

The effect of coping on job performance

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Abstract

Frontline workers, such as teachers and social workers, often experience stress, for instance because of high workloads. To deal with this, they use coping strategies. However, it is still unclear how coping strategies influence performance at work. The first goal of this article is therefore to theoretically and empirically study whether one important coping strategy (prioritizing motivated clients) influences job performance. The secondary goal is to go beyond testing a linear relationship between coping and performance by examining how work experience moderates this relationship. We use a multi-source survey of frontline workers and their supervisors in the United States to achieve these goals. We found that coping by prioritizing motivated clients is positively related to job performance. A strong moderation effect was also found: The positive effect is weaker for experienced frontline workers. Experienced frontline workers do not 'have to' prioritize motivated clients for high performance, as their knowledge and skills enable them to deliver results also for more difficult target groups. Contrary, for less experienced frontline workers, this coping strategy seems quite beneficial. We conclude with implications and a future research agenda.

Keywords

Coping; Performance; Street-level bureaucracy; Behavioral public administration

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1 Introduction

Workers on the frontline of public services, such as police officers, social workers and teachers, often face severe workloads. Further, they often experience conflicting demands from governmental policies, clients' wishes and professional norms (Hill & Hupe, 2009; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003, Sager et al., 2014). As a result, frontline workers experience stress on a regular basis when delivering public services to citizens.

To understand how frontline workers deal with these stresses coming from public service work, Lipsky (1980) used the concept of 'coping' in his seminal work on 'street-level bureaucracy'. Here, he draws upon the work of Lazarus (1966), one of the founding fathers of the coping field in clinical psychology. Inspired by Lipsky, many scholars have studied coping during public service delivery (for instance Brodtkin, 1997; Kelly, 1994; Knight & Trowler, 2000; Gofen, 2015).

A recent literature review on 35 years of coping studies summarized the results so far, and identified nine main ways of coping frontline workers (also termed street-level bureaucrats or public service employees) use when interacting with clients (Tummers et al., 2015). These include bending rules for clients, prioritizing clients over others and routinizing behavior. In this study, we analyze one important way of coping frontline workers can use: prioritizing clients, especially prioritizing motivated clients over unmotivated ones. That is, devoting more time or resources to clients who are driven to improve their situation. The motivation of clients is especially relevant in frontline work settings that are service oriented, such as social work and education (Križ & Skivenes, 2012, Winter, 2002; Maynard-Moody & Leland, 2000). For instance, social workers often work with difficult target groups, such as drug-addicted clients, unemployed persons and troubled families. These clients should be at least a little motivated to improve their situations. Furthermore, professors may decide to help especially students who

are motivated to learn, and putting less effort in unmotivated students. In this way, they can deliver results, even when their workload is high. Related to this Anagnostopoulos (2003:305) quotes teachers who state that they are “not wasting energy on kids who don’t care.”

We will analyze the effect of prioritizing motivated clients on job performance. In this way, this study is theoretically innovative. Job performance is a crucial element in organizations (Barrick & Mount, 1991). However, not much research has explicitly studied the relationship between coping behavior of frontline workers and their job performance. In work and organizational psychology, coping is often related to indicators like burnout and engagement (see for instance Leiter, 1991; Mearns & Cain, 2003). In street-level bureaucracy studies, most research analyzes antecedents of coping. For instance, it has been found that frontline workers employ rationing as a way of coping (decreasing service availability, such as stating “the office is very busy today, please return tomorrow”) when work pressure is high, and the frontline worker has substantial power (Triandafyllidou, 2003). It is important to establish the relationship between coping behavior and job performance, to analyze which coping behaviors of frontline workers are detrimental or beneficial for performance on the job, and in which circumstances this applies.

To measure job performance, we use supervisor-rated measures. This is done for several reasons. First, scholars suggest that supervisor-rated measures of employee performance are more valid than are employee self-ratings (Scullen, Mount & Goff, 2000). For instance, employees may consistently overrate their performance (Murphy & Cleveland 1995). Second, it has been suggested that supervisor-rated measures of performance have a stronger predictive validity than self-rated measures. For instance, Atkins and Wood (2002) showed that supervisor ratings predicted performance in an assessment center quite well, while self-ratings were sometimes even negatively related. Third, although we fully acknowledge that client-ratings are also useful in determining performance, this is sometimes not possible for ethical and

pragmatic reasons. For instance, clients of social workers often have severe mental problems. Related to the above reasons, this study eliminates common source bias by measuring job performance via supervisors. Common source bias occurs when overlapping variability is due to data collected from a single source, most often a single survey at a single point in time filled out by one person (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Common source bias is a serious threat to the validity of the research (Favero & Bullock, 2015). Taking different sources for dependent and independent variables directly follows recent calls in leading public administration journals to take common source bias (and common method bias more generally) seriously (Favero & Bullock, 2015; Jakobsen & Jensen, 2015).

The first goal of this study is then to analyze the effects of one important way of coping (prioritizing motivated clients) on job performance. The second goal is to go beyond this direct relationship by testing how work experience may *moderate* this relationship. As will be discussed more fully in the theoretical framework, we expect that there is a positive relationship between prioritizing motivated clients and job performance. However, this relationship is stronger for frontline workers with less work experience. For a frontline worker with low experience, it can be more fruitful to focus on motivated clients. If they would focus their attention on the difficult, unmotivated clients, they might ‘get nothing done’. On the other hand, experienced frontline workers have more knowledge and are therefore potentially more capable of getting results with less motivated clients. They are able to ‘get results’, even with less motivated clients.

Based on the above, we aim to answer the following research question:

How does the way of coping ‘prioritizing motivated clients’ influence job performance, and to what extent is this relationship influenced by work experience?

The structure of this paper is as follows. In the following section, we first discuss the theoretical background on coping and performance, and develop the hypotheses. We then present the data and methods, followed by the results section. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, limitations, and possible future research directions.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 The background on coping

To understand the concept of coping, one must go back to the 19th century when Freud introduced psychoanalysis (Breuer & Freud, 1955 (1893)). In Freud's theory, the concept of defense was very important and referred to the ego's struggle against unpleasant feelings. In the 1960s, a new research line emerged from this work under the label of 'coping'. The most notable work here is *Psychological stress and the coping process* by Richard Lazarus (1966). Based primarily on this work, coping has developed as a distinct research field.

Folkman and Lazarus (1980:223) define coping as "the cognitive and behavioral efforts made to master, tolerate or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them". This definition is broad. Coping in its most general form can range from positive thinking, quitting one's job to talking to one's partner about a problem at work. In this study, we focus on coping during public service delivery. These are *behavioral* ways of coping that occur when *frontline workers interact with clients* (during so-called 'public encounters'; Bartels, 2013). Examples are working overtime for clients, prioritizing some clients over others, bending rules for clients, or becoming aggressive to clients. This is in line with how public administration scholars predominantly study frontline work; they analyze how the behavior of frontline workers directly affects public service delivery, forming and reforming policies through interactions with citizens (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; 2003; Hill & Hupe, 2009;

Winter, 2003; Lipsky, 1980; Tummers & Bekkers, 2012). Combining the definition of Folkman and Lazarus (1980) and the topic studied by public administration scholars, coping during public service delivery is then defined as *behavioral efforts frontline workers employ when interacting 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 there are other ways of coping that are important to frontline workers. Some are behavioral, but take place outside public encounters, such as seeking help and support from colleagues, supervisors and family. Others are cognitive instead of behavioral, such as cognitive exhaustion and cynicism. These ways of coping have been studied extensively in literature streams such as work and organizational psychology (see for instance Schaufeli et al., 2009; Sonnentag & Jelden, 2009). In table 1, we introduce two dimensions for capturing coping types. We focus on type 1: behavioral coping during interactions with clients. We do recognize that the boundaries are not clear-cut and that there are potential connections (Goodsell, 1981). However, this distinction serves as a helpful analytical tool to focus on behavioral ways of coping employed by frontline employees when working with clients (Hill and Hupe, 2009; Winter 2002; Tummers & Rocco, 2015).

Table 1 Examples of various ways of coping of frontline workers. We focus on type 1 (based on Tummers et al., 2015).

	Behavioral coping	Cognitive coping
During client-worker interactions	<i>1. Aggression towards clients, priority setting among clients, working overtime to help clients.</i>	2. Client-oriented cynicism, compassion towards clients, emotional detachment from clients
Not during client-worker interaction	3. Social support from colleagues, complaining towards managers, turnover, substance abuse.	4. Cognitive restructuring, cynicism towards work, work alienation

2.2 Prioritizing motivated clients

Within coping during public service delivery, various ways of coping can be identified. Some examples are shown in Table 1. This study focuses on one particular way of coping employees can use: prioritizing among clients. Prioritizing during public service delivery is defined as “giving certain clients more time, resources, or energy” (Tummers et al., 2015:10). This is an interesting way of coping, as it is beneficial for some clients or client groups, but others may be worse off. Setting priorities among clients can be based on various criteria. For instance, in large disasters or in emergency care settings, physicians prioritize patients who will benefit the most from the help of patient care. This is referred to as ‘triage’ (Iserson and Moskop, 2007). In less extreme situations, other criteria may be used, such as whether a client is friendly versus hostile (Sandfort, 2000), or whether a client has a large chance of success versus a small chance, such as whether a student has a chance of getting a diploma or not (Baviskar, 2013).

In this study, we will analyze the effect of prioritizing *motivated* over *unmotivated* clients. The motivation of clients is especially relevant in frontline work settings that are service oriented, such as social work and education. For instance, social workers often work with difficult target groups, such as drug-addicted clients, unemployed persons and troubled families. These clients should be at least a little motivated to improve their situations. Križ and Skivenes (2012:795) quote a social worker who states that:

“If I think a family will meet the challenge of going the distance, I will hook them in. And what that means is if I’m running, and a family is running with me, I will provide services. If I’m pulling that family behind me, or pushing them, I may not be inclined. Because if it takes that much effort, they’re not ready, and they don’t want the service.”

Related to this, Maynard-Moody and Leland (2002) provide similar examples of Vocational Rehabilitation counsellors. They note that when clients are deemed ‘worthy’ by these counsellors, they receive extraordinary services and attention from frontline workers. Their cases are kept open longer, counsellors cut through red tape for these clients. They will even work overtime, for instance coming in on the weekend to help a client move. One of the most important determinants of ‘worthiness’ is whether a client is motivated: “the motivated client is [...] deemed morally superior and worthy of investment” (p.118). On a similar vein, Maynard-Moody & Musheno (2000:332) quote a counselor who put extra effort in helping a client who was “a very nice lady, a very motivated lady despite all the health problems” (p.332) Hence, frontline workers take into account characteristics of the clients when determining who to help, and a crucial characteristic is whether these clients are themselves motivated.

Similarly, Hagen and Owens-Manley concluded – in a qualitative study of 29 social workers - that most workers place “tremendous emphasis on the clients’ efforts to help

themselves” (2002:175). This signaled to the workers that these clients wanted to move forward. As a result, social workers put far more effort in these motivated clients versus the rest.

2.3 The effects of prioritizing motivated clients on job performance

How can we connect prioritizing motivated clients to job performance? Job performance can be defined as “the aggregated value to the organization of the discrete behavioral episodes that an individual performs over a standard interval of time” (Motowildo et al., 1997:72). On a similar vein, Campbell et al. (1990:314) define job performance as “observable things people do (i.e. behaviors) that are relevant to the goals of the organization.” We expect that frontline workers who focus more on motivated clients will show higher job performance. Frontline workers often face severe workloads and limited resources (Lipsky, 1980). In order to have as much impact as possible, they can chose to prioritize motivated clients. Helping motivated clients will probably have a larger effect on them than helping clients who are not motivated in progressing. Van der Aa (2012:144) quotes a social worker stating that “sometimes you have clients who do not want to improve and who are unmotivated, [...] these clients call you for every tiny little thing and then ask you to fix it.” Hence, when this social worker puts a lot of effort into these clients, he will probably not get high results, as for high results it is crucial that clients themselves also cooperate. It would pay off more to help those who really want to move forward. Similary and as stated in the introduction, Anagnostopoulos (2003:305) notes that teachers are “not wasting energy on kids who don’t care.” Based on the above, we expect that prioritizing motivated clients is positively related to job performance. Hence:

H1: Prioritizing motivated clients has a positive relationship with job performance

Note that we fully acknowledge that prioritizing motivated clients can have several other (unintended) effects, both positive (think of less burnout among frontline workers) and negative (think of severe discrimination among certain client groups). In the concluding section, we will discuss this more fully. In this article, we scoped the research by focusing on the relationship between prioritizing motivated clients and job performance as rated by the supervisor.

2.4 Priority setting and work experience

In order to provide a more comprehensive explanation for the link between prioritizing motivated clients and job performance we study the role of a potential important moderator: work experience.

Work experience is an often-studied concept in management studies (Quiñones et al., 1995). Work experience is for instance relevant for various human resource functions. Regarding selecting managers for a job, Singer and Bruhns (1991) showed that recruiters viewed work experience as more important than academic qualifications. It has also been linked to human resource functions such as training (to apply for some Executive Master Programs, applicants have to have a minimal number of work experience) and career development (people are being told to first make ‘flying hours’ before they can get promoted) (Campion et al., 1994; Guile & Griffiths, 2001).

Furthermore, also in policy implementation and street-level bureaucracy the importance of work experience is established. Evans (2010:133) states that having work experience and qualifications gives managing frontline workers more credit when interacting with other employees. As a result, they can be more authoritative as they ‘have experience’. Furthermore, socialization theories argue that behavior of frontline workers is determined by the work experience and peer pressure (Wilkins & Williams, 2008).

Work experience can be defined in various ways, such as using time-based and amount measures (Quiñones et al., 1995). Time-based measures are used most often. They measure for instance months or years in the job, in the organization or in the profession. Amount measures refer to the number of times a task was performed or the number of different jobs held. In this study, we choose for a common time-based measure, that is, the number of years someone has been working as a frontline worker. This explicitly included both the years in the current organizations and in other organizations. We chose this because this reflects the experience in working directly with clients, and – as frontline workers sometimes change organizations – this is a better indicator than only tenure in the current organization (see also Scott, 1997).

We expect that, when work experience increases, the impact of prioritizing motivated clients on job performance weakens. In other words, when frontline workers with less work experience prioritize clients, this has quite a positive effect on their job performance. This is expected because frontline workers with low work experience could lack the proper knowledge on how to accomplish results with less motivated clients. Hence, a frontline worker with low experience wants to accomplish results, it can be far more fruitful for him to focus his efforts on client who are motivated. If they would focus their attention of the particularly difficult, unmotivated clients, they might ‘get nothing done’. On the other hand, experienced frontline workers have more knowledge and are therefore potentially more capable of getting results with less motivated clients. They are able to ‘get results’ with less motivated clients. Related to this, an experimental study by DeLeon et al. (2000) analyzed whether employing senior staff (called the ‘Senior Professors’ in the study) reduced dropout of treatment programs for substance abusers. The authors showed that employing ‘senior professors’ significantly reduced the likelihood of early dropout. This enhanced effect was most evident for clients with the lowest levels of motivation. Hence, it seems that senior staff can deliver more results with less

motivated clients than less experienced staff. Concluding, we expect that prioritizing motivated clients is especially important for frontline workers with little work experience.

Based on the above, we expect:

H2: The impact of prioritizing motivated clients on job performance is stronger for frontline workers with low work experience.

3 Data and method

3.1 Sampling and response rate

We used a sample of social workers and their supervisors in a large non-profit social work organization in the United States (California). This organization provides mental health and social services to children, young adults, and their families. First, together with the vice-presidents of the organization, we identified all workers who had direct contact with clients (called ‘direct care staff’ in the organization). The total number of direct care staff (from here on: ‘frontline workers’) was 250. They had jobs such as mental health counselor, mental health therapist, psychiatric nurse practitioner and instructional aide. We linked them to their direct supervisor via company records.

The employees were approached via a web-based survey and/or a paper survey (to increase response rate). In the introductory text we among else stated the purpose of the study, showed the participating universities and researchers, provided incentives (such as a raffle for a Spa treatment), noted that participation was voluntary, secured anonymity of responses and indicated that there were no commercial interests. An email address (of the lead researcher) was provided for questions. Below the introductory text, the names and photos of the researchers and the vice presidents of the organization were shown. The survey consisted of background

variables (such as gender) and Likert-type items (see measures). Furthermore, we also provided space for comments. This yielded qualitative data. This qualitative data will be used to interpret the quantitative results (see Results). The survey was distributed and, after a number of reminders, we received 173 responses (response rate 69%) of frontline workers.

One month after closing the survey for the employees, we surveyed 43 supervisors to tap the performance of the frontline workers (all via email). Each supervisor rated the performance of all of his/her employees who were frontline workers and who have filled out the survey. The introductory text was largely similar to the one for the employees, stating among else the purpose of the study, the participating universities and researchers, incentives, voluntary participation, anonymity of responses and no commercial interests. After the introductory email and various reminders, we received responses from all 43 supervisors (response rate 100%). In total, we therefore received ratings for all 173 respondents.

3.2 Measures

Job performance was measured using the validated scale of Welbourne et al. (1996). Supervisors were asked to rate each of their subordinates on a number of job performance criteria, namely “quantity of work output”, “quality of work output”, “accuracy of work” and “Customer service provided (internal and external)”. The answer categories were 1=needs much improvement 2=needs some improvement 3=satisfactory, 4=good, and 5=excellent. The Cronbach alpha was .876.

To date, a validated scale for prioritizing motivated clients has not been developed. Therefore, such a scale was developed using scale development procedures (DeVellis, 2011). This is part of a larger study to develop validated scales for coping behavior of frontline workers. The main steps for the specific priority setting scale are summarized here.

First, based on the definition of prioritizing motivated clients six items were developed to tap this latent construct. The answer categories were 1=never, 2=sometimes, 3=often and 4=always. Templates were used in constructing the items. Templates 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 ‘clients’, the researcher can rephrase this to suit the specific situation, for instance with ‘students’ in an education section or ‘patients’ in a healthcare setting. This approach has been found to increase reliability and content validity (DeVellis, 2011). In this case, we used ‘participants’, as that is the common term to refer to clients in this particular social work organization. As an example, one of the template items working overtime is:

If clients are not interested in progressing, I put in less effort

In this context, we changed this to:

If participants are not interested in progressing, I put in less effort

Second, to further increase content validity, eighteen experts examined the initial pool of items. These experts were selected for their various expertise (DeVellis, 2011:75). They included twelve frontline workers (goal: to increase understandability and relevance to practice), four public administration scholars (goal: to check the relevancy to the public administration literature), one psychometric expert (goal: to analyze the psychometric properties of the scale) and one IT-expert (goal: to check applicability with the web survey). After each interview, we would potentially add or discard items based on the expert’s comments. Based here on, we ended with the best-fitting items for prioritizing motivated clients.

We included the items developed in the second step in our survey. Note that clients was replaced by ‘participants’ as this was the term to refer to clients in this particular social work organization. The final items were: “I spend less energy on unmotivated clients”, “I avoid clients who are unwilling to develop themselves”, “I invest less time in clients who do not want to move forward”, “I help unmotivated clients less than motivated clients”, “I will only do the minimum for 'lazy' clients” and “If clients are not interested in progressing, I put in less effort”. The Cronbach alpha was .910. Confirmatory factor analyses were also conducted, with satisfactory results (see results).

Alongside the variables described above, we included gender (0=male, 1=female) and education 1=High school or GED, 2=Some College, 3=Bachelor's Degree, 4=Some Graduate School, 5=Master's Degree / Licensed (LCSW, LMFT, LPCC), 6=PhD/Doctorate Degree). That is, any differences due to these variables are controlled for in the analyses. Furthermore, we included work experience in frontline work to test its moderating influence. This was worded as follows: “How long have you been working as direct care staff (in total in this and other organizations)”: 1=Less than 1 year, 2=1-4 years, 3=5-9 years, 4=10-14 years, 5=15-19 years, 6=20-24 years, 7=25 years or more.

3.3 Statistical methods used

We used Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) followed by Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in *Mplus*. The CFA and SEM techniques are often used in psychology research, but quite new to most public administration scholars, although its use seems to be increasing (see for instance Van Loon et al. 2015). Given its novelty to various public administration scholars, we discuss a number of the analyses’ characteristics in detail.

CFA is a technique used to test the factor structure of latent constructs based on theory and prior research experience. CFA has several advantages over exploratory factor analysis,

such as more stringent psychometric criteria for accepting models and allowing the estimation of latent variables rather than only measured variables, thereby improving validity and reliability (Brown, 2006).

Using CFA a *measurement model* is specified. The measurement model specifies the number of factors and shows how the indicators (items) relate to the various factors (Brown, 2006:51). Hence, it shows for instance how the items asked to measure priority setting relates to the latent construct of priority setting. This measurement model is a precursor for the SEM-analysis. In the SEM-analysis, a *structural model* is then constructed showing how the various latent factors relate to each other. For instance, it shows how priority setting of frontline workers is related to their job performance.

The data has a ‘nested’ structure: our respondents are ‘nested’ in supervisors as supervisors rate a number of employees. In order to account for this we used the ‘cluster’ command to identify the supervisor groups and use the TYPE=COMPLEX analysis command. We used MLR estimation. Furthermore, all variables were standardized beforehand to ease interpretation as no standardized scores are shown when conducting interactions using latent constructs.

3.4 Psychometric properties of priority setting and job performance

Before testing the structural model, CFAs were conducted to analyze whether the factor structure described was also present in the data. Several authors suggest reporting Root Mean Square Error Of Approximation (RMSEA), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) when describing model fit (Schreiber et al., 2006; Van de Schoot et al., 2012). The RMSEA is used to test the absolute fit of the model and for the CFA this was .024. This indicates good fit as Hu and Bentler (1999) suggest that values $\leq .06$ indicate good fit ($\leq .08$ average fit). The TLI and CFI are comparative fit indices that compares the fit of the model with the baseline

model. The TLI and CFI were .992 and .994, which is considered excellent ($\geq .90$, better $\geq .95$). The values of the standardized factor loadings were all high. For priority setting, these ranged from .748 to .838. For job performance, these ranged from .639 to .954 (all $p < .001$). This shows evidence of convergent validity—that is, items that tap the same latent construct are related to each other (Kline, 2010). This is shown in Table 2. Note that – based on the recommendations of Hooper et al. (2008) - we have not used correlated error terms.

Table 2 Standardized factor loadings for items measuring priority setting and job performance (CFA)

<i>Item</i>	<i>Priority setting</i>	<i>Job performance</i>
PS 1	.746	
PS 2	.783	
PS 3	.838	
PS 4	.768	
PS 5	.748	
PS 6	.833	
JP 1		.639
JP 2		.954
JP 3		.832
JP 4		.784

4 Results

4.1 Results of SEM analyses

In order to assess the hypotheses, we present Table 3, showing the results, including control variables and interaction effects. In Model 1, with only the main effects, a direct effect of priority setting on job performance was found. On average supervisors rate the job performance of employees who use more priority setting significantly higher ($\beta=.184$, $p<.05$). This provides support for the first hypothesis: priority setting is positively related to job performance. Furthermore, employees with a higher education are in general given higher performance ratings ($\beta=.117$, $p<.05$). There were no main effects for tenure or gender. Hence, people who are working longer in the organization are not rated higher than those who work there shorter. Furthermore, man and women are not rated differently.

In order to test Hypothesis 2, we included the moderating effects of work experience on the relationship between priority setting and job performance. This is shown in Model 2. It can be seen that the interaction between work experience and prioritizing motivated clients was negative and significant ($\beta=-.193$, $p<.05$). This means that the positive effect of priority setting is significantly lower for employees who work longer in the organization. Hence, setting priorities is especially relevant for frontline workers who do not have a lot of work experience. This is in line with Hypothesis 2.

We also have to analyse to what extent the models provide a good fit for the data. Model 1 already had a good fit (CFI = .981, TLI = .976, RMSEA = .039). Such fit criteria are not available when conducting interactions with latent constructs (here: prioritizing motivated clients) are included in the Structural Equation Model (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2010). The only available fit indexes are the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criteria (BIC). These fit indices can be used to compare competing models. Lower scores on

these fit indices mean that the model fits better (Schreiber et al. 2006). It can be seen that Model 2 provides a better fit of the data than model 1: the AIC and BIC are lower (Model 1: AIC=3771.367, BIC=3879.357, Model 2: AIC=3766.534, BIC=3877.699).

Table 3 Structural Equation Model and for impact priority setting on job performance

	<i>SEM Model 1 – Including priority setting</i>	<i>SEM Model 2 – Including interaction with work experience</i>
Priority setting	.184* (.082)	.171* (.077)
Work experience	.037 (.058)	.012 (.060)
Gender	.065 (.048)	.065 (.047)
Education	.117* (.058)	.123* (.057)
Priority setting & Work experience	-	-.193* (.081)
CFI	.981	-
TLI	.977	-
RMSEA	.038	-
AIC	3771.367	3766.534
BIC	3879.357	3877.699

Notes: * $p < .05$. Standardized coefficients are presented first (standard errors in parentheses).

4.2 Interpretation based on qualitative data

To increase the understanding of the relationships studied, we will examine some qualitative data, drawn from open answers from the survey. First, it was evident that some frontline

workers explicitly acknowledged that they were helping motivated clients more than less motivated clients. One of them stated that:

“Honestly, if a participant is pre-contemplation and it's demonstrated through cancellations and lack of follow-through I address this with them. If there are a large number of cancellations I may close the case and encourage them to reapply for services when they are more ready themselves.”

However, we must note that not all frontline workers prioritized motivated clients. Another frontline worker stated that “I put more energy into participants who are more unmotivated. I believe that they are the one who need more help on improving their skills.”. But in general, it seems to be accepted in the organization. A coordinating frontline worker noted “We have a saying that we should not work harder than our clients. Unless they are in crisis or we are in engagement. I try to remember this saying.” On a similar vein, another stated that “We don't want to work harder than our participants at fixing their own lives.”

It seems that the workers themselves also thought that helping motivated clients could be performance enhancing, noting that “When participants are not motivated to change or to receive help/support. We cannot force help on them. This is awkward & counterproductive.” Related to this, one stated that:

“We work with a population (teens on probation and CWS [Child Welfare Services]) who aren't always ready to make a change. I try my best to engage the family and show how our services are valuable to them. That being said. It is difficult to maintain motivation when participants consistently disregard action items and interventions.”

In the statistical analyses, we found that prioritizing motivated clients was especially effective for frontline workers with only a little work experience. We did not find many quotes who focused directly on this relationship, presumably because it is less known in the professional community. However, one interesting quote of a 52-year-old frontline worker provided indications that work experience indeed provided her with tools to accomplish results with less motivated clients:

“I believe that it is a challenge to work with participants [clients] who appear unmotivated. And it is common to have more difficulty when there are barriers to the therapeutic relationship. But over the years I have grown more patient and willing to self-examine. Without taking things personally. In order to more fully understand where I am. At times I find that my expectations are not matching the participants' stage of change. I then find it necessary to dial back my expectations and to search for what the participant needs and desires in their current stage of change. This frequently helps me to feel better about my work with them and gives me increased patience and respect for their right to self-determination.”

Hence, she states that she has “grown more patient and willing to self-examine”. In this way, she could better deal with less motivated clients than before, increasing her performance with these less motivated clients. Hence, work experience made it less rewarding for her to only focus on the motivated group of clients.

Concluding, this section highlighted some qualitative insights next to the statistical data, as such providing some background to interpret the results of this study

5 Conclusion

The primary goal of this article was to investigate the effect of an important way of coping (prioritizing motivated clients) on job performance. The secondary goal was to go beyond testing a linear relationship between coping and performance by examining the role of work experience in changing this relationship. Based on literature from public administration and applied psychology fields, a theoretical model was constructed. This model was tested in a survey of frontline workers and their immediate supervisors. In this way, this study has added two important elements to the coping literature. First, it is theoretically innovative as it links coping to performance at work. Second, the combination of different data sources has diminished the risk of common method bias, which has often been a concern for public administration studies. We are – to our knowledge – one of the first coping study to consider this. In this final section, we discuss the conclusions that can be drawn from this study, as well as some limitations and related future research suggestions.

We firstly found that prioritizing motivated clients indeed was positively related to job performance. This is an important finding, as it shows that a particular way of coping can be beneficial for job performance. Secondly, it was found that this way of coping is especially relevant for frontline workers with low work experience. Especially starting frontline workers may notice that they can get results when they focus on clients who are motivated to help themselves. Motivation makes clients easier to handle (see also Maynard-Moody & Leland, 2000:118). Various frontline workers also view motivation as a prerequisite to get results, noting that when clients are not motivated, they ‘cannot be forced’. Coping by prioritizing motivated clients indeed seems to pay off, as it increases job performance.

On the other hand, we must acknowledge that we have not analyzed other potentially important effects of prioritizing motivated clients, both positive and negative. This is an

important limitation of this study. Future studies may take up the challenge of various effects of this (and other) ways of coping, embarking on new theoretical venues. Potentially effects regarding clients/citizens are performance as rated by *clients* and discrimination of target groups (Carson et al., 2007; Keiser et al., 2004). Next to this, it can be analyzed whether this particular way of coping has detrimental or beneficial effects for workers themselves, such as burnout, engagement or work-life conflicts (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Amstad et al., 2002). Finally, it can be analyzed whether prioritizing motivated clients has effects on more general policy indicators such as rule compliance and degree of benefits provided (Henderson & Pandey, 2013; Scott & Pandey, 2000).

Another limitation relates to the research context. This study analyzed social workers and their supervisors in the United States. The specific institutional and policy context could affect the results. Further tests of the provided model are needed. It would be interesting to conduct studies using the same theoretical model which focus on other groups of frontline workers in other countries or who work in a different context, such as teachers or police officers.

Finally, methodological limitations are apparent. We aimed to increase the methodological strength of the study by among else using multiple sources of data, aiming for high response rates (70% and 100%), using validated scales or validating new ones ourselves, and using state-of-the-art SEM analyses. However, there are still limitations to this kind of research. An important one is that the analysis makes assumptions about the likely direction of causality, moving from the way of coping to job performance. When testing for causal effects, few of the methods in the social sciences can live up to the rigor and level of control of an experimental design. Future studies could test the proposed relationships using an experimental design.

To conclude, this study provides important insights that help to understand the effects of coping behavior of frontline workers. It shows that a particular way of coping can indeed be

beneficial for job performance. Embracing and further researching coping behavior should prove to be a timely and productive endeavor for both researchers and practitioners alike.

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