



Street-level bureaucrats help clients, even in difficult circumstances

Policy brief for Marie Curie Project “COPING”

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This policy brief presents the main findings of the Marie Curie Project “COPING: Policy implementation in stressful times: Analyzing coping strategies of civil servants”. The project combines insights from public administration and psychology to study how street-level bureaucrats (also termed frontline workers, public professionals or public service workers) cope with stress during public service delivery.

. More information can be found at www.larstummers.com/coping

How do street-level bureaucrats cope with stress during public service delivery?

Workers on the frontline of public services, such as police officers, social workers, teachers and physicians, often face severe workloads. Further, they often experience conflicting demands from policy mandates, clients’ needs, professional codes and their personal values. As a result, these ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (a term used by Lipsky) – or ‘frontline workers’ (see Maynard-Moody and Musheno) - experience stress on a regular basis when delivering public services to clients. Two quotes, one from a Dutch insurance physician and one from an American teacher, illustrate this:

“In this organization, I feel a high production demand. I have to deliver enough reassessments of work disabled clients. Sometimes, managers put pressure on me to handle a number of reassessment quickly: only conducting a telephone call and reviewing paperwork, not seeing the client directly.”

Dutch insurance physician talking about stress at work

“I think in the last couple of years changes have taken place that have just added more responsibility, higher expectations, and more accountability for some things that I feel are out of our control (...). I take my job very seriously and there are times that I feel like I’m just being spread thinner and thinner until the point where I get sad and it just makes me feel like I can’t do anything right (...). We talk about how everything should be about our students, but the biggest stress for me is how to keep it about the students, and not about everything else that we’re supposed to be doing.”

American teacher talking about stress at work

How do these street-level bureaucrats cope with such stressors when working with clients? This goal of this Marie Curie project was to increase our understanding of the coping behavior of street-level bureaucrats. In particular, we concentrated on *behavioral* ways of coping that occur when street-level bureaucrats *interact with clients*. This is in line with how public administration scholars study frontline work; they analyze how the *behavior* of street-level bureaucrats directly affects clients during public service delivery, via teaching students, giving fines for speeding to helping American clients get healthcare insurance. We called our topic of study ‘coping during public service delivery’.

To increase our understanding of how street-level bureaucrats ‘cope during public service delivery’, we have conducted various studies. These include a systematic review of over 30 years of the literature (Tummers, Vink, Bekkers and Musheno, 2015), conceptual analyses on coping and moral conflicts (Vink, Tummers, Bekkers and Musheno, 2015), qualitative

case studies in the United States and the Netherlands (Tummers & Rocco, 2015; Vink, Musheno, Tummers & Bekkers, in progress) and quantitative scale construction (Tummers & Musheno, 2015). In this policy brief, I summarize our results so far. I focus on three contributions we hope to make to the literature: a theoretical contribution, an empirical contribution and a methodological contribution.

Theoretical contribution: Conceptualizing coping during public service delivery

To analyze coping during public service delivery, we have defined coping and have developed a coherent classification system. This was needed as the public administration field lacks a comprehensive view of coping. Scholars use different terms to discuss the same phenomenon and operationalized the concept very differently and sometimes inconsistently.

Combining public administration and psychological studies, we defined coping during public service delivery as *behavioral efforts street-level bureaucrats use when working with clients, in order to master, tolerate or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts they face on an everyday basis*. We fully acknowledge that other ways of coping are important to street-level bureaucrats. Some are behavioral, but take place outside direct worker-client interactions, such as seeking comfort with colleagues or talking to your spouse about stress at work. Others are cognitive instead of behavioral, such as cognitive exhaustion and cynicism. These ways of coping have been studied extensively in literature streams like organizational behavior and occupational health psychology. In Table 1, we introduce two dimensions for capturing coping types. We focus on type 1: behavioral coping during interactions with clients.

Table 1 Examples of various ways of coping of street-level bureaucrats. We focus on type 1.

	Behavioral coping	Cognitive coping
During client-worker interactions	<i>1. Rule bending for clients, aggression to clients, routinizing work, working overtime with clients.</i>	2. Compassion towards clients, emotional detachment from clients
Not during client-worker interactions	3. Social support from colleagues, substance abuse.	4. Cognitive restructuring, cynicism towards work.

Based on the definition of coping during public service delivery and the systematic review of the literature, we have identified three families of coping specific to public service delivery: ‘*moving towards clients*’, ‘*moving against clients*’ and ‘*moving away from clients*’.

Moving towards clients can be seen as coping in the client’s benefit. The latter two families can be seen as coping in the worker’s benefit. Moving away from clients categorizes behavior in which street-level bureaucrats *avoid* meaningful interactions with clients, whilst ‘moving against clients’ analyzes *confrontations* with clients.

Table 2 shows these three coping families. They serve to classify specific behavior into coherent groups. A (true!) example can illustrate this. A social worker copes with having to deal with struggling unemployment clients and poor clients by giving them some of her own money (coping instance). This coping instance of ‘giving money’ can be classified under the way of coping ‘using personal resources’ (working overtime to help the client might be another instance in this category). This is then classified under the family ‘moving towards clients’.

Table 2 Distinction between families, including examples of ways and instances of coping

<i>Family of coping during public service delivery</i>	<i>Example: One way of coping under this family</i>	<i>Example: One coping instance under ways of coping</i>
Moving <u>towards</u> clients	Use personal resources	A social worker giving an unemployed client some of her own money to buy food
Moving <u>away from</u> clients	Rationing	A police officer saying ‘the office is very busy today, please return tomorrow’
Moving <u>against</u> clients	Rigid rule following	A teacher very strictly following a rule on no cell-phone use in class and sending students to the office immediately when they use a cell-phone

Empirical contribution: Street-level bureaucrats help clients, even in stressful situations

After we conceptualized coping during public service delivery, it became possible to classify the coping instances found in the three main coping families. Based on the literature review, we found that most street-level bureaucrats move *towards* clients. Street-level bureaucrats often work overtime and bend rules to benefit the clients. This family is substantial for all professions, as shown in Table 3:

Table 3 Relationship between families of coping and profession (based on literature review 1981-2014)

Profession	Moving towards clients	Moving away from clients	Moving against clients	Total
Social workers	38%	40%	22%	100%
Teachers	69%	26%	6%	100%
Healthcare professionals	57%	39%	4%	100%
Police officers	37%	22%	41%	100%

This table also shows that police officers and social workers move against clients more often. For instance, they were more rigid in their rules and sometimes even became aggressive to clients. This can be related to the notion that healthcare professionals and teachers are historically seen as ‘helping professions’, while police officers – and increasingly social workers - are more focused on sanctioning and disciplining.

Our qualitative studies reiterate the finding that street-level bureaucrats often moved toward clients. Philip Rocco and I conducted a qualitative study among workers implementing the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA, sometimes termed ‘Obamacare’) in the USA. These workers – with titles such as navigator, assister and certified application counselor — informed citizens about how the law worked and helped an estimated 10.6 million people sign up for coverage. We found that these workers often move towards clients. They were less inclined to “move away” or “move against” clients, for instance, through rigid rule following and rationing. An illustrating story is that of Fatema (a fictitious name to preserve the anonymity of the respondent):

At the beginning of open enrollment, Fatema and her colleagues believed that the navigator role would be quite minimal. It would be a routine service job that could be wrapped up by January. As it happened, things became quite complex. By January, IT problems and client requests pushed Fatema and her colleagues into a "catch all" role. Not only were they helping clients understand the policy and get signed up, they were becoming daily caseworkers before, during, and after the enrollment process. The work, especially during open-enrollment, was intense. Fatema said it was like a "political campaign": people worked eighteen hour days, with little sleep, poor diets, and strained relationships to their families. Most of her colleagues were not prepared for this kind of role, some quit, but many others stayed on despite the challenges.

In a commentary on our Affordable Care Act article, Sally McCarty - a federal and state regulator and Senior Fellow at Georgetown University - shows the policy implications of these findings:

“The federal officials who decided to award funds to assisters who are part of a social service, legal aid, or other “helping” culture chose assisters who would work long hours with little sleep, exhibit extraordinary patience with enrollment system problems, or any of the other activities undertaken by the interviewees—and do so with no other motivation than to help people enroll in health insurance. As the authors state, the approaches of the frontline assisters eventually become the policy they carry out. The strongest conclusion that one can draw from this article is that the approaches of the assisters in this study represent good policy that should be continued in coming years.”

Hence, our findings go against the stereotypical story that street-level bureaucrats are ‘lazy’ and ‘make their work as easy as possible’. Street-level bureaucrats can play a vital role in successfully delivering public services.

Methodological contribution: Measuring coping during public service delivery using a questionnaire

Based on the literature review and qualitative studies, we finally aimed to develop a reliable and valid quantitative measurement instrument for coping during public service delivery, which can be used for survey research. Developing a measurement instrument involves several time-intensive steps, such as writing items, checks with various experts, setting out the measurement instrument to various samples and statistically analyzing the dimensionality of the instrument. However, such a measurement instrument can be very useful. Scholars and practitioners can use it to analyze which ways of coping street-level bureaucrats use most often. Furthermore, comparisons can be conducted across countries or sectors. It can for instance be tested whether teachers in France use different coping strategies as compared to their Italian colleagues.

We have held interviews with street-level bureaucrats, public administration scholars and psychologists to develop the measurement instrument. The measurement instrument was then tested among teachers and social workers in the Netherlands and the United States. Based hereon, we have developed various scales for ways of coping. Here, we show three of those scales. For more information and more scales, you can visit www.larstummers.com/coping. You could try to fill them in yourself. How do you score?

Note: some words are underlined. These ‘template words’ allow researchers to adapt items to their specific situation by replacing general phrases with more specific ones: ones that fit the context of their research. For example, instead of using the terms ‘client’, you can rephrase this to suit the specific situation, for example with ‘student’ in school settings.

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Below you will see a number of behaviors you could display towards clients. There are no right or wrong answers, just indicate how often you experience the following situations. The scoring options range from 0 (never) to 6 (always):

	A few times a year or less	Once a month or less	A few times a month	Once a week	A few times a week	Always
0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Never	Almost never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always

Family moving towards clients.

Way of Coping: Working overtime.

My score:

1. I work extra time to be able to fulfill my client's needs _____
2. I limit my breaks to keep up with work for clients _____
3. I work on my days off to serve my clients _____
4. I skip after-work personal activities to work for clients _____
5. I work for clients even when I am on vacation _____
6. I interrupt my breaks to respond to clients' needs _____

My Total Score (min.=0, middle=18, max.=36): _____

Family moving away from clients.

Way of Coping: Rationing

My score:

1. The circumstances of my job require me to ration my time with clients _____
2. I spend less time with clients than would be optimal for them _____
3. Because of my limited available time I cannot help clients to the fullest extent _____
4. I am unable to give clients the attention they deserve _____
5. I only do what is strictly required when working with clients, nothing more _____
6. I tell clients that I only have limited time for them _____

My Total Score (min.=0, middle=18, max.=36): _____

Family moving against clients.

Way of Coping: Aggression

My score:

1. I lose my patience when working with participants _____
2. I quite easily become irritated when interacting with participants _____
3. I am quite impatient with participants _____
4. I easily lose my temper with participants fairly easily _____
5. I become easily angered with participants _____
6. Even when participants become aggressive, I stay calm (reverse score!) _____

My Total Score (min.=0, middle=18, max.=36): _____

Conclusion: Three Policy recommendations

Based on the results of this project, we have developed three policy recommendations:

1. Street-level bureaucrats often behave in ways that are beneficial for clients, even in difficult circumstances. This goes against the stereotype of the lazy bureaucrat who wants to make his work as easy as possible. *Hence, street-level bureaucrats can play a vital role in successfully delivering public services. Contracting out to private workers may not always be the best option.*
2. Street-level bureaucrats often continue to help clients when faced with limited resources and time. A result is that they can experience considerable workload when implementing policies. This can lead to burnout and/or turnover. Therefore, *governments should pay particular attention to the challenges that street-level bureaucrats face in their daily work and try to address these challenges.*
3. We have developed a conceptualization and measurement instrument of coping during public service delivery via a combination of public administration and psychological research. *Scholars, policy makers, managers and professionals can use the conceptualization and measurement instrument to study ‘what happens on the frontline’, analyzing whether implementation is going according to plan but also whether the implementers are not collapsing under the heavy burdens from the state, the clients and their own professional values and norms.*

Concluding, we show that street-level bureaucrats help clients, even under conditions of high stress. Nevertheless, we also saw coping strategies that were less beneficial for clients. Further research on behavior of street-level bureaucrats —both potentially harmful and potentially beneficial for citizens—should prove to be a timely and productive endeavor for scholars and practitioners alike. This is especially related to twenty-first-century public administration, such as New Public Governance (involving collaboration with non-state actors such as citizens), performance management, digitalization, enhanced technological surveillance, and transparency pressures. Such forces can invoke stress and hence coping. However, to date, little is known about how street-level bureaucrats are adapting to these new management strategies while engaging in the delivery of services. We hope that the construct of ‘coping during public service delivery’ and related families of coping can be valuable in studying such new developments.

Project identity

Project Name

COPING: Policy implementation in stressful times: Analyzing coping strategies of civil servants

Researchers

- Dr. Lars Tummers (Marie Curie Fellow)
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Website

www.larstummers.com/coping

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