Supervisory leadership at the frontlines: Street-level discretion, supervisor influence, and street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients

Erasmus University Rotterdam

ABSTRACT

Steering street-level bureaucrats is utterly complex due to their discretion and professional status which grant them relative autonomy from supervisory directives. Drawing from transformational leadership theory, this article explores the opportunities these work conditions provide for supervisory leadership at the frontlines. Looking at street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients, we analyze how the frontline supervisor affects this core perception that protrudes the human judgments street-level bureaucrats are required to pass in their use of their discretion. Using a survey dataset of 971 street-level bureaucrats and their 203 frontline supervisors, this study shows that frontline supervisors function as an attitudinal role model to street-level bureaucrats. Moreover, their supportive leadership behaviors are crucial to them upholding a positive attitude towards clients. Supportive leadership does not unequivocally strengthen the supervisor's position as an attitudinal referent, though. These findings challenge pessimistic assessments of the potential for supervisory leadership at the frontlines. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keulemans, S., & Groeneveld, S. (2020). Supervisory leadership at the frontlines: Street-level discretion, supervisor influence, and street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 30*(2), 307–323.
doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muz019

4.1 INTRODUCTION

While studies of leadership are ubiquitous in bureaucracy scholarship (e.g., Fernandez, 2005; Wright & Pandey, 2010), steering street-level bureaucrats is often perceived as an inherently complex matter due to the discretion that is inherent to their work (see Gassner & Gofen, 2018). Discretion is often believed to provide street-level bureaucrats with autonomy from management and supervisor directives (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Riccucci, 2005). Their autonomous position is strengthened by street-level bureaucrats' professional status that is derived from the occupational ideology that guides them and grants them control over their work (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Prottas, 1978).

The premise of this article is that street-level discretion and professionalism not merely grant street-level bureaucrats autonomy from superior directives (e.g., Brehm & Gates, 1999), but also open up opportunities for frontline leadership. By displaying leadership properties, frontline supervisors are able to shape street-level bureaucrats' tacit convictions and perceptions that inevitably guide the human judgments they pass in their use of their discretion (see Hupe & Hill, 2007). Consequently, frontline supervisors constitute a critical management layer in government administrations (see Brewer, 2005).

Street-level discretion is commonly perceived as an individual-level practice mainly under the control of street-level bureaucrats (e.g., Brehm & Gates, 1999; Prottas, 1978). Lipsky (2010) argues that street-level bureaucrats employ their discretion to pursue their own interests, which may run counter to those of their superiors. In his account, Lipsky (2010) further draws a sharp distinction between street-level bureaucrats and superiors, in which the superior layers in street-level bureaucracies are viewed as a homogenous group, devoted to achieving organizational goals (Evans, 2011, 2016).

Conceptualizations like these ignore that discretion is a relational construct that is negotiated between street-level bureaucrats and their supervisors (Evans, 2013, p. 750). They also don't do justice to the complexity and uncertainty that pervade street-level work practice (see Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Raaphorst, 2017; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998; Zacka, 2017); circumstances which can cause street-level bureaucrats to seek feedback from superiors on their use of discretion (e.g., see Northouse, 2018; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998), instead of merely applying it as a tool to advance their autonomy (Lipsky, 2010). Lastly, it neglects the actual fragmentation of superior layers in street-level bureaucracies (Gassner & Gofen, 2018): in these organizations, most frontline supervisors are former street-level bureaucrats who got promoted into supervisory positions (Evans, 2016), causing bureaucrats and their frontline superiors to find common ground in their professional background (Evans, 2011, 2016).

These circumstances have multiple implications for frontline supervisors' opportunities to lead street-level bureaucrats. Lipsky (2010) once argued that superiors in street-level bureaucracies are "best placed to make decisions about legitimate and illegitimate discre-

tion" (Evans, 2011, p. 371). The relational basis of discretion enables supervisors to regulate street-level bureaucrats' use of discretion and potentially set the marks for which values and perceptions can legitimately protrude street-level bureaucrats' work (e.g., see Brewer, 2005; Keiser, 2010; Oberfield, 2014b; Sandfort, Ong, & McKay, 2019; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998; Zacka, 2017). In addition, their common professionalism causes street-level bureaucrats and their supervisors to adhere to similar values on how the former should use their discretion (Evans, 2011). This agreement could narrow the hypothesized gap between the interests street-level bureaucrats and frontline supervisors pursue (see Brehm & Gates, 1999; Lipsky, 2010); hence increasing the supervisor's opportunities to steer street-level bureaucrats' use of discretion and impact the perceptions that permeate it (see Evans, 2013).

The current article aims to explore the potential for supervisory frontline leadership in street-level bureaucracies by examining how the frontline supervisor affects a personal disposition that guides how street-level bureaucrats use their discretion: their attitude towards clients. This specific attitude is a core perception that has been argued to inform and bias street-level bureaucrats' discretionary judgments and therewith the outcomes of the bureaucratic encounter (see Baviskar & Winter, 2017; Keulemans & Van de Walle, 2018; Keulemans & Van de Walle, 2019; Kroeger, 1975; Lipsky, 2010; Stone, 1981; Winter, 2002). Drawing from transformational leadership theory, we focus on the attitudinal responses brought about by the supervisors' role model function and the supportive leader behaviors they display.

Building on a survey dataset of 971 street-level bureaucrats and their 203 frontline supervisors from the Dutch and Belgian tax administration, this study adds to the field of public administration in three ways: first, how leaders can shape and steer subordinates is one of the core questions in organizational theory (Fernandez, 2005). This study contributes to the understanding thereof by examining this issue in a context where the potential for leadership is often contested: the frontlines of bureaucracies. Second, it provides new insights into the practice of public service delivery by exploring how street-level bureaucrat-supervisor relations work to shape street-level bureaucrats' core perceptions that permeate their use of discretion. Third, to achieve these aims, insights from psychology and organizational theory are applied to advance the standing of these core public administration issues—as is called for by several scholars (e.g., Foldy & Buckley, 2010; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017; Simon, 1997).

After constructing a conceptual framework that links discretion, attitudes, and frontline leadership, we introduce the notion of transformational leadership and explore its potential for supervisor impact on street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients. This will result in several hypotheses which are tested through a series of multi-level regressions that control for dependencies between bureaucrats led by the same supervisor. We then describe the sample of this study, the measures and methods used, and the study results. We end this

article with a discussion of those results, study limitations, and its implications for street-level theory and practice, as well as avenues for future research.

4.2 DISCRETION, ATTITUDES, AND FRONTLINE LEADERSHIP

Discretion is a necessity for effective public service delivery that simultaneously permits street-level bureaucrats' personal preferences and favoritism to permeate their decisions (see Dubois, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). A street-level paradox is that frontline work conditions pressure street-level bureaucrats to fall back on these personal dispositions to fulfil their tasks, as the strains of public service work necessitate client-processing based on routines and stereotypes (Lipsky, 2010; also see Zacka, 2017). These mental simplifications of the client world correspond with street-level bureaucrats' "attitudinal developments that redefine […] the nature of the clientele to be served" (Lipsky, 2010, p. 141). Redefinitions like these impose bias on street-level bureaucracy as street-level bureaucrats "are conspicuously prone to scan their environment for empirical validation of their views" (Lipsky, 2010, p. 115; also see Keiser, 2010).

As a result, street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients can introduce bias to public service delivery (Keiser, 2010). For instance, Winter (2002) and Baviskar and Winter (2017) found that street-level bureaucrats with an aversion towards clients more strongly resorted to coping behaviors than those without such negative perceptions. In addition, Kroeger (1975) illustrates that client-oriented bureaucrats are more likely to use their discretion to benefit clients, while Stone (1981, p. 45) posits that street-level bureaucrats with "a condemnatory moralistic view of clients" are enticed to take a punitive stance to clients. Lastly, Keulemans and Van de Walle (2018) postulate that street-level bureaucrats' general attitude towards clients underlies their subsequent categorization of clients in terms of, for instance, their perceived 'need' or 'deservingness' (e.g., Jilke & Tummers 2018; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). From this perspective, street-level bureaucrats with a positive attitude towards clients are deemed more likely to categorize clients as, for instance, deserving of their help.

A dominant driver of attitude development and change are the social relations individuals form with others (Briñol & Petty, 2005; Ledgerwood & Wang, 2018; Prislin & Wood, 2005). In the street-level bureaucracy literature, ample evidence for the importance of relationships to street-level bureaucrats exists (e.g., Keiser, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Raaphorst, 2017). For example, in their ground-breaking work, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003, p. 20) found that street-level bureaucrats "define their work and to a large extent themselves in terms of relationships more than rules. Their judgments are rendered more in the context of social relations, and less […] in the context of formal duties and responsibilities." The relational basis of discretion converts the social relation between

street-level bureaucrats and their supervisor into one of crucial importance for bureaucrats' attitudinal developments and change.

It is also in this social relation that frontline supervisors can position themselves as leaders (see Van Knippenberg & Van Kleef 2016). Leadership refers to "the process of providing direction and influencing" (Banai & Reisel, 2007, p. 466). Frontline supervisors are assigned leadership through their formal authority to assess street-level bureaucrats' performance and control resource allocations and task assignments (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). Street-level scholarship, however, tends to subscribe to the view that frontline work conditions complicate the exercise of this formal leadership mandate (e.g., Brodkin, 2011; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Riccucci, 2005).

As frontline conditions require street-level bureaucrats to function rather autonomously (Vinzant & Crothers 1998), the social relations supervisors build with subordinates enable them to establish legitimate authority over bureaucrats and hence capitalize on their formal leadership mandate (Blau & Scott, 1963; also see Magee & Smith, 2013). Hence, the interplay between their social relation with subordinate bureaucrats and their legitimate authority over them enables frontline supervisors to display leadership properties that allow them to impact the attitudes that permeate street-level bureaucrats' use of discretion, such as their attitude towards clients. In the next section, we explain how supervisor leadership properties can work to impact this specific attitude.

4.3 TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ITS POTENTIAL FOR ATTITUDINAL IMPACT AT THE FRONTLINES

Public management scholars predominantly build on the distinction between transactional and transformational leadership (see Jensen et al., 2019; Oberfield, 2014b). In this leadership conceptualization by Burns (1978), transactional leaders motivate subordinates to attain organizational objectives by appealing to subordinate self-interest (Jensen et al., 2019). Under transactional leaders, the supervisor-subordinate relation is mainly instrumental, characterized by a value exchange of resources for rewards (Northouse, 2018; Yukl, 2010).

Contrastingly, transformational leaders "motivate behavior by changing their followers' attitudes and assumptions" (Wright & Pandey, 2010, p. 76). Through their leader behaviors, transformational leaders appeal to subordinates' higher order needs to increase their work motivation (Jensen et al., 2019), by altering subordinates' attitudes, values, and beliefs in that process (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Their preoccupation with subordinate needs causes transformational leaders to heavily invest in their relation with subordinates (Northouse, 2018). By means of this investment, transformational leaders establish legitimate leadership over them (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). As transformational

leaders become legitimate leaders for attitude change by capitalizing on the supervisor-subordinate social relation, we draw from transformational leadership theory.

Bass (1985, 1990) identified four transformational leadership dimensions: idealized influence; inspirational motivation; intellectual stimulation; and individualized consideration. Transformational leaders with idealized influence are strong role models to subordinates (Northouse, 2018; Wright & Pandey, 2010). Subordinates trust them and believe that the leaders can be counted on to do what is right (Northouse, 2018, p. 169). Inspirational motivation is aimed at leader efforts to motivate subordinates by communicating an appealing organizational vision and high performance expectations (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Intellectual stimulation entails motivating subordinates to take an innovative stance to organizational issues in their efforts to solve them (Yukl, 2010). Individualized consideration refers to leader efforts to create a supportive work environment in which subordinates' personal individual needs are prioritized, enabling them to reach their full potential (Northouse, 2018).

Even though transformational leadership is one of the most popular leadership theories in the public management literature (Oberfield, 2014b), it represents an umbrella term for a variety of leader-induced motivational effects, rather than a well-developed configurational theory (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). It is consequential to its theoretical standing that its different dimensions should not be treated as additive to a unitary model of transformational leadership (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Rather, as empirical findings suggest that each leadership dimension relates to different outcomes through different causal mechanisms, an analytical focus on the dimensional level is key (see Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). The current study aims to assess what happens in the transformational process that enables frontline supervisors to impact street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients, rather than to test the impact of transformational leadership on this specific attitude. In addition to taking a dimensional approach to transformational leadership, we, therefore, explore only those dimensions to which causal mechanisms have been attributed that are likely to bring about supervisory impact of this sort.

Because the causal processes through which leader behaviors generate transformational effects remain quite of a black box still (Shamir et al., 1993; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), we turn to general attitude theory to identify these dimensions. General attitude theory distinguishes four general human motives for individual-level attitude development and change: knowledge, consistency, self-worth, and social inclusion and approval (Briñol & Petty, 2005, p. 575). Affiliation with others is core to the social approval motive (Briñol & Petty, 2005). Since we explore frontline leadership opportunities that arise from street-level bureaucrats' social affiliation with their supervisor, included transformational leadership dimensions should activate this motive.

A dominant motivational process through which transformational leaders are enabled to affect subordinates is that of role modelling (Shamir et al., 1993). Role modelling mecha-

nisms are predominantly attributed to the idealized influence dimension of transformational leadership (e.g., Northouse, 2018). Leaders with idealized influence are often claimed to set a behavioral example supportive of an espoused organizational vision (Wright & Pandey 2010). However, they may also occupy a role model position by means of their strong moral principles and values (see Northouse, 2018). The latter suggests that their role model position has spill-over effects to attitudinal matters beyond that vision. Moreover, subordinates identify with these leaders (Yukl, 2010), which implies that idealized influence appeals to street-level bureaucrats' sense of affiliation with their supervisor.

In addition, the support and encouragement that are intrinsic to the individualized consideration factor (Yukl, 2010) are likely to appeal to street-level bureaucrats' basic human need for caring and approval—a key driver of individual-level attitude change (see Briñol & Petty, 2005). Consequently, we focus on idealized influence and individualized consideration—and more specifically, on the role model and support mechanisms inherent to them—in our exploration of supervisor impact on street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients.

The frontline supervisor as an attitudinal role model

Idealized influence causes subordinates to identify with the transformational leader (Northouse, 2018). In the work context, personal identification with the leader is present "when an individual's belief about a person (a leader) becomes self-referential or self-defining" (Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003, p. 247). In these instances, transformational leaders are able to influence subordinates by activating motivations that are intertwined with subordinates' self-concept: their self-expression, self-esteem, self-worth, and self-consistency (Shamir et al., 1993). Personal identification appeals to subordinates' self-concept either through their conviction that they adhere to the same values as their leader or a will to alter their self-concept to increase the congruence between their own beliefs and values and those of the leader (Kark et al., 2003).

According to Shamir et al. (1993, pp. 584–585), role model mechanisms are crucial in activating these motivational effects because role modelling enables the leader to communicate which beliefs, traits, and behaviors are preferable and legitimate. If leaders fulfil a role model position, subordinates are likely to emulate the leader's dispositions and attributes (Kark et al., 2003), including their attitudes (see Yukl, 2010). In these cases, the leader becomes a source of reference (Kark et al., 2003); a form of social power that triggers attitudinal change (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

Frontline supervisors have discretion of their own which they can use to navigate between the street-level and higher management tiers (Brewer, 2005). Equal to that of the street-level bureaucrat (see Lipsky, 2010), the supervisor's discretion "is not random, but rather, an integration of personal beliefs, shared organizational values, and a strategic assessment of the context" (Sandfort et al., 2019, p. 155). Superiors aim to create attitude and

value consistency among bureaucrats because these personal dispositions determine how street-level bureaucrats process information (Keiser, 2010). If the supervisors' discretion use is shaped by their own personal beliefs and they aim to create attitudinal consistency among subordinates, they are likely to pass their own attitude towards clients on to the street-level bureaucrats they supervise (e.g., see Brewer, 2005).

Whether this supervisory attitudinal influence has a role model functionality depends on how street-level bureaucrats position themselves to such influences. Theories from the field of social psychology have taught us that individuals have affiliative and epistemic needs that cause them to strive for a shared reality with others (Ledgerwood & Wang, 2018; Sinclair, Huntsinger, Skorinko, & Hardin, 2005). This shared reality "serves the critical epistemic function of verifying one's evaluation of events and objects in the world" (Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018, p. 67). Shared reality development thus constitutes a process of sense-making that is grounded in the social bonds individuals form with others (Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018; Sinclair et al., 2005).

Ledgerwood and Wang (2018, p. 62) argue that attitude alignment is a core contributor to the construction of a shared reality. In these cases, the strive for a shared reality is a social force that causes one's attitudes to change (Ledgerwood & Wang, 2018, p. 62). Davis and Rusbult (2001) explain that a misbalance in the attitudes held by two individuals can evoke negative sentiments and physical tension in them, as well as alter their relation. How strongly these effects emerge depends on how close two individuals are and how important the attitude object is to either of them. Resultantly, the interdependence of individuals is likely to foster the negative effects attitudinal imbalance may arouse.

Attitude alignment can be a process of mutual influence (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). However, the social distance theory of power predicts that lower-power individuals are more likely to assimilate their attitudes to those of higher-power individuals as "low-power individuals' dependence increases their motivation to affiliate with their high-power counterparts" (Magee & Smith, 2013, p. 160). Conversely, having power decreases individuals' sensitivity to the social influences others exert that may evoke attitude change (Magee & Smith, 2013).

As frontline supervisors affect street-level bureaucrats' access to resources (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998), they are most likely to fulfil the high-power position in the social relation between them. Their higher-power position implies that street-level bureaucrats will experience a stronger need to affiliate with their supervisor than vice versa, causing street-level bureaucrats to align their attitude towards clients to that of the supervisor. Consequently, the here described psychological processes are likely to convert the supervisor into a role model to the street-level bureaucrat for attitudinal matters. These expectations are summarized in the first hypothesis of this article:

H1: *Individual street-level bureaucrats whose supervisor has a more positive attitude towards clients are more likely to have a positive attitude towards clients themselves.*

Supportive leader behaviors and upholding a positive attitude towards clients

The individualized consideration dimension is commonly broken up into supportive and developmental leader behaviors (Yukl, 1999). In this distinction, supportive leadership refers to "expressing concern for followers and taking account of their individual needs" (Rafferty & Griffin, 2004, p. 333). Developmental leadership aims to stimulate subordinates' abilities and self-efficacy (Yukl, 1999). While developmental leadership is predominantly concerned with coaching and mentoring subordinates (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006), supportive leadership "includes being friendly, helpful, considerate, and appreciative of individual subordinates" (Yukl, 1999, p. 288). It consequently constitutes a source of subordinate well-being, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and social satisfaction (Banai & Reisel, 2007; House, 1996; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). As a result, supportive leadership appears more likely to appeal to street-level bureaucrats' social approval motive for attitude change. This leads us to focus on the supportive leadership dimension of individualized consideration.

Supportive leadership has consistently been linked to positive attitudinal outcomes among subordinates (e.g., Banai & Reisel, 2007; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). These positive effects have predominantly been attributed to its potential to relieve job stress (House, 1996; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). Leader support may operate as a buffer that protects individuals against the negative outcomes induced by such stressors (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006).

Since Lipsky's (2010) path-breaking work, the frontlines have consistently been identified as a strenuous and challenging work environment (e.g., Dubois, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Zacka, 2017). These work conditions can lead street-level bureaucrats to seek support from their supervisors (Anshel, 2000; also see Evans, 2011). Zacka (2017) appoints these managers as the key actor to prevent street-level bureaucrats from falling into 'reductionist dispositions' that serve as a coping mechanism for the psychological strains that originate from frontline work conditions, such as insufficient resources and demanding interactions with clients.

Attitudes are held to satisfy multiple psychological needs, one of which is ego-protection (Katz, 1960). Ego-protective attitudes serve to decrease the influence of threatening external forces and internal emotional conflicts (Katz, 1960, p. 172). At the frontlines, many such threats are primarily intertwined with street-level bureaucrats' encounters with clients (e.g., Lipsky, 2010; Dubois, 2010). Consequently, the strains of street-level work can pressure street-level bureaucrats into altering their attitude towards clients into a 'bitter and callous' one (Blau, 1960, p. 348; Lipsky, 2010). Such ego-protective attitudes allow street-level bureaucrats to maintain a positive self-image under these pressures (see Katz, 1960).

As supportive leaders are concerned with subordinates' well-being and needs, frontline supervisors who display supportive leadership behaviors are likely to relieve street-level

bureaucrats from the psychological strains of frontline work. By reducing their stress and frustrations, supportive supervisors enable street-level bureaucrats to uphold a positive attitude towards clients. This brings us to the second hypothesis of this study:

> H2: *Individual street-level bureaucrats whose supervisor displays more supportive leadership behaviors towards them are more likely to have a positive attitude towards clients.*

Lastly, we posit that supportive leader behaviors also work to strengthen the supervisor's position as an attitudinal referent. Supportive leadership triggers subordinates' affiliation with their supervisor (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006, p. 42), thereby appealing to their motivation to achieve a shared reality with them (see Sinclair et al., 2005). Increased affiliation with the leader works to convert supervisors into a referent to the street-level bureaucrat, strengthening their position as an attitudinal influencing agent (see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). We therefore propose that street-level bureaucrats who work under supervisors who display supportive leadership behaviors are more likely to adjust their attitude towards clients to that held by their supervisor:

> H3: *The relation between the individual street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients and that of their supervisor is stronger for bureaucrats whose supervisor displays more supportive leadership behaviors.*

4.4 METHODS

Research setting

Lipsky (2010) treats street-level bureaucrats as an analytically distinct category whose similar work conditions give rise to similar coping and client-processing mechanisms, irrespective of the specificities of the type of street-level bureaucracy they work for (Baviskar & Winter, 2017; Prottas, 1978). The face-to-face interactions with clients they engage in is a critical precondition for their common ground (see Lipsky, 2010). Surveys were therefore conducted in two regulatory street-level bureaucracies whose street-level bureaucrats still have regular face-to-face contact with citizens: the Dutch and Belgian tax administration. The survey population consisted of street-level tax bureaucrats charged with auditing entrepreneurs in the small and medium-sized enterprises segment (1 to 50 employees) and their frontline supervisors.

The Dutch and Belgian tax systems are relatively similar, as are the tasks the street-level tax auditors within them perform. They meet up with small entrepreneurs to check their administration, discuss tax declarations, ask for clarifications, decide on the truthfulness of

the accounts and explanations clients provide, and decide on tax deductions or fines. Their daily work practice is imbued with uncertainty (Raaphorst, 2017). To make these calls, they have ample discretion (Boll, 2015).

Most supervisors come from a professional background, meaning that they were street-level tax auditors who got promoted into supervisory positions. Although cases can be assigned to street-level bureaucrats by audit managers, frontline supervisors need to ensure that organizational objectives are attained and standards on the quality and quantity of inspections are met (Raaphorst, 2017). All cases need to be handled in the number of hours assigned to them beforehand, although tax bureaucrats can ask their supervisors for extensions. Their direct supervisor is street-level bureaucrats' first resort for problems they encounter with either a specific case or the clients involved.

Data

Two electronic mail surveys were conducted in the summer of 2016.[14] No sampling procedure was administered since the entire population of tax auditors and supervisors in the SME-segment was included in the study.[15] Respondents were identified using the tax administrations' internal databases. This resulted in a sample of 4639 street-level tax bureaucrats and 415 supervisors. To assure that respondents belonged to the sample population, two screening questions were included in the survey. Among street-level bureaucrats the response rate was 42.2% (n = 1959). Among their supervisors it was 58.6% (n = 243).

We employed multiple selection criteria for respondents' inclusion in the final sample. First, we only included those street-level bureaucrats who confirmed to be tax auditors with client-contact and had valid replies on key variables. Second, we excluded all street-level tax bureaucrats whose supervisor did not participate in the supervisor survey.[16] Vice versa, supervisors of whom no subordinates participated were discarded. Lastly, supervisors who did not carry full responsibility for a specific team were excluded, thus excluding all teams with multiple supervisors. These circumstances would prevent the attribution of observed effects to specific frontline supervisors. Supervisors who solely supervised multiple (i.e., two) teams were duplicated in the dataset.[17] Because they were the single supervisor-influence

14 Survey texts (in Dutch, French, and English) and further information on the survey procedure are provided in the Supplementary Appendix.

15 In the Netherlands, the surveys were administered in four out of five tax regions as a pilot survey was conducted in the fifth region (see Keulemans & Van de Walle, 2018).

16 To rule out the presence of a positive selection bias caused by supportive leaders being more inclined to fill out the survey, we examined whether street-level bureaucrats of whom the supervisor participated in the survey (n = 922) differed in their supportive leadership perceptions from the street-level bureaucrats whose supervisor did not partake therein (n = 507). The results of an independent samples t-test showed no such bias (t = -1.445, *ns*).

17 All data cleaning steps are accounted for in the Supplementary Appendix.

on the street-level bureaucrats in those teams, found effects could be directly regressed to them.

This resulted in a final sample of 971 street-level bureaucrats supervised by 203 supervisors. On average, 3.6 street-level bureaucrats participated per supervisor. The number of bureaucrats supervised varied between 1 and 12. The mean age in our sample was 52.1 years for the street-level bureaucrats and 53.3 years for their supervisors.

Measures

Dependent variable: Street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients

Attitudes are a main topic of inquiry in social psychology (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). A widely recognized conceptualization from this field views attitudes as an object's general evaluation, derived from an individual's cognitive, affective, and behavioral pieces of information thereon (Breckler, 1984; Huskinson & Haddock, 2006; Maio & Haddock, 2015). We therefore define street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients as their summary evaluation of clients along a dimension ranging from positive to negative that is based on the street-level bureaucrats' cognitive, affective, and behavioral information on clients (Keulemans & Van de Walle, 2018, p. 5).

To assess this construct we used the cognitive component and affective components of Keulemans and Van de Walle's (2018) measure for street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients.[18] This resulted in three separate attitude scores for each bureaucrat.[19] In this distinction, the cognitive attitude component represents the traits street-level bureaucrats assign to clients (see Huskinson & Haddock, 2006). Affect refers to the emotional responses clients elicit in bureaucrats upon their confrontations with them (see Breckler, 1984). The behavioral component was omitted since supervisors did not have current behavioral experiences with clients that could inform their general evaluation of them. These circumstances did not allow the assessment of role model mechanisms for this specific attitude component.

Because only three out of four attitude components were used for the attitude assessment, an EFA was performed to assess the dimensionality of the remaining three components. This analysis showed that one positive affect item ('clients make me feel inspired') and one negative affect item ('clients make me feel uncomfortable') required omission.[20] The alphas of the remaining twelve items ranged from .73 for the cognitive attitude component,

18 To have our attitude measures befit the class of bureaucrats being surveyed, i.e., tax bureaucrats, Keulemans & Van de Walle's (2018) measure was adapted in such a way that their references to 'clients' were substituted by the term 'taxpayers'.

19 Previous research indicated that the affective component of street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients represents two orthogonal (i.e., distinctive) dimensions of affect, which implies that affective items are unipolar in nature (Keulemans & Van de Walle, 2018).

20 For all study variables, further information on measure construction is provided in the Supplementary Appendix.

.73 for positive affect, and .78 for the negative affective component, supporting the internal consistency of these measures (Devellis, 2003). All items were measured using seven-point Likert scales that ranged from 1 = 'never' to 7 = 'always' (see Appendix 1).[21]

The supervisors' attitude towards clients

The supervisor's client-attitude was also measured using the cognitive and affective attitude components of Keulemans and Van de Walle's (2018) multicomponent model. As supervisors do not have face-to-face interactions with clients, the question formulation for their attitude assessment differed from that of the street-level bureaucrats: in the survey, street-level bureaucrats' cognition and affect were tapped in reference to the clients they interact with; supervisors were questioned about client-cognitions and affect evoked in them when they talked or thought about clients.

The attitude measures were kept constant between the bureaucrats and their supervisors. This means that, if an item required omission for either actor, it was deleted from both the supervisor and street-level bureaucrat attitude measure—providing that any item omission resulted in measures that displayed factorial validity and reliability for both actors. Resultantly, following an EFA, the same twelve attitude items were kept for both supervisors and street-level bureaucrats. This resulted in alphas of .74 for the cognitive attitude component, .70 for positive affect, and .80 for the negative affective component; indicative of measure reliability.

Supportive leadership

This construct was assessed using Rafferty and Griffin's (2004) three-item measure of supportive leadership. We inquired the supervisor's supportive leadership behaviors as perceived by the street-level bureaucrats. This individual-level construct was measured using seven-point Likert scales that ranged from 1 = 'totally disagree' to 7 = 'totally agree' (α = .93). The items are included in Appendix 1.

Control variables

Multiple control variables were included in this study. We first controlled for three forms of tenure: bureaucrat and supervisor organizational tenure, and the bureaucrats' tenure under their current supervisor.[22] Time in the form of tenure enables bureaucrats and supervisors to learn and internalize organizational norms and values (see Rollag, 2004). In addition, as the duration of the bureaucrat-supervisor relation increases, so does the likelihood of supervisors affecting street-level bureaucrats' value system (see Krishnan, 2005). Bureaucrats and supervisors' organizational tenure was assessed by asking them when they started working

21 Full response categories are listed in the Supplementary Appendix, for all study variables.

22 The correlations between these variables showed no indication of multicollinearity.

for the tax administration. To assess bureaucrats' tenure under their current supervisor, bureaucrats were asked to list since when they were supervised by her/him.

Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) imply that a high frequency of supervisor-subordinate interactions is associated with a stronger transmission of values and norms onto new employees. We therefore controlled for the frequency of team meetings initiated by the supervisor, using a five-point response scale (1= 'never'; 2 = 'yearly'; 3 = 'monthly'; 4 = 'weekly'; 5 = 'daily').

General attitude theory suggests that women may be more sensitive to attitudinal influences than men (Briñol & Petty, 2005). And a study by Keulemans and Van de Walle (2019) alludes that highly educated street-level bureaucrats harbor less positive client-attitudes than their lower educated colleagues. Resultantly, we controlled for both demographics. Educational attainment was obtained by inquiring respondents' highest completed form of education, which was later binary coded into low to mid-high education and high education.[23] Gender categories were male and female.

Lastly, because the Dutch and Belgian tax administrations have a different team make-up—whereas Belgian teams consist of tax auditors only, Dutch teams also include desk auditors with no face-to-face client contact—country of residence was included as a control measure.

Analysis

First, the descriptive statistics were calculated, the association strength of the study scales assessed in the form of their bivariate correlations, and the issue of common method variance addressed through Harman's one-factor test. Second, the hypothesized relationships were tested in a series of multi-level models using the maximum likelihood estimation method—as implemented in SPSS Statistics version 25. Multi-level analysis techniques allowed for the modelling of potential dependencies between street-level bureaucrats managed by the same supervisor as they estimated the extent to which street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients varied within teams versus between teams (see Field, 2013).

We treated each attitude component as a separate dependent variable. For each component, we subsequently estimated three models. In the first model, we explored the proportion of within-team and between-team variance to provide a benchmark against which the fit of the consecutive explanatory models could be compared. To the second model the predictors were added to test the first and second hypotheses of this study. It did so by exploring the interrelations between street-level bureaucrats' and their supervisor's attitude towards clients, and supportive leadership. In the third model, the moderation from

23 Education was included as a binary variable due to the low number of low educated street-level bureaucrats (9%) and frontline supervisors (3%) in the sample.

supportive leadership was added to test hypothesis 3. As our analyses included interaction effects, all non-binary variables were centered using grand mean centering (see Field, 2013).

4.5 RESULTS

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and common method variance

The descriptives listed in Table 4.1 show that both street-level bureaucrats and their supervisors generally held a fairly positive attitude towards clients: they often attributed positive cognitions to clients and clients regularly evoked positive affect in them. Client-induced negative affect was held on a rare basis. Also, bureaucrats and supervisors held very similar client-attitudes.

On average, street-level bureaucrats displayed a moderate tendency to attribute supportive leadership behaviors to their supervisor. Team meetings were primarily initiated on a monthly basis, and, on average, both bureaucrats and supervisors had been working for their administration for a long time. The 3 to 1 gender ratio shows that the frontlines of the tax administrations were male-dominated.

For the most part, the correlations between the study scales (see Table 4.2) were consistent with our hypotheses, in statistical significance and direction. For the cognitive attitude component, though, the association between the street-level bureaucrat and supervisor was limited.

Lastly, measuring predictors and outcomes using the same data source, i.e., a cross-sectional survey, harbors a risk of CMV that can result in inflated correlations between study variables (George & Pandey, 2017). We adverted this risk by having street-level bureaucrats and supervisors list their own client-attitude, in separate surveys. For the measures that were self-reported by street-level bureaucrats, i.e., their client-attitude and supportive leadership perceptions, we assessed this risk by performing a Harman one-factor test on the unreversed final item set of both constructs (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). The one factor extracted only accounted for 17.76% of the total variance, suggesting that CMV was not significant (George & Pandey, 2017).

Table 4.1. Descriptives

	Street-level bureaucrats					Frontline supervisors				
Variables	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Obs	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Obs
Cognitive attitude component[a]	5.11	.64	2.20	6.80	971	5.13	.57	2.40	6.40	195
Positive affective attitude component	4.26	.99	1.00	7.00	971	4.20	.92	1.33	6.67	195
Negative affective attitude component	2.04	.73	1.00	5.25	971	1.93	.76	1.00	4.75	195
Supportive leadership	4.91	1.31	1.00	7.00	922					
Tenure under current supervisor (years)	1.23	2.31	0	21	971					
Organizational tenure (years)	26.09	13.04	0	47	971	29.14	10.15	0	47	203
Frequency of team meetings	2.91	.61	1	4	950					
Gender (1=female)	.27	.44	0	1	900	.27	.45	0	1	187
Education (1=high)	.58	.49	0	1	896	.79	.41	0	1	185
Country (1=Belgium)	.36	.48	0	1	971	.46	.50	0	1	203

[a] Because the cognitive attitude items were negatively framed (see Appendix 1), the direction of these items was reversed to facilitate the interpretation of the results.
SD, standard deviation; Min, minimum; Max, maximum; Obs, observations.

Table 4.2. Pearson correlations between study scales (n = 888)

	Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1.	SLB: Cognitive attitude component	1						
2.	SLB: Positive affective attitude component	-.130	1					
		(.000)						
3.	SLB: Negative affective attitude component	-.278	-.156	1				
		(.000)	(.000)					
4.	Supervisor: Cognitive attitude component	.025	.024	-.074	1			
		(.454)	(.483)	(.028)				
5.	Supervisor: Positive affective attitude component	-.035	.119	-.129	-.027	1		
		(.299)	(.000)	(.000)	(.422)			
6.	Supervisor: Negative affective attitude component	-.035	-.131	.413	-.184	-.076	1	
		(.298)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.024)		
7.	Supportive leadership	.151	.139	-.117	-.015	-.018	-.077	1
		(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.650)	(.582)	(.022)	

Note: p-values are in the parentheses.
SLB, street-level bureaucrat.

Regressions

Table 4.3 reports the findings of the regression analyses. Models 1, 4, and 7 show that the intraclass correlation coefficients [ICCs] were low for the cognitive component and positive affective component (2.2% and 5.6%, respectively). This means that most of the variability in these attitude components existed across individual bureaucrats, rather than across bureaucrats supervised by the same superior. This conclusion did not apply to the negative affective component. For this attitude component, 50.5% of its variability could be attributed to the team-level.

Models 2, 5, and 8 in Table 4.3 show that some of the control variables displayed associations with street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients. Most notably, street-level bureaucrats whose supervisor initiated team meetings with a higher frequency were more likely to hold positive client-cognitions (b = .096, $p < .01$). Also, gender related to all three attitude components, but in a differentiated manner: women were more likely to hold positive client-cognitions (b = .096, $p < .10$), while simultaneously being more likely to experience client-induced negative affect (b = .104, $p < .05$). Lastly, Belgian street-level tax bureaucrats were less likely to hold positive client-cognitions and more likely to hold negative affect than Dutch tax bureaucrats (b = -.273, .575, $p < .01$, respectively).

Grounded in role-model mechanisms, hypothesis 1 predicted that street-level bureaucrats whose supervisor has a more positive attitude towards clients are more likely to have a positive attitude towards clients themselves. After controlling for the effects of tenure, team meeting frequency, gender, education, and country of residence, models 2, 5, and 8 in Table 4.3 indicate no such association for the cognitive attitude component (b = -.016, *ns*). This shows that street-level bureaucrats were not inclined to adjust the characteristics they attributed to clients to those their supervisor assigned to them. The two affective attitude components were positively related to their corresponding component of the supervisor's client-attitude (b = .135, .227, $p < .01$, respectively), though. This reveals that clients were more likely to evoke positive affect and negative affect in street-level bureaucrats when their frontline supervisor held these affective sentiments with a higher frequency. This effect was stronger for negative affect. These findings provide partial support for hypothesis 1.

Table 4.3. Multi-level regressions

	Dependent variable								
	Cognitive attitude component								
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	b	SE	P	*b*	SE	P	*b*	SE	P
Control variables									
Tenure under current supervisor				-.017	.009	.075	-.015	.009	.103
SLBs' organizational tenure				-.001	.002	.551	-.001	.002	.560
Supervisor's organizational tenure				-.001	.002	.566	-.001	.002	.566
Frequency of team meetings				.096	.036	.009	.100	.036	.007
Gender (1=female)				.096	.049	.052	.096	.049	.051
Education (1=high)				-.080	.051	.119	-.078	.051	.130
Country (1=Belgium)				-.273	.052	.000	-.276	.052	.000
Predictors									
Supervisor's cognitive component				-.019	.040	.631	-.016	.040	.689
Supervisor's positive affective component									
Supervisor's negative affective component									
Supportive leadership				.067	.016	.000	.066	.016	.000
Moderators									
Supervisor_COG × SL							-.047	.032	.142
Supervisor_PA × SL									
Supervisor_NA × SL									
Constant	5.116	.022	.000	5.246	.037	.000	5.245	.037	.000
ICC	2.15%			.12%			.15%		
-2LL[a]	1879.36			1584.06		< .01	1581.90		*ns*
Observations	971			864			864		

Table 4.3. Multi-level regressions (*continued*)

	Dependent variable								
	Positive affective attitude component								
	Model 4			Model 5			Model 6		
	b	SE	P	*b*	SE	P	*b*	SE	P
Control variables									
Tenure under current supervisor				.016	.015	.269	.016	.015	.271
SLBs' organizational tenure				-.002	.003	.471	-.002	.003	.470
Supervisor's organizational tenure				.001	.003	.733	.001	.003	.743
Frequency of team meetings				.038	.061	.529	.038	.061	.527
Gender (1=female)				-.133	.077	.086	-.133	.077	.087
Education (1=high)				-.060	.081	.458	-.061	.081	.455
Country (1=Belgium)				-.109	.084	.194	-.108	.084	.196
Predictors									
Supervisor's cognitive component									
Supervisor's positive affective component				.135	.039	.001	.135	.039	.001
Supervisor's negative affective component									
Supportive leadership				.097	.025	.000	.098	.026	.000
Moderators									
Supervisor_COG × SL									
Supervisor_PA × SL							-.004	.028	.876
Supervisor_NA × SL									
Constant	4.249	.036	.000	4.387	.060	.000	4.387	.060	.000
ICC	5.58%			3.82%			3.15%		
-2LL	2720.84			2366.94		< .01	2366.91		*ns*
Observations	971			864			864		

Table 4.3. Multi-level regressions (*continued*)

	Dependent variable								
	Negative affective attitude component								
	Model 7			Model 8			Model 9		
	b	SE	P	*b*	SE	P	*b*	SE	P
Control variables									
Tenure under current supervisor				-.007	.009	.421	-.008	.009	.408
SLBs' organizational tenure				.000	.002	.898	.000	.002	.968
Supervisor's organizational tenure				-.001	.003	.740	.000	.003	.877
Frequency of team meetings				-.035	.047	.447	-.033	.047	.491
Gender (1=female)				.104	.045	.022	.110	.045	.015
Education (1=high)				.061	.048	.200	.066	.048	.167
Country (1=Belgium)				.575	.070	.000	.567	.071	.000
Predictors									
Supervisor's cognitive component									
Supervisor's positive affective component									
Supervisor's negative affective component				.227	.044	.000	.248	.045	.000
Supportive leadership				-.034	.015	.028	-.033	.015	.031
Moderators									
Supervisor_COG × SL									
Supervisor_PA × SL									
Supervisor_NA × SL							.059	.020	.004
Constant	2.109	.042	.000	1.750	.044	.000	1.752	.045	.000
ICC	50.50%			20.22%			22.21%		
-2LL	1866.65			1483.63		< .01	1475.42		< .01
Observations	971			864			864		

[a] The significance of the -2LL indicates whether that model has a significantly better fit to the data than its predecessor (Field 2013).

Note: Unstandardized estimates are reported.

SE, standard error; P, p-value; SL, supportive leadership; *ns,* not significant.

Hypothesis 2 stated that street-level bureaucrats whose supervisor displays more supportive leadership behaviors towards them are more likely to have a positive attitude towards clients. Interpreting models 2, 5, and 8, all three attitude components displayed associations with supportive leadership in the anticipated direction, thus supporting hypothesis 2. It shows that street-level bureaucrats whose supervisor displayed more supportive leadership behaviors towards them were more likely to hold positive cognitions and positive affect towards clients (b = .066, .097, $p < .01$, respectively), and less likely to experience client-induced negative

affect (b = −.034, $p < .05$).[24] Although supportive leadership relates to all three attitude components, these effects were stronger for cognition and positive affect than for negative affect.

Regarding supportive leadership as a moderator, hypothesis 3 postulated a stronger relation between the street-level bureaucrats' and their supervisor's attitude towards clients for bureaucrats who more strongly view their supervisors as supportive leaders. From models 3, 6, and 9 it can be derived that no such relations were found for the cognitive component and positive affective component (b = −.051, −.004, *ns*, respectively). However, supportive leadership did alter the association between the negative component of their client-attitudes (b = .059, $p < .01$). To facilitate its interpretation, this effect is plotted in figure 4.1. In this figure, the low values of the supervisor's negative affect and supportive leadership represent their minimum values. The high values represent their maximum values. It shows that this effect is supportive of hypothesis 3: street-level bureaucrats whose supervisor often held negative affect towards clients and displayed strong supportive leadership properties were more likely to hold negative affect against clients themselves and vice versa. Consequently, hypothesis 3 is partially supported.

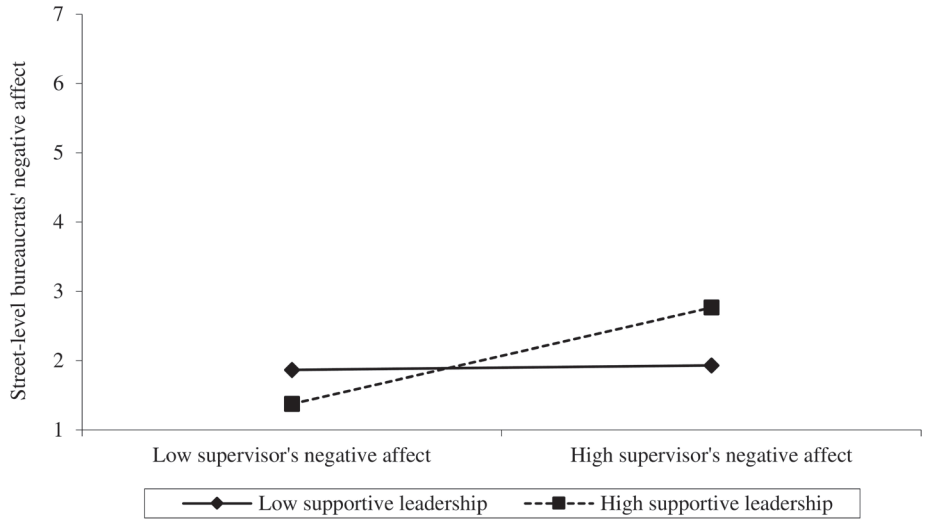

Figure 4.1. Interaction effect between the street-level bureaucrats' negative affect, the supervisor's negative affect, and supportive leadership

24 To obviate concerns of reverse causality, we examined whether street-level bureaucrats who held a similar attitude to clients as their supervisor (i.e., Δ < 1 SD) were more likely to assign supportive leader behaviors to their supervisor than bureaucrats with a client-attitude dissimilar to that of their supervisor (i.e., Δ > 1 SD). The results of an independent samples t-test showed that, for all three attitude components, street-level bureaucrats with attitudes similar and dissimilar to that of their supervisor did not differ in their supportive leadership perceptions (t = 1.605, -.562, .338, *ns*, respectively).

This analysis alludes that the direct effect and indirect effect of supportive leadership on negative affect have a different nature: in a direct manner, supportive leadership altered street-level bureaucrats' negative affect in such a way that bureaucrats with supportive supervisors held negative affect towards clients with a lower frequency. Indirectly, however, it fostered street-level bureaucrats' negative affect as supportive leadership strengthened the congruence between street-level bureaucrat and supervisor negative affect. These findings imply that, for this attitude component, role model effects were stronger than those of supportive leadership. They also suggest that supportive leadership properties worked to strengthen this negative role model effect.

4.6 DISCUSSION

This article built on a relational perspective on discretion to challenge the assumption that the frontlines provide limited opportunities for steering street-level bureaucrats (e.g., see Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lipsky, 2010; Riccucci, 2005). Its primary contribution is that it shows that the social process that occurs between street-level bureaucrats and their frontline supervisor enables supervisors to display leadership properties that shape street-level bureaucrats in their attitude towards clients.

Drawing from transformational leadership theory, our analysis focused on attitudinal influences that originate from the role model function supervisors have and the supportive leadership behaviors they display. An assessment of the cognitive, positive affective, and negative affective components of street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients among a sample of Dutch and Belgian street-level tax bureaucrats and their direct supervisors revealed that frontline supervisors function as an attitudinal referent to street-level bureaucrats, for the affective components of this attitude. This differentiation by attitude components could be due to transformational leaders' role model position originating from the idealized influence they exercise. Idealized influence is viewed as closely intertwined with subordinates' emotions, rather than their cognitions (Northouse, 2018; Yukl, 2010). Moreover, leader affect has been argued to be contagious in nature, meaning that it induces similar affect in subordinates (Van Knippenberg & Van Kleef, 2016, p. 806).

The empirical study furthermore showed that the supervisor's supportive leadership behaviors foster a positive client-attitude among the street-level bureaucrats they supervise. This finding is in line with the broader literature on the link between supportive leadership and attitudes (e.g., Banai & Reisel, 2007; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). This congruence notwithstanding, supportive leadership did show stronger associations with cognition and positive affect than negative affect. Its stronger relation to cognition may be attributable to supportive leadership's positive impact on the standing of attitude objects relevant to the street-level bureaucrats' work context (e.g., Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). Its connectedness to

positive affect could stem from the socio-emotional support that is inherent to supportive leadership (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006, p. 141).

The third noteworthy finding is that supportive leadership strengthens the supervisors' position as an attitudinal referent for negative affect on clients. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) have illustrated how "clients overpower the physical and emotional spaces in which street-level workers perform their jobs" (Keiser, 2010, p. 250), leaving them unable to disregard their client-related affect (Keiser, 2010). In general, positive affect makes individuals feel energized, focused, and pleasurably engaged, but negative affect represents "a general dimension of subjective distress and unpleasurable engagement" (Watson et al., 1988, p. 1063).

Stress increases individuals' affiliative needs (Taylor, 2006). As the street-level bureaucracy literature subscribes to the disagreeable nature of client-induced negative affect (e.g., Blau, 1960; Dubois, 2010; Raaphorst, 2017; Zacka, 2017), negative affect is likely to trigger street-level bureaucrats' affiliative and epistemic needs, more so than positive affect which lacks such strain. A heightened need to affiliate subsequently encourages street-level bureaucrats to align their negative affect to that of the supervisor. The shared reality with their supervisor this attitudinal alignment brings about strengthens the social bond between them and verifies the bureaucrats' interpretation of events (see Ledgerwood & Wang, 2018; Sinclair et al., 2005). These mechanisms work to alleviate the disagreeable experience of negative affect. Because supportive leadership functions as a conduit for bureaucrats' sense of affiliation with their supervisor (see Rafferty & Griffin, 2006), alignment of negative affect is stronger when conditions of supportive leadership are present.

Conversely, the supervisors' experience of negative affect may also encourage street-level bureaucrats' alignment thereto. Magee and Smith (2013) propose that affective alignment is greater when the high-power individual with whom a low-power individual seeks affiliation is in distress. This suggests that alignment is more likely to occur for supervisor negative affect than positive affect.

Before turning to the theoretical implications of these findings, it is important to convey their context. These conclusions were derived from cross-sectional data. As a result, claims on the direction of causality rely on the theoretical arguments made. Empirical validation of the causality of presupposed relations requires a longitudinal research design (see Rafferty & Griffin, 2004, 2006). This consideration notwithstanding, empirical evidence suggests that—*ceteris paribus*—transformational leadership properties and employee outcomes remain fairly stable over time (Oberfield, 2014b). This implies that a cross-sectional research design does not necessarily provide biased results. Building on survey data, however, did not allow us to assess the psychological processes in which our propositions were grounded; the most prominent of which is street-level bureaucrats' affiliative needs. To develop a more in-depth understanding of supervisory frontline leadership, we invite a qualitative research design that explores how such psychological processes interact with supervisory influence.

Second, we built on three of four attitude components of Keulemans and Van de Walle's (2018) measure for street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients. Although attitudinal inquiries that focus on cognition and affect only are by no means uncommon (for examples, see Crites, Fabrigar, & Petty, 1994; Fabrigar & Petty, 1999; Van den Berg, Manstead, Van der Pligt, & Wigboldus, 2005), future research is welcomed that includes the here omitted behavioral attitude component. Possibilities for this purpose include a participant observation in which the ways in which supervisors express themselves on desired and expected behaviors towards clients and the actual field-behaviors of street-level bureaucrats are compared. These participant observations could be supplemented with in-depth interviews to establish underlying causal mechanisms.

Although these empirical conditions call for some caution, our study makes multiple theoretical contributions to the broader literature on street-level bureaucracy. First, it counters pessimistic assessments of leadership potential at the frontlines by broadening a formal authority perspective on frontline leadership to incorporate the social processes that unfold in the bureaucrat-supervisor relation. As these social processes enable frontline supervisors to capitalize on their formal leadership mandate, this nuance to street-level scholarship repositions leadership as a key element for understanding frontline dynamics.

The importance of leadership to frontline dynamics draws attention to a supposition in the street-level bureaucracy literature that street-level bureaucrats themselves exercise leadership in their autonomy (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998). Their autonomy leaves these informal leadership displays by street-level bureaucrats largely unscrutinized by hierarchical control (e.g., Zacka, 2017). As the current study showed that street-level bureaucrats' autonomy does not obviate supervisory frontline leadership, it forwards the question of how the supervisor's leadership relates to street-level bureaucrats' informal leadership, exercised without this leadership mandate.

Second, this study further complicates the assumption that street-level bureaucrats and supervisors will hold opposing preferences (e.g., Lipsky, 2010; also see Evans, 2011). We argued that the shared professional background of street-level bureaucrats and their frontline supervisors opens up leadership opportunities that allow for supervisory attitudinal influence. Hupe and Hill (2007, pp. 290–291) cast doubt on our point of view, explaining that shared professionalism also raises questions "about the extent to which such people see themselves as 'peers' as opposed to 'superiors'. The supposition is that they will somehow be able to be both at once." From this perspective, shared professionalism at the frontlines could also just redirect traditional leadership issues from the frontlines to higher management levels; thus, not resolving the issue of steering street-level bureaucrats.

Empirical evidence counters this supposition: Butterfield, Edwards, and Woodall (2005, p. 331) and Kitchener, Kirkpatrick, and Whipp (2000) direct attention to the management challenges supervisors without this professional background face in steering street-level bureaucrats. And Sandfort (2000, p. 751) explains that street-level bureaucrats experience

professional knowledge as a source of legitimacy, while a managerial emphasis on "administrative rules and performance indicators […] helped to convince front-line staff of their separateness" (also see Evans, 2011; Zacka, 2017). Studies like these suggests that, rather than rendering them a peer status, professionalism is a unifying force that consolidates the frontline supervisor's position as a legitimate leader in a work context that leaves little opportunities for formal bureaucratic control (see Evans, 2011).

To explore supervisory leadership at the frontlines, we built on transformational leadership theory but diverged from traditional ways to assess transformational leadership or its dimensions (see Van Knippenberg & Sitkin (2013) for an overview). This approach was legitimate as we did not aim to measure either construct. Rather, we built on the transformational leadership dimensions to identify causal mechanisms inherent to them that may account for supervisory impact on street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients. From this analytical lens, it follows that the measures used should represent those specific causal mechanisms—i.e., role modelling and supportive leadership—, not their umbrella dimensions.

Connecting our study to the larger body of literature on transformational leadership, this theory is as popular as it is contested. One of its main critiques concerns its conceptual weakness (Northouse, 2018; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013); inter alia stemming from unclear criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of transformational leadership dimensions; high correlations between them; and its conceptual confounding of leadership and its effects (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Another critique sheds doubts on transformational leadership's status as a unitary construct, suggesting that its four dimensions have different effects on different outcomes; thus operating through different causal mechanisms (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

Such criticisms have caused multiple authors to reconceptualize transformational leadership (for examples, see Jensen et al., 2019; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990; Rafferty & Griffin, 2004). In the public management literature, several calls have been made for a conceptualization that is confined to the organizational vision leaders develop, share, and sustain (e.g., Bro, Andersen, & Bøllingtoft, 2017; Jensen et al., 2019). Although vision is crucial to transformational leadership (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013), such a narrow conceptualization can be problematic too. First, by its definitional nature transformational leadership is a process in which leader influence is dependent on the interactions between leaders and subordinates (Northouse, 2018). And "even though 'creating a vision' involves follower input, there is a tendency to see transformational leaders as visionaries" (Northouse, 2018, p. 181). Consequently, transformational leadership confined to leader vision may take a leader-centered perspective that undermines the interactional element that is a prerequisite for leader influence to occur.

Second, one of transformational leadership theory's strengths resides in its concern with the personal needs of subordinates (Northouse, 2018). Transformational leadership

theory confined to vision, at least in part, loses its focus on subordinates' needs and growth through its instrumental perspective on the leader-subordinate relation. Therein, this relation is seemingly reduced to a means leaders can employ to engage subordinates with organizational goals (for an example, see Jensen et al., 2019). Lastly, it surpasses that transformational leaders can impact subordinate attitudes and behavior through mechanisms other than those intertwined with the vision the leader sustains (e.g., Rafferty & Griffin, 2004, 2006).

Because it would result in the beforehand exclusion of potentially influential transformational leadership properties, a leadership conceptualization confined to vision was unsuitable for our purposes. Especially since the context provided was street-level bureaucrats' attitude towards clients. This attitude is strongly shaped through implicit cues (e.g., Jilke & Tummers, 2018), while a focus on vision alludes to explicit, conscious attitude formation processes. As a result, despite its critiques, drawing from the full transformational leadership theory and exploring the causal mechanisms inherent to those dimensions with the greatest probable influence from a theoretical point of view is a strength of the current study.

This is not to claim that leader vision and street-level bureaucrats' attitude to clients are unrelated. For instance, government bureaucracies' increased reliance on horizontal steering arrangements to achieve public aims (Van de Walle & Groeneveld, 2011) requires an organizational vision that prescribes a trusting attitude towards clients to street-level bureaucrats (e.g., see Goslinga, Van der Hel-van Dijk, Mascini, & Van Steenbergen, 2018). Assuming that frontline supervisors adopt this organizational vision, their vision could impact street-level bureaucrats' client-attitude.

4.7 CONCLUSION

By shifting the focus from formal authority to leadership properties displayed in the social relation between street-level bureaucrats and their frontline supervisor, this article has demonstrated the potential for supervisory leadership at the frontlines. As such, supervisors can contribute to attitudinal consistency among street-level bureaucrats, and through this ability, may constitute a key actor for safeguarding the legitimacy of bureaucratic processes and outcomes.

Multiple practical implications can be derived from this conclusion. On a general level, it suggests that supervisors who seek to steer street-level bureaucrats should invest in their social relation with them. More specifically, as supervisors function as role models for affective attitudinal information, this study highlights the importance of supervisor awareness of their own attitude to clients. The importance of the supervisor attitude to street-level bureaucrats implies that supervisory and organizational efforts to stimulate a particular stance to clients among bureaucrats should take the supervisor's own attitude thereon

into account. Furthermore, as this study highlights that supportive leadership may buffer street-level bureaucrats against developing a negative attitude towards clients, it implies that frontline supervisors should aim to invest in their supportive leadership qualities.

Finally, the practical and theoretical implications of this study give way to three directions for future research. First, having established that causal mechanisms inherent to dimensions of transformational leadership bring about supervisory influence, future research is welcomed that takes a broader approach to leadership to further explore the interrelations between transformational leadership and supervisory attitudinal impact at the frontlines, as well as the potential interactions between supervisory leadership and informal leadership behaviors of bureaucrats. Second, given the importance of the social relation between street-level bureaucrats and their supervisor and the potential effects social distance may have on the power relation between them, future research should explore how supervisors' and bureaucrats' social status factors, such as gender, may interact to shape the supervisor's frontline leadership. Third, future work should consider the ways in which leadership approaches can build on this social relation to increase our knowledge of how frontline supervisors may effectuate their formal leadership mandate.