

The use of discretion by client managers in social assistance practice

Marjolijn De Wilde – University of Antwerp – Herman Deleeck Centre for Social Policy

Very first draft – please do not quote

Introduction

Although the use of the discretion granted to street level bureaucrats and municipalities in social assistance practice has been widely discussed (Evans & Harris, 2004; Lipsky, 2010), little is known about its actual use. Most existing studies are either qualitative (thus preventing claims of causality) (Bergmark & Minas, 2010; Dubois, 2013; Grant, 2013) or based on administrative data (thus limiting the number of variables that can be studied) (Carpentier & Neels, 2013; Kazepov Y & Barberis, 2012). Furthermore, studies usually do not study all levels that are deemed to influence social policy implementation, namely client characteristics, social workers' preferences, the context of the organization offering the treatment, organizational policies and national legislation (Rice, 2012). The research which led to this paper aims to by-pass these shortcomings by gathering and analyzing relevant empirical data in a novel way, using a factorial survey (detailed below). In this paper I focus on the influences on social policy implementation of social workers and, more provisory, of the municipality where the case manager is working. Our research question is: **To what extent and in which way do case managers (and the municipality level) influence the work conditions set on social assistance claimants?**

The paper is structured as follows. It will start with a brief description of the method used, namely the factorial survey, followed by an outline of the way the discretion of social workers is studied in the paper. In this regard, two elements will be analysed: firstly, the amount of variation between respondents, both in their general and in their specific treatment of specific client features; and secondly, which respondent characteristics could possibly explain this variance. The choice of this specific approach and the variables is embedded in existing scientific research. The methodological part will end with a note on the limitations of the data, due to the pilot-study character of the survey. The results section will start with a description of the respondents' characteristics and then present the results of the above-mentioned analysis. The final subsection will summarize these results, concluding that the variation between respondents is large, both in general and concerning specific client features. The kind of respondent characteristics which explain most of the variation differ across the dependent variables.

Methodology

Introduction to the factorial survey

This section introduces the factorial survey. In a traditional comparative experiment, the effect of one factor on a dependent variable is tested. In a factorial experiment, however, at least two factors are varied at once, enabling the researchers to investigate the effect of multiple factors and their 'interaction effects' on the dependent variable. In a factorial survey, the experiment requires each respondent to read a story about a person or situation, after which the respondent rates the person or the situation. This story or situation is usually referred to as a vignette. As every experimental unit in a factorial experiment, every story, consists of several factors (e.g. gender, nationality, work experience) all with their own levels (e.g. for gender: female, male). The vignette universe consists of all possible vignettes generated by combining all levels across all factors.

In some cases, all respondents rate all possible stories. Most commonly, however, a sample is taken from the vignette population and this sample is presented to the respondents. Samples can be taken at random, but a more appropriate approach is to select a D-efficient sample. A D-efficient sample ensures that maximum information is obtained concerning the effects of the experimental factors. Typically, a factorial survey is sent out to various respondents, where every respondent only evaluates a subset of all vignettes in the D-efficient sample. An attractive feature of the D-efficient survey design approach is that it seeks the best possible assignment of vignettes to the respondents, in the sense that the influence of the experimental factors and the influence of the respondent characteristics can be quantified with maximum precision. The assignment of vignettes to respondents is known as blocking in the design of experiments literature (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010; Dülmer, 2007; Goos & Jones, 2011).

Whenever a survey is taken by multiple respondents, it is common to record the characteristics of the respondents (e.g. gender and age). This leads to multi-level data: part of the data is related to individual experimental units (vignettes), and another part of the data is concerned with the respondents (who evaluate a set of vignettes). As a result, multi-level regression models are appropriate for quantifying the relationship between on the one hand, the experimental factors and the respondents' characteristics and, on the other hand, the respondents' ratings. Multi-level regression takes into account statistical dependencies between ratings from the same respondent. In order to study social policy implementation properly, one should also add characteristics of the office/agency/institute where the respondent is working as explanatory variables in the multi-level regression model, since local policies might be as instrumental as respondent and client characteristics in choosing treatment (Wallander, 2012). Since only five Flemish municipalities are investigated, it is impossible to treat these as a third level and to include explanatory variables at this level. The municipalities are introduced in the model as fixed effects.

Research setup

We will use the factorial survey as described above to acquire insight into the treatment which social workers predict a hypothetical client would receive. This means that the respondents are not asked to answer what they would personally prefer or what they would personally do, but to consider all elements that might influence the decision concerning treatment.

Independent variables

The survey – answered by social workers of social assistance offices – consists of two parts. First, several (12) vignettes concern hypothetical clients that ask for help at the welfare office. Each

vignette is followed by the same questions (see below). The second part of the questionnaire consists of questions about the office where the case manager is working and about the case manager herself. More concretely, the dependent variables in my research are:

1. The probability that the hypothetical client will be offered a financial benefit. (scale question – 1 (very unsure) to 7 (very sure))
2. The probability that a client is forced to take a job offer (on the regular labour market or in an activation project) with a specific character, namely:
 - Commuting more than three hours per day.
 - Starting early in the morning (5:00 a.m.)
 - A job on which a client is over-qualified

Not taking the job or activation offer would result in losing the benefit (scale questions – 1 (very unsure) to 7 (very sure))

3. The probability that no work or activation expectations are set upon the client. (scale question – 1 (very unsure) to 7 (very sure))

Modelling discretion

The literature suggests that street level bureaucrats show a wide discretion regarding the guiding of clients (Lipsky, 2010). If true, this would mean that the ratings of the vignettes differ according to the respondent. Differences may be located in two areas. First, respondents may vary in their intercept, meaning that their judgment of cases differs in general. In the multi-level regression this will affect the variance at the second level in the multi-level analysis. We, therefore, predict that the Variance Partition Component (= variance at the second level (respondent) / (variance at the first level (vignette) + variance at the second level (respondent))) from the null models for each dependent variable will be large, meaning that the variation in answers cannot be explained by client characteristics (first level) only, but to a considerable degree also depends on the respondent and her characteristics.

Second, respondents may react differently on specific client characteristics. For example, the difference in work conditions set for a client without children and a client with a (sick) child is judged differently by the respondents. To detect such differences, the study randomized the specific client characteristics on the second level. So, it is predicted that, in the multi-level analysis, there will be significant slopes at the second level.

The above analyses concern the variance parts of the multi-level regression. The model also includes fixed effects as explanatory variables. These independent variables are expected to decrease the variance at the second level. To estimate the impact of the variables I thus investigate two effects, namely the significance of the parameters and their effect on the variance at the second level. For completeness, I include all client characteristics in the regression. I do not elaborate on these results, as they are of no use in answering the above research question. The coefficients are, however, presented in the Appendix of this paper. More interestingly, the model includes respondent characteristics and interactions between client and respondent characteristics. The inclusion of respondent characteristics as fixed effects is based on findings in the scientific literature.

First, it has been argued that socio-demographic characteristics matter (Lipsky, 2010). It is unclear in which direction the influences work, but it is supposed that the following respondent characteristics might be significant predictors in the regression analysis: gender (Haas, Malouf, & Mayerson, 1988; Kullberg & Fäldt, 2008), the nationality of the father, age, parenthood and diploma. Second, work characteristics are also likely to be decisive concerning treatment. According to Lipsky (2010), the effect of differences in work conditions translates into differences in the routines of social workers. Such routines are built by social workers to simplify their work. After some time they start treating similar clients in a similar way. Several work characteristics influence the level of routinization (Lipsky, 2010). Some of these are included in the survey, while others, such as the work load of the case manager, are missing. In this study the surveyed characteristics are job duration (Haas et al., 1988), work regime and task specialization (Lipsky, 2010). Third, qualitative research (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013) shows that case managers actually involved in decision making have a less disciplinary view on labour market participation than those having less decision-making power. In this research this would result in fewer withdrawals of benefits in cases where clients reject a work offer. I included one question assessing the degree of decision power concerning the eligibility to benefits of the three following actors: the case manager, the head of the team of case managers and the municipality board¹. Another question surveyed a related issue, namely the degree in which, according to the respondent (= case manager), the board generally follows the advice of the case manager as regards treatment decisions. I expect that respondents who express the feeling that the board generally follows their advice will show less restrictive answers on the work condition questions.

Fourth, Van Oorschot (2000) mentions an important criterion on which people consider others deserving benefits, namely the identity criterion, which states that we are more inclined to help people that are more like us (Vannicelli, 1991). Therefore, this study includes interaction terms between the gender of the client and of the respondent, the nationality of the client and the nationality of the father of the respondent, parenthood of the client and of the respondent, the diploma of the client and of the respondent. It is hypothesized that when the client is similar to the respondent, the respondent will be more likely to think that the client will get a benefit and will not lose the benefit if rejecting a job offer. Furthermore, it is predicted – based on the same criterion – that both young respondents (the clients in the vignettes are all 23 years old) and respondents with experience of long term unemployment (more than 6 months) will be less restrictive in their judgments.

Most likely, these independent variables will not explain all unexplained variance. There are, after all, at least two components that are not covered in the analysis and that are perceived as important in the literature. First of all the personality of the case manager. She may, e.g., “be sympathetic or rule abiding” (Rice, 2012, p. 1). Second, the value framework of the case managers may differ considerably (van Oorschot, 2000).

A last predictor accounted for in the analysis is the office or municipality level. Research has shown that municipalities differ in their treatment practices (e.g., Carpentier & Neels, 2013; Kazepov Y & Barberis, 2012; Rice, 2012). Still, as in the pilot study only five municipalities were surveyed it would

¹ In Belgium a politically composed board decides upon several aspects of the files of social assistance clients. The eligibility to or the withdrawal of benefits is such an aspect. The degree of power of the board, however, varies according to municipality.

be unjustified to treat them as a third level. Instead, the five municipalities are entered in the regression model as a categorical explanatory variable.

Methodological limitations

The pilot study, used for the analysis in this paper, is primarily designed to test several methodological options concerning the use of the factorial survey approach. Although the current paper does not really focus on these methodological issues, here the two most prominent will be briefly summarized. They both concern the length of the vignettes. To allow the respondents to make a judgment on treatment they need a lot of information about the clients. This leads to long stories with two possible problems. Firstly, respondents might focus on the most striking attributes, while ignoring other factors that are important in reality as well. Second, long stories might lead to respondents focusing only on the first and the last couple of sentences. Both issues are under-investigated in factorial survey research. That is why we varied both the number of attributes presented to the respondents and the order in which these attributes are shown (Aiman-Smith, Scullen, & Barr, 2002; Auspurg, Hinz, & Liebig, 2009; Auspurg, Hinz, Liebig, & Sauer, in press; Caussade, Ortúzar, Rizzi, & Hensher, 2005; DeShazo & Fermo, 2002; Johnson, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Wallander, 2009). Our first analysis (not further discussed here) shows that the number and order of attributes do influence the results. Since the current paper does not accommodate these issues, the results presented here may only be considered as an indication of results.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The survey was distributed to five social assistance agencies in five middle-sized Flemish (Belgium) municipalities: Aalst, Hasselt, Kortrijk, Leuven and Mechelen. These municipalities were chosen because they are well spread across Flanders and have similarly sized populations. In each municipality, the agency management provided us with the contact details of 26 to 35 staff, all of whom were sent one of the 27 unique questionnaires. Each questionnaire consisted of 12 vignettes. Across the five agencies, 21 to 34 respondents replied and offered us usable data. This means a response rate of almost 90 percent (127 of 143), providing information on a total of 1522 cases presented in the form of vignettes.

The respondents were mainly female (92%), their mean age was 37 years, and slightly more than one-third had children. Only one respondent had a non-Belgian mother and four had a non-Belgian father. The vast majority of the respondents (93%) had a Bachelor's degree. Furthermore, they were well distributed over the four different job duration categories: less than 5 years, 5 to 10 years, 10 to 15 years and more than 15 years of experience, with most of our respondents in the last category. Of the respondents, 60 percent worked full-time, one third less than full-time but more than half-time, and ten percent half-time or less. To determine their level of specialization, respondents were asked to select from nine categories in relation to the tasks they performed in the office (e.g. intake, counselling of clients, activation-related treatment, after care). If they chose only one of these categories they were considered specialized (26%). Case managers with two or three different tasks were labelled semi-specialized (35%), and those performing more than three different tasks were considered not specialized (35%). Another group (4 percent) did not choose any of the tasks.

The board² seems to be the actors with the most assumed decision-making power concerning eligibility for benefits. Of our respondents, 75 percent indicated a decision-making power of 7 on a scale of 7, with only 4 percent indicating 4 or less on the 7-point scale. Less extreme was the decision-making power of the case manager and the team leader. Both are assumed to have a mean decision-making power of 4 to 5 on the 7-point scale. The extreme scores (1 and 7) were, however, frequently used for both actors. Dispersion around the median (5) was wider for the team leader than for the case manager. With a mean of almost 6 out of 7, the case managers reveal that their advice concerning the treatment of clients is mostly followed by the board. The distribution is rather narrow, with 75 percent of the respondents choosing 5 or 6.

Finally, for 60 percent of the respondents, no close relatives or friends had experienced long-term unemployment (more than 6 months). Only eight respondents had themselves experienced long-term unemployment.

The intercepts of the null models have no informative value as such, since they concern experimentally constructed personalities that do not necessarily resemble the realities in the five municipalities. What is informative, however, is the fact that a client risks losing a benefit more easily when declining a job or activation offer that does not correspond to their own qualifications, than declining a job offer for which one needs to travel more than three hours, or a job that starts at five in the morning.

Multi-level regression

VPC of the null models

As described in the methodological section, here I will start with an elaboration of the null models and the VPC for each dependent variable. Table 1 shows that total unexplained variance is largest for the dependent variable associated with the risk of losing the benefit when not taking a job or activation offer, more specifically, when the job does not correspond to the client's qualifications and when the job starts early in the morning. Whereas most of the unexplained variance for the dependent variable 'early morning start' may be explained by client characteristics (VPC < 0.5), almost 70 percent of the unexplained variance for the dependent variable 'qualifications' is due to variation between subjects. The VPC of the dependent variable concerning the risk of losing the benefit when not accepting an offer that would involve commuting more than three hours a day, is also fairly high, namely 0.64. The VPC is lowest for the dependent variable 'exemption from activation', implying that case managers differentiate the least when making judgements about the right to exemption from work duties. Nevertheless, all VPCs are quite high, suggesting a wide use of discretion by case managers (and their offices).

² See footnote 1.

Table 1

Intercept, Variance at Levels 1 and 2 and VPC of the Null Models

	Eligibility benefit	Risk of losing benefit: early morning start	Risk of losing benefit: qualifications	Risk of losing benefit: commuting duration	Exemption from activation
Intercept	5.218***	2.718***	4.298***	2.253***	2.487***
Variance: level 2	1.250***	1.374***	2.612***	1.443***	0.921***
Variance: level 1	1.044***	1.686***	1.201***	0.818***	1.468***
Total variance	2.294	3.060	3.813	2.261	2.389
VPC	0.54	0.45	0.69	0.64	0.39
N	1520	1522	1522	1522	1522

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p = 0.001

Explanatory variables

Firstly, all available client characteristics were included in the model. These characteristics concerned socio-demographic features (gender, country of birth, parenthood, qualifications),³ mental health (depression, lacking mental capacities, addiction) and attitude issues (willingness to work, experience with work or activation, punctuality). The related regression results are not elaborated on, but they are included in the full model table in the Appendix. Secondly, blocks of respondent characteristics were successively introduced into the model and the effect on the unexplained variance at the second level was investigated. The first block consisted of socio-demographic characteristics of the respondent, the second block concerned work-related characteristics and the third block included variables concerning decision-making power. Finally, the effect of including the variable municipality was investigated.

Surprisingly, entering the variables concerning decision-making power, changed little in relation to the second level variance. Only 1 to 5 percent of the second level variance was explained by this block of characteristics. None of the single variables appeared to have any significant explanatory value. Socio-demographic features decreased the unexplained variance from 3 to 12 percent (risk of losing benefit: commuting duration). Some of the variables showed explanatory power for some of the dependent variables (see further). Work-related respondent characteristics accounted for 3 to 10 percent (risk of losing benefit: early morning start) of the variance. The variable 'municipality' explained 3 to 21 percent (chance of receiving a benefit) with respect to the unexplained second level variance.

Here, the effects of the municipality level on the dependent variables are described, followed by the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and finally the work-related features (see Table 2). The municipality is decisive for three of the dependent variables. Concerning eligibility for a benefit, the municipality of Aalst is the least likely to offer benefits. Three of the other four municipalities differ significantly from Aalst, while clients in Kortrijk have up to 1 point on a 7-point

³ Age and partnership are constant over all vignettes. All clients are 23 years and single.

scale less chance of receiving a benefit than similar clients in Aalst. In relation to the other variables (risk of losing benefit: early morning start and commuting duration), Aalst and Kortrijk also represent the extreme cases, with lesser chance of losing the benefit in Kortrijk than in Aalst (Table 2).

Gender is only crucial in explaining the chance of losing a benefit when not accepting an offer of work because of an early morning start. Male respondents predict the client's risk of losing the benefit in this case to be 0.9 points out of 7 higher than female respondents do. Age seems to be an important predictor for three of the variables. The older the respondent, the greater the chance that clients are perceived to lose their benefit. Surprisingly, the same holds for the variable 'exemption from activation', so both the obligation to and the exemption from activation seem to grow with the age of the respondent. Other socio-demographic characteristics were only included in the model because excluding them worsens the model fit (Table 2).

The variables concerning work characteristics, specialization and work regime were also included in some models to ameliorate the model fit, but they have no significant effect on the dependent variables. It is expected that this might change with a larger sample of client managers, because some of the effects are quite large, but with large standard errors (Table 2).

Table 2

Coefficients and standard errors regarding respondent characteristics – main effects

	Eligibility benefit	Risk of losing benefit: early morning start	Risk of losing benefit: qualifications	Risk of losing benefit: commuting duration	Exemption from activation
Intercept	5.421 (0.238)***	1.590 (0.473)***	4.544 (0.592)***	2.713 (0.384)***	1.392 (0.435)**
MUNICIPALITY (REFERENCE: AALST)					
Hasselt	0.831 (0.261)**	-0.079 (0.281)		-0.710 (0.299)*	
Leuven	1.063 (0.268)***	-0.251 (0.302)		-0.309 (0.331)	
Mechelen	0.368 (0.253)	-0.443 (0.273)		-0.768 (0.316)*	
Kortrijk	1.146 (0.249)***	-0.851 (0.281)**		-1.077 (0.316)***	
RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS					
<i>Gender (reference: female)</i>					
Male		0.458 (0.323)	-0.940 (0.610)	0.895 (0.294)**	-0.273 (0.212)
<i>Nationality (reference: father born in Belgium)</i>					
Father born outside of Belgium				0.544 (0.557)	-0.069 (0.491)
Age		0.039 (0.010)***		0.027 (0.009)**	0.018 (0.009)*
<i>Parenthood (reference: no children)</i>					
Child(ren)					0.036 (0.228)
<i>Qualification (reference: Bachelor's degree)</i>					
Master's degree	0.127 (0.399)	-0.554 (0.391)	-0.883 (0.582)	-0.408 (0.264)	
<i>Degree of specialization (reference: specialized)</i>					
Semi-specialized				-0.006 (0.173)	
Not specialized				-0.274 (0.209)	
Other				-0.310 (0.578)	
<i>Work regime (reference: less than half-time)</i>					
Half-time					0.920 (0.602)
Between half and full-time					-0.109 (0.438)
Full-time					-0.068 (0.458)

Note. The coefficients and standard errors shown in the table are those of the final full model (see Appendix for the full model)

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Identity criterion: main effects and interaction effects

The identity criterion states that people who are more like one another consider each other more deserving of benefits. To date, this hypothesis has only been tested on the general population, but

nothing keeps us from thinking that the tendency would not also hold for case managers in social assistance offices. In our analysis two main variables might verify the hypothesis: the age of the respondent and his or her experience with long-term unemployment. As described in the previous section, the respondent's age had an effect on the dependent variables. This effect partly confirms the above statement, as the older the respondent (the youngest respondent was 23 years), the less similar they were in age to the clients (all 23 years), and the more likely the benefit will be withdrawn. In contrast, the chance that a person will be exempted from activation also increased with the age of the respondent (Table 3).

The respondent's experience of unemployment (self or close relatives and friends) and thus their resemblance to the clients, was only a good predictor concerning the risk of losing the benefit due to declining a job offer not relevant to one's qualifications. The effect is, however, contrary to the identity hypothesis. Respondents who have experience with unemployment are somewhat hastier in withdrawing a benefit (Table 3).

A final way to verify the identity hypotheses is to check for interactions between the characteristics of the clients and the respondents. Due to space limitations I only include the significant interaction terms in Table 3, the related main effects will be described in the text and are presented in the Appendix. Firstly, the interaction between a male client and a male respondent is positive for all variables concerning the risk of losing the benefit. The main effects of both gender variables are not significant (except for the variable concerning commuting), which means that gender does not play a role, except when both client and respondent are male, where the risk of losing a benefit increases. This is contrary to the identity criterion.

Secondly, in relation to the interaction between information on nationality of the client and the respondent, the identity criterion seems to hold for two of the dependent variables. Both main effects were not significant (see Appendix); however, the interaction term between a respondent with foreign origins and a client born in Europe influenced the risk of losing a benefit (commuting) in a negative way, meaning that these respondents will hesitate to withdraw the benefit of a foreign-born client. A similar effect holds for exemption from activation when the respondent's father is foreign and the client is born outside Europe. In this case, the client will be more readily exempted.

The final interaction term with important effects is that between the qualifications of the clients and the respondents. The main effects of the respondent's degree were not significant. The main effect of the client's degree is significant for one variable: risk of losing benefits (qualifications) (see Appendix). This main effect was positive. If a client had a Bachelor's degree rather than only primary school education, it was more likely that she would be forced to take a job that does not match her qualification. The interpretation of the significant interaction term for this dependent variable might be that this effect is strengthened when the respondent has a Master's. For the other dependent variables, the qualifications of the respondent and the client had no influence, except – again – when the respondent had a Master's and the client had a Bachelor's. Then the chance of receiving a benefit decreased and the chance of a withdrawal increased.

Table 3

Coefficients and standard errors regarding the identity criterion – main and interaction effects

	Eligibility benefit	Risk of losing benefit: early morning start	Risk of losing benefit: qualificatio ns	Risk of losing benefit: commuting duration	Exemption from activation
Intercept	5.421 (0.238)***	1.590 (0.473)***	4.544 (0.592)***	2.713 (0.384)***	1.392 (0.435)**
Age		0.039 (0.010)***		0.027 (0.009)**	0.018 (0.009)*
<i>Experience with long-term unemployment (reference: yes)</i>					
No			-0.656 (0.287)*		
Rmale*Cmale		0.692 (0.320)*	1.242 (0.314)***	0.698 (0.256)**	
Rfather born outside of Belgium*Cborn in Europe				-0.375 (0.138)**	-0.037 (0.146)
Rfather born outside of Belgium*Cborn outside of Europe				0.436 (0.428)	0.710 (0.180)***
Rmaster's degree*Csecondary education	-0.562 (0.534)	0.192 (0.356)	0.711 (0.318)*		
Rmaster's degree*Cbachelor's degree	-1.315 (0.268)***	0.206 (0.434)	0.830 (0.365)*		
Rmaster's degree*Cbachelor's not recognised	-1.407 (0.712)*	0.844 (0.313)**	0.703 (0.409)		

Note. The coefficients and standard errors shown in the table are those of the final full model (see Appendix for the full model)

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Random slopes

To test whether there is more to say about discretion than this rather static variation in the general judgements of case managers concerning treatment, several client characteristics were also randomized. If variances or covariances attached to these parameters turn out to be significant, this means that case managers differ in their responses to these specific parameters. All of the client characteristics concerning elements that make life more difficult (children, bad housing, mental health, addiction) and elements connected to attitude (aspirations, work experience, activation experience and diligence) were randomized step by step.

Table 4 clearly shows that the variance increases for several specific parameters. With regard to the eligibility for benefits, case managers differ more in their judgements when the client has no stable housing. Concerning the risk of losing a benefit, the parameters of having a child or being addicted are associated with more diversity in the answers of respondents. Severe addiction is also associated with greater diversity in responses with regard to the dependent variable of exemption from work-related duties. This is also the only dependent variable where one of the attitude-related features affects the spread of the answers of the respondents, namely the client's wish to study.

The co-variance element of the table indicates that, with regard to the dependent variables of the risk of losing the benefit, for respondents who have a rather high level of general judgement, the decrease in scores is larger when confronted with information that makes the life of clients more difficult. All respondents judge the likelihood of clients with such characteristics lower than clients without such characteristics, but respondents with rather high starting scores decrease their scores more strongly. For example, a respondent who more readily withdraws a benefit from a non-responsive client without a drug addiction, will – in the case of a client who is addicted – decrease their willingness to withdraw the benefit more than a colleague with lower levels of general judgement. With regard to the eligibility for a benefit, respondents who readily allocate benefits to clients with a good attitude or without activation experience, will also more readily provide benefits to clients who are not motivated or clients with negative activation experience, although these covariances are rather small. Regarding the covariances between specific features, only three of these parameters proved significant across the dependent variables. One of them was rather large, namely the covariance between clients with a healthy child and clients with a sick child, meaning that the more likely a respondent is to withdraw a benefit from a client with a healthy child, the more likely they are to withdraw this same benefit from a client with a sick child.

Table 4

Variance-covariance Matrix

	Eligibility benefit	Risk of losing benefit: early morning start	Risk of losing benefit: qualifications	Risk of losing benefit: commuting duration	Exemption from activation
Variance Intercept – Second level	0.572 (0.090)***	2.439 (0.251)***	2.533 (0.292)***	1.755 (0.196)***	0.669 (0.203)**
Variance: Bad housing	0.363 (0.154)*				
Variance: Healthy child		1.287 (0.283)***		0.426 (0.116)***	
Variance: Sick child		1.531 (0.302)***		0.677 (0.189)***	
Variance: Severe addiction		0.109 (0.077)	0.417 (0.145)**	0.174 (0.070)*	0.957 (0.217)***
Variance: Wants to study					0.232 (0.097)*
Covariance Intercept: Healthy child		-1.288 (0.214)***		-0.518 (0.134)***	
Covariance Intercept: Sick child		-1.532 (0.245)***		-0.842 (0.177)***	
Covariance Intercept: Severe addiction		-0.212 (0.081)**	-0.225 (0.112)*	-0.150 (0.080)	-0.022 (0.096)
Covariance Intercept: No motivation	0.173 (0.050)***		-0.169 (0.102)		
Covariance Intercept: Bad activation experience	0.117 (0.048)*				
Covariance: Healthy child - Sick child		1.337 (0.268)***		0.485 (0.133)***	
Covariance: Mild addiction - Severe addiction					0.226 (0.104)*
Variance: First level	0.795 (0.084)***	0.957 (0.113)***	0.975 (0.116)***	0.537 (0.071)***	0.956 (0.084)***
N	1520	1522	1522	1522	1522

Note. The coefficients and standard errors shown in the table are these of the final full model (see Appendix for the full model). Only significant parameters are shown.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Now that the main results have been described some of the findings are summarize in the discussion section below.

Discussion and conclusion

The use of discretion by social workers and their organizations has been discussed widely in the literature (Lipsky, 2010; Rice, 2012). Focusing on social assistance, previous research found evidence of such discretion at the municipal level (Carpentier & Neels, 2013; Kazepov & Barberis, 2012). However, due to methodological limitations, the impact of individual case managers is under-investigated. The topic is important because it might raise concerns, insofar as the allocation of resources and activation measures depends to a large extent on the social worker. It is in this sense that Lipsky (2010) considers the acts of street level bureaucrats to be political. Since these acts affect the lives of several vulnerable people, he calls for more related research (Lipsky, 2010).

Using a factorial survey approach, this study examined the influence of case managers (and the municipality) on the eligibility of clients for social assistance benefits and on the client's obligation to take a certain job or activation offer. Such obligation was concretized in four measures. Firstly, respondents were asked about the likelihood that clients would be exempted from activation measures (on a scale of 1 to 7; where 1 is very unlikely and 7 very likely). Secondly, respondents were asked to predict the chance that clients – at the risk of losing their benefit – would be forced to take a job or activation offer that either started early in the morning, did not match their qualifications, or would mean the clients would have to commute more than three hours a day (again on scales of 1 to 7).

The respondents were 127 client managers from five municipalities in Flanders (Belgium). They all rated 12 vignettes that were sampled out of a collection of vignettes using a D-efficient sampling design. The vignettes consisted of 12 varying characteristics. Each characteristic had from 2 to 4 different levels. In total, 1522 vignettes were rated. The results were analysed using multi-level techniques, with the vignettes as the first level units and the respondents the second level units.

A first analysis, using the second level variance and the VPC (Variance Partition Coefficient) of the null models, confirmed the findings of previous, mostly qualitative research, which has demonstrated that case managers vary in their treatment of individual clients. For all of the dependent variables, more than 40 percent of the variation around the mean could be explained at the respondent (and municipality) level. This means that it is not only client characteristics (such as being addicted or not) that influence decisions about the duty to work, but also characteristics of the municipality and the actual case manager of the client. The greatest variation was found with regard to the variable of risk of losing the benefit if rejecting an offer not matching one's qualifications. Case managers (or municipalities) disagree the most concerning this specific activation feature. They vary the least with regard to the exemption from activation, meaning that for this variable client characteristics are more decisive and that there is a more general human tendency to treat clients with the same characteristics similarly.

Case managers not only differ significantly in their overall judgements about cases, they also vary with regard to their judgements of specific client characteristics. Randomizing the slopes in the multi-level analysis by including some of the client characteristics in the random part of the model, revealed that the more a client differs from a (perceived as) standard or non-problematic case, the more diverse the judgements become. Clients in bad housing, with children (healthy or sick), with addiction problems or who want to study generate more diverse judgements. This also implies that attitude characteristics (e.g. not motivated to work) do not result in more variation amongst case managers. Rather, client characteristics that might lead to exemption from activation, namely characteristics that mean clients' lives are more difficult, make case managers most uncertain.

Some of the variation can be explained by variables considered in the survey. A first observation is that the municipality (included as a fixed effect in the model) where one seeks assistance is decisive for three of the dependent variables. The degree of eligibility for a benefit seems to be the variable most affected by the municipality level, with (controlling for all other important parameters) more than one point on seven-point scale difference between the two most extreme municipalities. For the dependent variables concerning the risk of losing a benefit, the respondent characteristics seem to be more decisive. The process of decision-making and the decision-making power experienced by

a case manager have no explanatory power for any of the dependent variables. The socio-demographic characteristics, more specifically, the age and gender of the respondents, explain most of the variation. Other – e.g. work-related – respondent characteristics might become important when more respondents are surveyed and if their profile is more diverse.

One hypothesis that is both supported and contested by the data is the identity criterion hypothesis (van Oorschot, 2000). The hypothesis was confirmed by variables included in the model as main effects and as interaction terms. One of the interaction terms supporting the hypothesis concerned the combination of the origin of the client and the origin of the respondent. Respondents with foreign origins seem to be less restrictive in relation to foreign clients. Furthermore, respondents with a Bachelor's degree are more positive about the eligibility of clients with a Bachelor's than are their colleagues with a Master's. The same holds for the obligation to take a job or activation offer. The expectations of a respondent with a Master's concerning the take up of a job or activation offer are higher for clients with a Bachelor's than for clients with secondary education. This difference disappears when the case manager has a Bachelor's. The main effect confirming the identity criterion hypothesis is the age of the respondents. The older the respondents, the more readily they withdraw benefits.

Concerning gender, however, the identity hypothesis can be refuted. Although the client's gender does not make a difference for female respondents, male respondents will more readily withdraw a benefit from male clients. Another finding that does not confirm the identity hypothesis concerns the effect of the respondent's experience with long-term unemployment. Respondents who have had experience with unemployment (more than six months) treat social security clients slightly more severely.

In conclusion, it can be stated that possible exemption from activation is largely influenced by client characteristics, implying a general human response to specific client characteristics. The eligibility for benefits, in contrast, seems to be a municipality-oriented decision, while the withdrawing of benefits tends to be case-manager dependent.

A major limitation of social policy implementation research using the factorial survey method lies in its use of hypothetical cases. As such, none of the results can be generalized to real practice, although they might be used to complement the results of other types of research.

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Appendix

Table A:

Full models

	Eligibility benefit	Risk of losing benefit - early morning start	Risk of losing benefit - qualifications	Risk of losing benefit - commuting duration	Exemption from activation
Intercept	5.421 (0.238)***	1.590 (0.473)***	4.544 (0.592)***	2.713 (0.384)***	1.392 (0.435)**
CLIENT CHARACTERISTICS					
<i>Gender (reference female)</i>					
Male	0.068 (0.068)	0.062 (0.107)	0.095 (0.099)	0.051 (0.060)	-0.044 (0.076)
<i>Origin (reference born in Belgium)</i>					
Born in Europe	-0.050 (0.092)	-0.050 (0.103)	-0.046 (0.107)	0.108 (0.096)	0.069 (0.105)
Born outside of Europe	-0.112 (0.099)	-0.066 (0.110)	0.000 (0.082)	0.055 (0.101)	-0.064 (0.101)
<i>Parenthood (reference: no children)</i>					
One healthy child	0.190 (0.056)***	-0.972 (0.116)***	-0.150 (0.059)*	-0.327 (0.071)***	0.132 (0.067)
One sick child	0.183 (0.062)**	-1.265 (0.131)***	-0.392 (0.086)***	-0.609 (0.089)***	0.564 (0.098)***
<i>Education (reference: primary education degree)</i>					
Secondary education degree	-0.098 (0.088)	-0.003 (0.089)	0.216 (0.124)	0.037 (0.080)	-0.083 (0.100)
Bachelor's degree	-0.002 (0.132)	0.026 (0.116)	0.393 (0.148)**	-0.017 (0.090)	-0.268 (0.119)*
Bachelor's degree not recognised	0.278 (0.150)	-0.167 (0.131)	0.381 (0.157)*	-0.021 (0.115)	-0.071 (0.118)
<i>Command of the national language (reference: speaks Dutch)</i>					
Does not speak Dutch	-0.027 (0.051)	-0.109 (0.053)*	-0.111 (0.057)	-0.058 (0.041)	0.221 (0.051)***
<i>Housing (reference: stable housing)</i>					
Non stable housing	-0.241 (0.073)***	0.031 (0.057)	-0.122 (0.066)	-0.025 (0.045)	0.196 (0.063)**
<i>Mental health (reference: healthy)</i>					
Depression	0.072 (0.062)	-0.095 (0.077)	-0.113 (0.060)	-0.119 (0.053)*	0.230 (0.073)**
Mental disabled	0.209 (0.072)**	-0.157 (0.081)	-0.175 (0.067)**	-0.172 (0.066)**	0.235 (0.074)**
<i>Drug addiction (reference: no addiction)</i>					
Beginning addiction	-0.095 (0.058)	0.003 (0.055)	-0.096 (0.071)	-0.108 (0.045)*	0.210 (0.066)**
Severe addiction	-0.090 (0.057)	-0.235 (0.074)**	-0.435 (0.103)***	-0.230 (0.067)***	0.938 (0.107)***
<i>Ambition (reference: does not know what s/he wants)</i>					
Wants to study	-0.088 (0.074)	-0.036 (0.065)	0.036 (0.079)	-0.095 (0.054)	0.079 (0.090)

Wants to work	0.153 (0.060)*	-0.008 (0.079)	0.077 (0.079)	-0.055 (0.056)	-0.088 (0.077)
Does not want to work nor to study	-0.202 (0.077)**	-0.009 (0.073)	0.012 (0.084)	0.011 (0.053)	-0.037 (0.077)
<i>Work experience (reference: no experience)</i>					
Positive work experience	-0.055 (0.060)	0.030 (0.067)	0.055 (0.063)	0.024 (0.047)	-0.002 (0.060)
Negative work experience	-0.049 (0.057)	0.029 (0.066)	0.028 (0.069)	0.035 (0.041)	-0.052 (0.067)
<i>Activation experience (reference: no experience)</i>					
Negative experience with activation	-0.210 (0.054)***	0.078 (0.051)	0.058 (0.047)	0.080 (0.042)	0.098 (0.053)
<i>Attitude (reference: diligent)</i>					
Not diligent	-0.405 (0.063)***	0.064 (0.057)	-0.013 (0.046)	0.042 (0.043)	0.034 (0.048)
MUNICIPALITY (REFERENCE: AALST)					
Hasselt	0.831 (0.261)**	-0.079 (0.281)		-0.710 (0.299)*	
Leuven	1.063 (0.268)***	-0.251 (0.302)		-0.309 (0.331)	
Mechelen	0.368 (0.253)	-0.443 (0.273)		-0.768 (0.316)*	
Kortrijk	1.146 (0.249)***	-0.851 (0.281)**		-1.077 (0.316)***	
	Eligibility benefit	Risk of losing benefit - morning	Risk of losing benefit - diploma	Risk of losing benefit - commuting	Exemption of activation
RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS					
<i>Gender (reference: female)</i>					
Male		0.458 (0.323)	-0.940 (0.610)	0.895 (0.294)**	-0.273 (0.212)
<i>Origin parents (reference: father born in Belgium)</i>					
Father born outside of Belgium				0.544 (0.557)	-0.069 (0.491)
<i>Age</i>					
Age		0.039 (0.010)***		0.027 (0.009)**	0.018 (0.009)*
<i>Parenthood (reference: no child(ren))</i>					
Child(ren)					0.036 (0.228)
<i>Education (reference: Bachelor's degree)</i>					
Master's degree	0.127 (0.399)	-0.554 (0.391)	-0.883 (0.582)	-0.408 (0.264)	
<i>Degree of specialization (reference: specialized)</i>					
Semi-specialized				-0.006 (0.173)	
Not specialized				-0.274 (0.209)	
Rest specialized				-0.310 (0.578)	
<i>Work regime (reference: less than half time)</i>					
Half time					0.920 (0.602)
Between half and full time					-0.109 (0.438)
Full time					-0.068 (0.458)
<i>Experience with long term unemployment (reference: yes)</i>					
No			-0.656 (0.287)*		
INTERACTION TERMS IDENTITY					
Rmale*Cmale		0.692 (0.320)*	1.242 (0.314)***	0.698 (0.256)**	
Rfather born outside of Belgium*Cborn in Europe				-0.375 (0.138)**	-0.037 (0.146)
Rfather born outside of Belgium*Cborn outside of Europe				0.436 (0.428)	0.710 (0.180)***
Rchildren*Chealthy child					-0.052 (0.145)
Rchildren*Csick child					-0.318 (0.172)
Rmaster's degree*Csecondary school degree	-0.562 (0.534)	0.192 (0.356)	0.711 (0.318)*		
Rmaster's degree*Cbachelor's degree	-1.315 (0.268)***	0.206 (0.434)	0.830 (0.365)*		
Rmaster's degree*Cbachelor's degree4	-1.407	0.844	0.703		

	(0.712)*	(0.313)**	(0.409)		
CONTROLE VARIABLES					
Recognizability of the case	-0.193 (0.048)***			-0.037 (0.038)	
<i>Respondent's experience with young clients (reference: little)</i>					
A lot				-0.205 (0.175)	
	Eligibility benefit	Risk of losing benefit - morning	Risk of losing benefit - diploma	Risk of losing benefit - commuting	Exemption of activation
VARIANCE - COVARIANCE					
Variance Intercept second level	0,572 (0.090)***	2,439 (0.251)***	2,533 (0.292)***	1,755 (0.196)***	0,669 (0.203)**
Variance Healthy child		1.287 (0.283)***		0.426 (0.116)***	
Variance Sick child		1.531 (0.302)***		0.677 (0.189)***	
Variance Bad housing	0.363 (0.154)*	1.531 (0.302)***		0.677 (0.189)***	
Variance Beginning addiction					0.067 (0.097)
Variance Severe addiction		0.109 (0.077)	0.417 (0.145)**	0.174 (0.070)*	0.957 (0.217)***
Variance Wants to study					0.232 (0.097)*
Variance No motivation	0.081 (0.063)		0.167 (0.107)		
Variance Bad activation experience	0.087 (0.054)				
Covariance Intercept - Healthy child		-1.288 (0.214)***		-0.518 (0.134)***	
Covariance Intercept - Sick child		-1.532 (0.245)***		-0.842 (0.177)***	
Covariance Intercept - Bad housing	0.060 (0.055)				
Covariance Intercept - Beginning addiction					0.048 (0.064)
Covariance Intercept - Severe addiction		-0.212 (0.081)**	-0.225 (0.112)*	-0.150 (0.080)	-0.022 (0.096)
Covariance Intercept - Wants to study					0.029 (0.081)
Covariance Intercept - No motivation	0.173 (0.050)***		-0.169 (0.102)		
Covariance Intercept-Bad activation experience	0.117 (0.048)*				
Covariance Healthy child - Sick child		1.337 (0.268)***			0.485 (0.133)***
Covariance Healthy child - Severe addiction		0.011 (0.065)		0.000 (0.057)	
Covariance Sick child - Severe addiction		0.017 (0.075)		-0.006 (0.059)	
Covariance Sick child - No motivation			0.071 (0.078)		
Covariance Bad housing - No motivation	-0.003 (0.068)				
Covariance Bad housing - Bad activation experience	-0.092 (0.055)				
Covariance Beginning addiction - Severe addiction					0.226 (0.104)*
Covariance Beginning addiction - Wants to study					-0.032 (0.065)
Covariance Severe addiction - Wants to study					0.012 (0.101)
Covariance No motivation - Bad activation experience	0.054 (0.052)				
Variance first level	0.795 (0.084)***	0.957 (0.113)***	0.975 (0.116)***	0.537 (0.071)***	0.956 (0.084)***
N	1.520	1.522	1.522	1.522	1.522

*p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001