish clients compared to clients with a non-western ethnicity. These results are surprising in light of previous findings (Schram et al. 2009; Pedersen et al. 2018). However, the qualitative interviews help us understand the results. Thus, the interviews showed that caseworkers use ethnic stereotypes when interpreting the different pieces of information provided about the clients. Although non-western clients were associated with integration problems and crime (negative attributes), the ethnic non-western clients' psychological health issues were also taken more seriously. This may have led to a general perception of the non-western client as being in a weaker and more vulnerable state relative to the ethnic Danish client, which, in turn, may have led to feelings of empathy toward the client and made the client seem more deserving. Research on Danish caseworkers' sanctioning behavior has shown that vulnerable welfare clients are less likely to be sanctioned. Specifically, Caswell et al. (2011) have demonstrated that welfare clients with high levels of medicine consumption and in a weak psychological state are less likely to receive economic sanctions.

According to the authors, their findings may reflect that caseworkers are less likely to sanction vulnerable clients, because these clients cannot respond to the sanctions by changing their behavior.

Consequently, caseworkers may choose not to sanction clients with a non-western ethnicity because they believe that these clients are less responsive to economic penalties compared to ethnic Danish clients. Interestingly, as mentioned in the theory section, Schram et al. (2009) argued that frontline workers were more likely to apply sanctions "when clients are perceived as needing a stronger push to follow rules and to achieve welfare-to-work goals." (Schram et al. 2009, p. 401). However, when a "stronger push" may push clients over the edge, sanctions are not just ineffective as a disciplinary tool, they are directly counterproductive for the achievement of organizational policy goals. In this way, ethnic stereotypes could work as a double-edged sword that activates stereotypic perceptions about clients' attributes and deservingness (as hypothesized by the RCM) as well as perceptions regarding the effectiveness of sanctions as a viable tool for ensuring future client compliance.

Importantly, our results also showed heterogeneous effects suggesting that frontline workers' traits curb the use of ethnic stereotypes in the decision-making process. Thus, we found a strong moderating effect of caseworkers' ability to cope indicating that discrimination can be reduced by increasing caseworkers' ability to cope in their daily work. This is an important finding that breaks new ground by showing that the negative effects of stereotypic beliefs can potentially be mitigated. We found no moderating effect of PSM. However, only caseworkers with low levels of PSM discriminated clients based on ethnicity, while caseworkers with high levels of PSM did not discriminate clients. The results suggests that managers in public organizations should initiate training programs to improve public employees' ability to cope with their daily work tasks and/or consider how organizational resources can be directed toward activating employees' PSM (Pedersen 2015).

[FIGURE 3 here]

In Figure 3, our findings are summarized and integrated with the expectations derived from the RCM. As the figure shows, ethnic stereotypes affect not only perceptions of clients' deservingness, but also the effectiveness of sanctions as a disciplinary tools. As the RCM predicts, caseworkers use ethnic stereotypes to classify clients, but the effect of this classification works differently than what we expected. Stereotypic beliefs about clients are still used. However, if the stereotypic beliefs entail that sanctions are perceived as counterproductive to the achievement of policy goals, they may not be applied. Furthermore, the model shows that we need to consider the influence of employee traits. We have shown that frontline workers' ability to cope moderates whether frontline workers use stereotypes to ease the decision-making process. In addition, we only found marginal effects of the treatment condition for low levels of PSM. However, as mentioned in the research design, the reliability of the two indexes was low and more research is therefore needed in this area.

It is also worth contemplating alternative mechanisms and the generalizability of our results. First, Cottrell and Neuberg (2005) argue that different groups invoke different qualitative emotional reactions such as fear, disgust, guilt and pity depending on the perceived threat level of the group. Following this argument, we may speculate that clients with non-western ethnicities are perceived as posing a relatively smaller threat than ethnic Danish clients and may invoke feelings of guilt and pity that ultimately result in less harsh treatment of the group. In addition, Watkins-Hayes (2011) demonstrates that when caseworkers exercise bureaucratic constraints, racial commonality between caseworker and client may actually lead to harsher treatment of the intragroup member.

Future research should examine what feelings different ethnic groups elicit and how racial commonalities influence caseworkers' decision-making.

Second, in line with Einstein and Glick (2017), our results show that we should be careful of overgeneralizing studies of discrimination from one context to another. This also implies that it is uncertain whether the results of this study are generalizable to other countries and client groups. For instance, we may imagine that in cases where minority clients are perceived as strong and therefore more responsive to sanctions, non-western clients are *more* likely to receive sanctions because they are considered responsive to economic penalties and associated with more negative stereotypes than clients belonging to the ethnic majority.

Finally, this study also raises normative questions concerning frontline worker discretion and discrimination between clients that may lead to desirable outcomes such as future client compliance, integration or equality. Is positive discrimination towards minority groups thus a problem for equality or a driver of equality? Equal cases should be treated equally and unequal cases unequally. Future research should seek to answer these normative, but important questions.

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Tables

TABLE 1 Balance check

	Control group Ethnic Danish client	**Treatment group** Non-western client
Gender (male)	.11	.15
Age	41	42.3
Experience (in years) *	6.5	8.1
Both parents born in DK	.86	.77
Population in municipality (in 1000)	141	154
Share of citizens in the municipality with a non-western ethnicity	11.8	11.8
Unemployment rate in municipality	4.3	4.2
Share of sanctioned welfare recipients in municipality	7.8	8.4
Red Major in the municipality	.51	.47
Ability to cope	.79	.80
PSM	.63	.63
N	80	95

Note: *: $P<0.05$. Two-sided significant test.

TABLE 2 Logistic regression analysis: Effect of ethnicity on sanctioning moderated by ability to cope and PSM

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Non-western ethnicity	-.53†	-.63†	-3.56*	-4.97**	-2.06	-3.00
	(.31)	(.33)	(1.51)	(1.57)	(1.80)	(1.92)
Ability to cope		0.20	-1.41	-2.44†		.15
		(.93)	(1.28)	(1.31)		(.93)
PSM		1.88		1.78	.44	-.12
		(1.49)		(1.50)	(2.08)	(2.18)
Non-western ethnicity X Ability to cope			3.78*	5.43**		
			(1.83)	(1.93)		
Non-western ethnicity X PSM					2.45	3.75
					(2.82)	(3.00)
Control variables included	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Intercept	.51	-1.57	1.64	.15	.23	-.31
	(.23)	(1.80)	(1.01)	(2.04)	(1.30)	(2.07)
Pseudo R2	.08	.08	.08	.11	.02	.09
Walds Chi^2	2.95	15.38	6.90	24.80	5.12	17.75
N	175	175	175	175	175	175

Note: ***;**;*;†: $P<0.001;0.01;0.05;0.1$. Two-sided significance test using logistic regression. Dependent variable is whether caseworkers will sanction the citizen. Robust standard error in parenthesis. Only respondents who answered all relevant variables in the survey are included in the analysis, excluding 23 respondents. Control variables include: Gender, age, experience, parents born in DK, share of citizens with non-western ethnicity in municipality, unemployment rate in municipality, share of sanctioned welfare recipients in municipality and red major.

Figures

FIGURE 1 Vignette description of welfare client

[**Thomas/Ahmad**] is 33 years old, divorced and receives social security benefits. He lives in an apartment block in Vollsmose and has a 6-year-old child, who he sees once every second week. The child has social and learning difficulties and therefore has to wait one extra year before start of school.

[**Thomas/Ahmad**] used to work as a storage worker but he lost his job due to psychological disorders. At the moment, he is an activity-ready welfare recipient and is in a job training program four days a week. During [**Thomas'/Ahmad's**] period of unemployment he has had absences from job interviews at the job center and from the job training program. Some of the absences have been valid due to illness. Another part of the absences have been unauthorized, for which [**Thomas/Ahmad**] has received sanctions.

[**Thomas/Ahmad**] now fails to appear for the job training program and has not cancelled the appointment. Someone calls him and sends him a text message but he does not answer. Therefore, the provider of the job training program approaches [**Thomas'/Ahmad's**] caseworker, who sends a stakeholder consultation letter to him. [**Thomas/Ahmad**] contacts the job center two days after receiving the stakeholder consultation letter (three days after being absent) and explains his absence by saying there were problems in his child's preschool that he had to take care of.

FIGURE 2 Marginal effects of sanctioning moderated by caseworkers' ability to cope and PSM

Sanctioning contingent on ability to cope   **Sanctioning contingent on PSM**
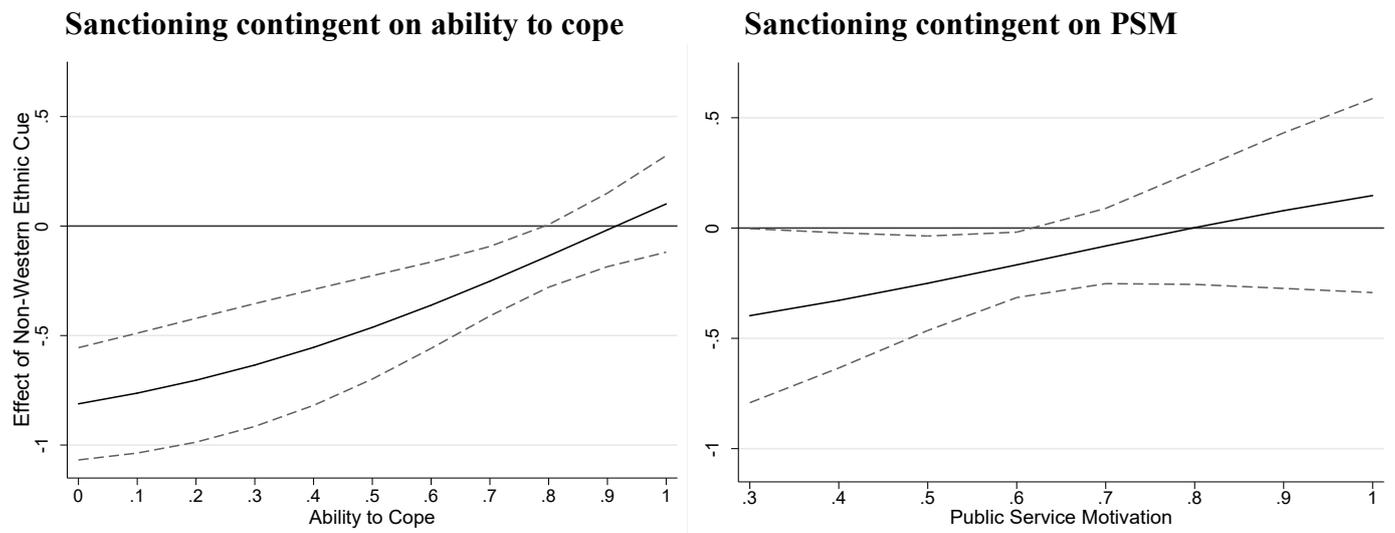
Note: The figures are based on Models 4 and 6 in Table 2.

FIGURE 3 Theoretical model
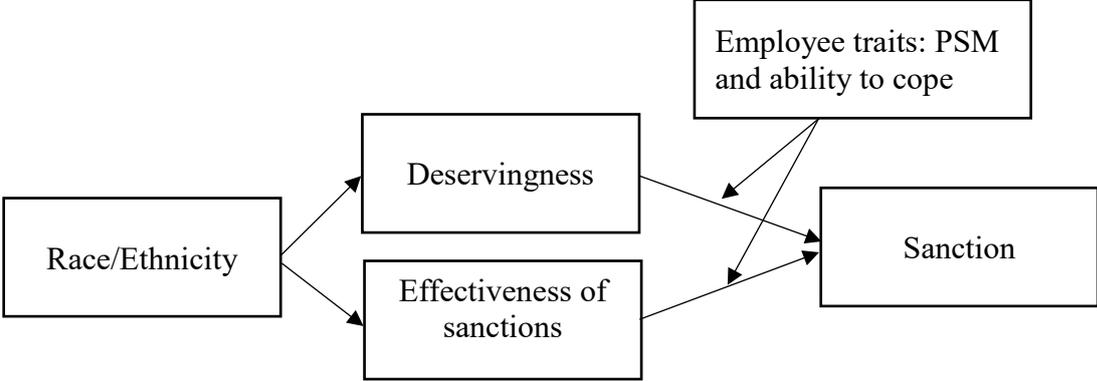
Display

DISPLAY 1 Caseworkers' perceptions of clients

	Danish ethnicity	**Non-western ethnicity**
Course of psychological problems	Depression or anxiety due to divorce or lost job	PTSD or trauma after war or parents experiencing war
Residence in Vollsmose (a Danish ghetto)	Practical and economic reasons	Practical and economic reasons Larger network Indicates that the citizen might be at risk of falling into criminal circles Indication of possible integration challenges
Motivation to get a job	The citizen is motivated	The citizen is motivated
General evaluation of the client	Strong client with temporary issues	Mixed perceptions: Strong client, temporary issues, weak client

Note: The display is based on six interviews with caseworkers working with activity-ready clients.

Appendix

TABLE A1 Descriptive Statistics of Items

Construct and items	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Cronbach's Alpha
Ability to cope	.80	.18	.25	1	.32
I find it difficult to quickly get a handle on new tasks (reversed)	4.08	1.05	1	5	.32
I am good at keeping sight of the big picture in my work	4.30	0.73	1	5	.32
PSM					
Self-sacrifice	.52	.21	0	1	.77
I am willing to risk personal loss to help society	3.11	1.09	1	5	.63
I am prepared to make sacrifices for the good of society	3.06	0.96	1	5	.73
I believe in putting duty before self	3.03	1.04	1	5	.68
Compassion	.76	.15	.33	1	.44
It is difficult for me to contain my feelings when I see people in distress	3.87	0.95	1	5	.52
For me, considering the welfare of others is very important	4.19	0.80	1	5	.27
I am often reminded by daily events of how dependent we are on one another	4.05	0.88	1	5	.24
Attraction to public policy making	.44	.23	0	1	.63
I generally associate politics with something positive	2.93	0.99	1	5	.63
I do not care much for politicians (reversed)	2.60	1.13	1	5	.63
Commitment	.80	.15	.25	1	.59
Meaningful public service is very important to me	4.37	0.76	1	5	.54
It is important for me to contribute to the common good	4.38	0.73	1	5	.35
I consider public service my civic duty	3.87	0.84	1	5	.59

Higher values indicate higher levels of ability to cope and PSM. Due to theoretical considerations, the following item was removed from the ability to cope index: "My colleagues often contact me when they need for help". Removing this item did not change the results of the analysis.

TABLE A2 Logistic regression analysis: Full models

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Non-western ethnicity	-.53†	-.63†	-3.56*	-4.97**	-2.06	-3.00
	(.31)	(.33)	(1.51)	(1.57)	(1.80)	(1.92)
Ability to cope		0.20	-1.41	-2.44†		.15
		(.93)	(1.28)	(1.31)		(.93)
PSM		1.88		1.78	.44	-.12
		(1.49)		(1.50)	(2.08)	(2.18)
Non-western ethnicity X Ability to cope			3.78*	5.43**		
			(1.83)	(1.93)		
Non-western ethnicity X PSM					2.45	3.75
					(2.82)	(3.00)
Gender (male)		.18		.24		.24
		(.46)		(.47)		(.47)
Age		-.01		-.01		-.01
		(.02)		(.02)		(.02)
Experience (in years)		.02		.01		.02
		(.03)		(.03)		(.03)
Both parents born in DK		.56		.73		.56
		(.41)		(.43)		(.42)
Population in municipality (in 1000)		.00		.00		.00
		(.00)		(.00)		(.00)
Share of citizens in the municipality with a non-western ethnicity		-.02		-.02		-.02
		(.04		(.05)		(.04)
Unemployment rate in municipality		-.01		.02		-00
		(.24)		(.23)		(.24)
Share of sanctioned welfare recipients in municipality		.11**		.12**		.11**
		(.04)		(.04)		(.04)
Red Major in the municipality		-.18		-.28		-.18
		(.37)		(.48)		(.37)
Intercept	.51	-1.57	1.64	.15	.23	-.31
	(.23)	(1.80)	(1.01)	(2.04)	(1.30)	(2.07)
Pseudo R2	.08	.08	.08	.11	.02	.09
Walds Chi²	2.95	15.38	6.90	24.80	5.12	17.75
N	175	175	175	175	175	175

Note: ***;**;*;†: P<0.001;0.01;0.05;0.1. Two-sided significance test using logistic regression. Dependent variable is whether caseworkers will sanction the citizen. Robust standard error in parenthesis. Only respondents who answered all relevant variables in the survey are included in the analysis, excluding 23 respondents.

FIGURE A1 Marginal effects of sanctioning moderated by the four PSM sub-dimensions