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Coping During Public Service Delivery: A Conceptualization and Systematic Review of the Literature

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ABSTRACT

Frontline workers, such as teachers and social workers, often experience stress when delivering public services to clients, for instance because of high workloads. They adapt by coping, using such practices as breaking or bending rules for clients, or rationing services. Although coping is recognized as an important response to the problems of frontline work, the public administration field lacks a comprehensive view of coping. The first contribution of this article is therefore theoretical: conceptualizing coping during public service delivery and developing a coherent classification of coping. This is done via a systematic review of the literature from 1981 to 2014. The second contribution is empirical: via a systematic review of the literature from 1981–2014 this article provides a framework and analytical account of how coping during public service delivery has been studied since 1980. It highlights the importance of the type of profession (such as being a teacher or a police officer), the amount of workload, and the degree of discretion for understanding how frontline workers cope with stress. It also reveals that frontline workers often draw on the coping family “moving towards clients” revealing a strong tendency to provide meaningful public service to clients, even under stressful conditions. We conclude with an agenda for future studies, examining new theoretical, methodological and empirical opportunities to advance understanding of coping during public service delivery.

INTRODUCTION

Frontline workers, such as police officers, social workers, teachers, and physicians, often face severe workloads. They also experience conflicting demands from policy rules, their client’s needs, their professional codes, and own personal values (Gofen 2014; Hill and Hupe 2009; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Sager et al. 2014; Tummers et al. 2012). As a result, frontline workers regularly experience stress when delivering public services to citizens.

To understand how frontline workers deal with stress related to their public service work, Lipsky (1980, 2010) invokes the concept of “coping” in his groundbreaking study on “street level bureaucrats,” or those public employees who we reference as “frontline workers” (see also Lipsky 1980, xvii). His notion of coping draws upon

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the work of Lazarus (1966). Inspired by Lipsky, many scholars have studied coping during public service delivery (for instance, Brodtkin 1997; Dias and Maynard-Moody 2007; Kelly 1994; Knight and Trowler 2000; May and Wood 2003; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Oberfield 2010; Sandfort 2000). Ways of coping that have been articulated and studied include bending or breaking rules for clients (Evans 2013), routinizing public service delivery (not taking into account personal circumstances of clients) (Trowler 1997), and using personal resources to help clients (such as giving personal resources to struggling clients) (Dubois 2010).

While coping is widely acknowledged in the literature as an important response to the challenges of frontline work (Dubois 2010; Winter 2002), the public administration field lacks a comprehensive view of coping and how it has been studied since Lipsky addressed it. First, scholars use different terms to discuss the same phenomenon. For instance, Satyamurti (1981) talks about “strategies of survival” and Evans (2013) talks about how frontline workers “approach” rules, in a way that is fully convergent with Lipsky’s articulations about “coping.” Second, scholars operationalize the concept very differently and sometimes inconsistently. For example, Newton (2002) distinguishes between eight coping mechanisms. “Coping” is one of those eight mechanisms. Hence, it’s both a higher and a lower order category, which is inconsistent with a coherent classification system. Furthermore, Anagnostopoulos (2003) identifies very specific ways of coping like “altering results” and “lowering expectations” as ways in which teachers deal with student failure. Such very specific classifications are hard to transfer to different contexts, hampering for instance cross-sectoral or cross-country comparisons. Concluding, researchers have viewed coping as a “sensitizing concept” providing the researcher with “a general sense of reference and guidance in empirical instances” (Blumer 1954). This stands in sharp contrast to “definitive concepts,” which have a clear definition, and refers precisely to what coping during public service delivery entails and what it does not entail (see also Suddaby 2010).

The first contribution of this article is theoretical. We conceptualize coping during public service delivery as a construct that can be operationalized across a range of professions and contexts. As will be discussed in the Background to Coping section, coping during public service delivery is 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*. Based on a systematic review of the literature and the work of Skinner et al. (2003), we furthermore develop a coherent classification of families and ways of coping during public service delivery. We identify three distinctive families of coping: moving towards clients, moving away from clients, and moving against clients. Within each family, we identify ways of coping evident in the literature. In this way, we create “construct clarity” (Suddaby 2010). This classification of families and ways of coping can help scholars to study coping systematically and “build upon each other’s work.” In this way, a body of knowledge that is subject to continuous empirical investigation and adjustment can be developed. An example where the strategy of “building upon each other’s work” has been enabled by attention to construct clarity is the scholarship on Public Service Motivation (Kim et al. 2014; Perry 1996).

The second goal is to provide a comprehensive overview of how coping during public service delivery has been studied to date. This will be done through the systematic identification and analysis of studies published since the study of Lipsky,

specifically 1981–2014. We use a descriptive lens—describing the contextual and methodological characteristics of the studies included in the review—and an explanatory lens, connecting professional membership and situational factors (such as workload, discretion, and role conflicts) to particular coping behavior. Such an investigation enables us to identify areas of inquiry where substantial progress has been made and point to areas where future studies could best be directed.

To analyze the relevant published works, we conduct a “systematic review” (Cooper 2010). A systematic review entails several explicit and reproducible steps, such as: identifying all likely relevant publications in a standardized way, extracting data from eligible studies, and synthesizing the results. Systematic reviews differ from traditional literature reviews in that they are replicable and transparent. In reporting the systematic review, we adhere to the widely used “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses” (PRISMA, see Appendix 1) (Liberati et al. 2009).

In the Background to Coping section, we first turn to our conceptualization of coping during public service delivery. In the Methodology for Systematic Review section, we depict our methodology used to conduct the systematic literature review. The results are presented in the next section with attention to a classification of coping during public service delivery. In the final section we will address important conclusions and limitations and provides a future research agenda.

BACKGROUND TO COPING

Defining Coping During Public Service Delivery

To understand the concept of coping, one must go back to the 19th century when Freud introduced psychoanalysis (Breuer and Freud 1955). 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 psychologist Richard Lazarus (1966). Based primarily on this work, coping evolved as a distinct research field.

Folkman and Lazarus (1980, 223) define coping broadly as “the cognitive and behavioral efforts made to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them.” Coping in this formulation can range from positive thinking, quitting one’s job, to talking to one’s partner about work problems. In this study, we focus on coping during the delivery of public service. That is, we concentrate on *behavioral* ways of coping that occur when *frontline workers interact with clients*. This is fully in line with how public administration scholars predominantly study frontline work; they analyze how the behavior of frontline workers directly affects public service delivery, giving life to policy mandates, laws, and administrative edicts through interactions with citizens (Bartels 2013; Hill and Hupe 2009; Lipsky 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 2012). Combining the work of Folkman and Lazarus and that of public administration scholars, we define coping during public service delivery 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 other ways of coping are important to frontline workers in responding to various forms work-related stress. Some are behavioral, but take place outside direct worker-client interactions, such as seeking comfort with 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 like organizational behavior and occupational health psychology (Euwema, Kop, and Bakker 2004; Halbesleben 2006; Schaufeli et al. 2009; Van Yperen and Hagedoorn 2003). 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 that are embedded in direct frontline worker-citizen interactions (Hill and Hupe 2009; Lipsky 1980; Winter 2002).

Why do we focus our systematic analysis on the behavior of frontline workers when they interact with clients? We have two reasons. First, with this focus, we break new scholarly ground. While systematic reviews of other types of coping under conditions of stress have been undertaken (see, for instance, Dewe, Cox, and Ferguson 1993), this is the first systematic review of coping that focuses on frontline workers' direct engagement in public service delivery.

Second, we do so because of the alignment of this focus with public administration scholarship. We align the study of coping with core empirical, normative, and applied concerns of public administration. The question of the quality of service delivery is of high concern to scholars, policymakers, the media, and the citizenry alike (May and Winter 2009; West 2004). Indeed, the very legitimacy of public agencies and the state hinges substantially on how worker stress translates into actions taken towards clients (Hupe and Hill 2007). Therefore, by conceptualizing the construct of coping during service delivery and developing a classification, we elevate this line of inquiry such that it can be integrated with big questions in public administration while promoting rigorous inquiry.

Table 1
Examples of Various Ways of Coping of Frontline Workers (We Focus on Type 1)

	Behavioral Coping	Cognitive Coping
During client-worker interactions	1. Rule bending, rule breaking, aggression to clients, routinizing, rationing, using personal resources to help clients	2. Client-oriented cynicism, compassion towards clients, emotional detachment from clients
Not during client-worker interactions	3. Social support from colleagues, complaining towards managers, turnover, substance abuse	4. Cognitive restructuring, cynicism towards work, work alienation

An Initial Classification for Coping During Public Service Delivery

To analyze coping during public service delivery, we develop a classification system. Based on the work of Lazarus and others, many scholars tried to classify coping. Various difficulties have emerged, such as overlapping and incomparable categories (Parker and Endler 1996). An important learning point was that distinguishing between coping levels is essential to systematically order coping (Ayers et al. 1996). In a seminal article, Skinner et al. (2003) developed a hierarchical coping order consisting of four levels. We will draw on this while developing a classification of coping during public service delivery.

The coping order of Skinner and her colleagues ranges from the very specific (instances of coping) to the very abstract (adaptive processes). Starting with the very specific, *coping instances* are concrete responses in which people try to master, tolerate, or reduce stress. These coping instances can be grouped into *ways of coping*: recognizable action types that provide boundaries to the instances of coping. Thirdly, *families of coping* are higher order categories that can be used to organize ways of coping based on their function. These families can be grouped into *adaptive processes*. These adaptive processes are very general and link coping to health and overall functioning (Skinner et al. 2003). As we are particularly interested in coping and less in general adaptive processes, we focus on the first three levels: coping instances, ways of coping, and families of coping.

Based on the knowledge we have derived from years of field research on front-line workers (among else Bekkers et al. 2007; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Tummers 2013), the systematic review of the literature on coping, continuous team exchanges in interpreting what the data revealed, and suggestions from anonymous reviewers, we have identified three families of coping specific to public service delivery (see also Bekkers, Moody, and Edwards 2011; Horney 1945): “moving towards clients,” “moving against clients,” and “moving away from clients.”

Moving towards clients, pragmatically adjusting to client’s needs, can be seen as coping in the client’s benefit. The latter two families can be seen as coping in the worker’s benefit. Moving away from clients categorizes behavior in which frontline workers avoid meaningful interactions with clients, while “moving against clients” analyzes confrontations with clients. Within these families, various ways of coping are specified.

Table 2 ties the hierarchical coping order we adopted from Skinner et al. to the three coping families we have distinguished. An example—drawn from Dubois (2010)—can illustrate this hierarchical coping order. A social worker copes with having to deal with struggling unemployment clients by giving them some of her own money (*coping instance*). This coping instance of “giving money” can be classified under the way of coping “using personal resources” (working overtime to help the client might be another instance in this category), which is then classified under the family “moving towards clients.”

In the Results section, we will fill the framework exemplified above with the results from our systematic review. In this way, we are able to develop a full classification system of coping during public service delivery. Before turning to the Results section, however, we first discuss the methodology used for the systematic review.

Table 2
Initial Distinction Between Families, Including Examples of Ways and Instances of Coping

Family of Coping During Public Service Delivery	Example: One Way of Coping Under This Family	Example: One Coping Instance Under Ways of Coping
Moving towards clients	Use personal resources	A social worker giving an (unemployed) client some of her own money to buy food
Moving away from clients	Rationing	A police officer saying “the office is very busy today, please return tomorrow”
Moving against clients	Rigid rule following	A teacher very strictly following a rule on no cell-phone use in class and sending students to the office immediately when they use a cell-phone

METHODOLOGY FOR SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Literature Search

Four strategies were used to identify eligible studies (Cooper 2010).

First, we carried out an electronic search using the Google Scholar database (<http://scholar.google.com>). Google Scholar was chosen as we wanted to include a broad range of scientific output such as journal articles, book chapters, conference papers, and dissertations. The search terms we used were [policy implementation] plus one of the following: [street-level], [frontline], [field-level]; plus one of [cope], [coping], [coping strategies], [coping mechanisms], [ways of coping], [coping behavior]. This search generated over 2,000 studies and was last conducted in February 2013.

Second, we searched for journal articles on coping during public service delivery published in five top public administration journals: *Governance*, *Journal of Public Administration Research & Theory*, *Policy Sciences*, *Public Administration* and *Public Administration Review*. The last such search was conducted in October 2013 and generated 179 studies.

Third, we analyzed all the publications cited in five major publications concerning coping during public service delivery: Brodtkin (1997), Thorén (2008), Nielsen (2006), Van der Aa (2012), and Trowler (1997). This reference search generated 653 studies.

Fourth, we contacted experts public administration scholars and asked them to check the list of eligible publications and to indicate possible gaps (see Acknowledgments). They identified 58 further studies. We received the last expert e-mail in March 2014.

Although we used four search strategies, we must acknowledge a potential limitation of the search criteria. One of our main selection criteria was that we focused on terms such as “frontline work,” “street-level,” and “coping.” Herewith, we place our work firmly within the public administration discipline. However, it is possible that we missed studies dedicated to coping of frontline workers because different terminology was used. Taking all such literature into account is worthwhile, but extremely time consuming (we now had to screen already over 3,000 studies). However, we decided to analyze the last five volumes (2009–13) of two important organizational behavior

journals: *Work & Stress* and the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* to partly overcome this. We read the title and abstract of all articles published in that period (304) and scanned the body text of 60 possible eligible studies. The last such search was conducted in February 2014. Many articles were found addressing coping of frontline workers (sometimes indeed under labels other than coping), on topics like cynicism (Schaufeli et al. 2009), support seeking (Avanzi et al. 2012), and turnover (Heponiemi et al. 2009). However, using the definition of coping during public service delivery as developed (*behavioral coping of frontline workers during client–worker interactions*, hence, Type 1), less studies were eligible. We found three eligible studies, which we subsequently coded and included in our review (González-Morales, Rodríguez, and Peiró 2010; Halpern et al. 2009; Nizielski et al. 2013).

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included in the systematic review, if they met all of the following inclusion criteria:

- Type of study and participants: Studies should focus on individual frontline workers (also termed street-level bureaucrats or public professionals)—workers who interact directly with citizens, and who have substantial discretion in dealing with clients. The studies should deal with coping during public service delivery.
- Study design: Only empirical studies were included.
- Publication status: Studies had to be conducted by at least a PhD student. Further, only studies with explicit reference to the place of dissemination or “belonging” (journal, academic conference) were included to safeguard the quality of the review.
- Language: Only studies published in English were included. However, we included one dissertation written in Dutch as it was heavily focused on coping (Van der Aa 2012).
- Year of publication: Only studies published between 1981 and 2014 were included.

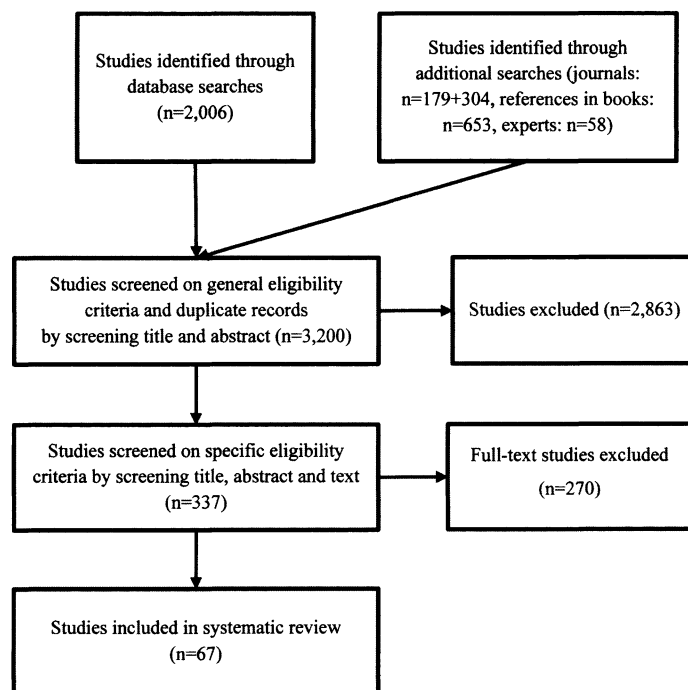
Review Method and Coding

The process for including studies is shown in figure 1.

After applying the inclusion criteria mentioned, we included 67 studies in the review, which provided us with 277 text fragments on coping during public service delivery. These text fragments were analyzed. First, the instance of coping was coded, after which coding of the way and family of coping followed. Fragments often consist of quotes from frontline workers (see for instance Bjerregaard and Klitmoller 2010, 426) or observations of the researcher on how frontline workers behave (see for instance Meyers, Glaser, and Donald 1998, 15).

We acknowledge that coding is a subjective process and therefore took measures to deal with the associated risks. Two researchers independently coded studies. To safeguard the quality of the review, one researcher then read all the coded fragments and checked whether they (a) fitted the scope of the study, were unambiguous, and contained no doublings and (b) were assigned to the appropriate ways and families of coping. During the coding process, it became eminent that some behaviors were less

Figure 1
PRISMA flowchart: process for identifying and retaining studies



clear-cut (for instance distinguishing between “rule bending” and “rule breaking”) and were thus harder to code. The two researchers discussed each “difficult” fragment when needed via phone, Skype, or face-to-face meetings. In this process, new codes were introduced and nonexclusive codes were deleted. One of the coders would then, again, check all the coded fragments along these lines and reassign them to the now appropriate ways and families of coping. The list of definitions of ways of coping and families of coping was decisive in coding the text fragments.

RESULTS OF SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Before we discuss the instances, ways, and families of coping that were found in the analyzed studies, we first describe some background information on the included studies.

Background Characteristics

Firstly, the studies are often based in Western countries, and most studies have been conducted in the United States (29; 43%) or the United Kingdom (16; 24%). Only two studies are conducted in Asia. Most studies in the review are conducted in single countries, while only two are cross-national (Jewell 2007; Knight and Trowler 2000).

The majority of studies are published in peer-reviewed journals (47; 70%), followed by books (10; 15%). Most of the included journal articles are published in the *Journal of Public Administration, Research & Theory*.

Thirdly, we observe that more than half of the studies have a qualitative design (see table 3). An illustrative example is Dubois (2010) who analyzed the interactions between frontline family-welfare workers and clients using nonparticipant observation and interviews. Quantitative methods are the least frequent employed. Winter and Baviskar (Baviskar 2013; Winter 2002; Winter and Baviskar 2010) are quite unique in employing predominantly quantitative (survey) methods. We did not find any study using a laboratory or field experiment.

Lastly, we focus on the professions studied in the included studies (see table 4). Most studies analyze social workers, such as workers engaged in “welfare to work” (Riccucci 2005) and child welfare workers (Smith and Donovan 2003). The next most studied professions are teachers—in both primary (Kelly 1994) and secondary education (Wong and Anagnostopoulos 1998)—and healthcare professionals, such as nurses (Bergen and While 2005) and emergency care workers (Henderson 2013). The last most mentioned profession is that of the police officer (for instance Brown 1988). The rest of the studies focus on coping of other professions, such as judicial and municipal workers.

Classifying Coping During Public Service Delivery

The 277 text fragments on coping during public service delivery that flowed from analyzing the included studies can be linked to nine ways of coping and the three families of coping already mentioned. The ways and families of coping are shown in table 5.

The names of the nine ways of coping are based on the literature as much as possible. The terms routinizing and rationing have already been identified by Lipsky (1980, 2010). Rule bending and rule breaking have been distinguished by Evans (2013). On two occasions, we diverged from familiar naming in the field. We chose “prioritizing”

Table 3
Designs of Included Studies

Study Design	Number (%)
Qualitative design	46 (69)
Mixed-method design	15 (22)
Quantitative design	6 (9)
Total	67 (100)

Table 4
Professions Studies in Included Studies

Profession	Number (%)
Social worker	40 (50)
Teacher	14 (17)
Healthcare professional	10 (13)
Police officer	9 (11)
Other (e.g. judicial or municipal worker)	7 (9)
Total ($n = 80$; some studies analyzed more than one profession)	80 (100)

Table 5
Families and Ways of Coping Identified

Coping Family and Way of Coping	Description	Number of Fragments (%)
Moving towards clients		120 (43)
Rule bending	Adjusting the rules to meet a client's demands	37 (13)
Rule breaking	Neglecting or deliberately obstructing the rules to meet a client's demands	22 (8)
Instrumental action	Executing long-lasting solutions to overcome stressful situations and meet client's demands	22 (8)
Prioritizing among clients	Giving certain clients more time, resources, or energy	20 (7)
Use personal resources	Using one's own time, money, or energy to benefit the client	19 (7)
Moving away from clients		104 (38)
Routinizing	Dealing with citizens in a standard way, making it a matter of routine	57 (21)
Rationing	Decreasing service availability, attractiveness, or expectations to clients or client groups	47 (17)
Moving against clients		53 (19)
Rigid rule following	Sticking to rules in an inflexible way that may go against the client's demands	39 (14)
Aggression	Confronting clients in a hostile manner	14 (5)
Total		277 (100)

and “rigid rule following” over respectively “creaming” and “sanctioning” as we found these to be more suited towards what is happening in frontline practice. The terms creaming and sanctioning both have quite a negative association and narrow scope and have been challenged (see Brodtkin 1997 and Winter 2002 on creaming and Miller 1983 and Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011 on sanctioning). Instrumental action, using personal resources, and aggression are terms adopted from psychology (Skinner et al. 2003).

Below, we discuss the ways of coping within each family. Here, we discuss one or more examples from the literature for each way of coping. For a more comprehensive overview of the ways of coping, examples for each way of coping are shown in Appendix 2.

Moving Towards Clients

The largest number of coping instances is related to the coping family “moving towards clients” (43%). Frontline workers often seem to pragmatically adjust to the client's needs, with the ultimate aim to help them. This is an interesting finding, which corresponds with the work of Dias and Maynard-Moody (2007). They note that frontline

workers often express a “social work narrative”: focusing on helping clients achieving long term success. This is also connected to the important notion of Public Service Motivation (Perry 1996; Wright, Moynihan, and Pandey 2012): frontline workers seem to want to perform meaningful public service, even in stressful situations.

Adjusting the rules to meet client demands (rule bending) is the most often mentioned way of coping in this family. Rule bending describes how frontline workers adjust the rules to meet the clients’ demands. In essence, they are experiencing a role conflict: the policy rules and requirements do not fit with the wishes and demands of their clients (Tummers et al. 2012). In order to cope with this role conflict, they adjust the rules somewhat, so that the client can benefit. An example of rule bending is provided by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003, 113), who quote a teacher on his feelings about rules: “I’ll kind of use the system and tweak the system to get more benefits — not so much for me, but for the kids on my casework. [...] I like to do the best that I can, and I’ll bend the system, and occasionally I’ll snap it in half.”

Rule breaking is another often-mentioned way of coping. It is related to “rule bending,” but more extreme in that it deliberately goes *against* the rules rather than working *with* the rules. For an illustrative example, we refer to Anagnostopoulos (2003), who describes how secondary school teachers in Chicago coped with a new and stringent accountability policy on student failure, which they strongly disagreed with. Where students were failing classes, many teachers tried to improve their instructional practices. However, some teachers indicated that they passed students who had not actually satisfied the course requirements. This is a clear example of rule breaking which probably will reduce legitimacy of public service delivery when this becomes known to the general public.

A third way of coping in this family is instrumental action, which focuses on developing *long term* solutions to overcome stressful situations. Instrumental action seems to be applied when the stress situation is quite severe or persists for a longer period of time and there is ample time to develop solutions. Wagenaar (2004, 645) describes instrumental actions of Dutch immigration officers who have to deal with a large group of immigrants: “A while ago, a pretty large group of 56 Slovenians entered (...) According to the Dublin Agreement you cannot re-apply for legal status in the European Union when you have been rejected by an EU country, but we were stuck with them (...) So we came up with the idea to create a terminal D at the airport. A temporary facility with beds and everything. So we could keep those people outside our borders. That is something that you have to create out of nothing.”

A fourth way of coping in this family is prioritizing among clients. In a recent quantitative study, Baviskar (2013) shows that 28% of schoolteachers in Denmark showed prioritizing behavior by giving greater priority to teaching students with a good chance of doing well academically. Prioritizing among clients seems to take place when there is a high workload (so not everyone can be helped optimally) and a shortage of resources. This way of coping is beneficial for certain clients or client groups, but others may be worse off. Frontline workers may prioritize clients on for instance the client’s readiness. As Križ and Skivenes (2012, 795) note: “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.”

The last way of coping in this family is termed “using personal resources” and applies to frontline workers who invest energy—beyond that specified in their job descriptions—to help clients. Using personal resources covers working overtime and even giving one’s own money to clients. This is especially relevant when frontline workers are confronted with powerless and unemployed clients, as Dubois (2010, 126) illustrates by quoting a family-welfare worker: “I gave money to some young ones. [...] That girl didn’t have a thing, especially milk for the kid.”

Moving Away From Clients

Although the family of coping “moving towards the clients” is most often mentioned, we also found many examples where frontline workers were moving away from clients (38%).

The most often mentioned way of coping in this family is “routinizing”: dealing with clients in a standardized way. Frontline workers try to deliver the same standard of services to a great amount of people in a short timeframe (high workload), thereby having to compromise on the quality of the service. An illustrative example is that of a social worker in Sweden whose job was to professionally assess the needs of unemployed clients (Thorén 2008, 88). He coped with high work pressure—caused by New Public Management type of demands of management—by avoiding individual assessments and suggesting to all clients that they start at the job center: “I select all [emphasis added] unemployed clients as long as they don’t have a doctor’s certificate or just can’t work ... I don’t do many exceptions.” On a similar vein, Trowler (1997) described how academics in the United Kingdom coped with complex rule-systems in a routinizing way by signing virtually any document that students asked them to, regardless of whether they fully understood it.

A second way of coping in this family is rationing. Here, frontline workers make accessing the public service more difficult for clients. Rationing is often used when work pressure is high, and the frontline worker has substantial power over the availability of services. Triandafyllidou (2003, 275) quotes a police officer who tells clients who apply for citizenship: “The office is very busy today; return tomorrow if you wish.”

Moving Against Clients

Lastly, we found 53 (19%) instances of coping that could be categorized under the family of coping “moving against clients.”

The way of coping most often mentioned here is “rigid rule following.” Instead of bending or even breaking rules, frontline workers can also stick to the rules. Mostly, frontline workers rigidly follow rules as a way to control clients, especially those who are particularly demanding or manipulative. This way of coping seems to be related to high workload and a focus on efficiency (related to New Public Management). Wright (2003, 137–8) refers to a welfare worker who tells a citizen that wants to apply for a well-suited job that the vacancy has been suspended 10 min ago and that the opportunity has passed. This shows the effects of the submissions limits, which are set by employers and enforced by staff. Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011, 220) comment that some officials view sanctioning as “the most important process they have in terms of case management and producing results.” Some officials for instance choose the path

of letting clients attend daily classes before having their application for benefits submitted. Missing a class or turning up inappropriately dressed means having to start over the following week.

The last way of coping during public service delivery we identified was “aggression.” Frontline workers often experience aggression from clients (Barling, Rogers, and Kelloway 2001). Recent studies note that aggression is relational, and that aggression from the client can result in a similar reaction from the frontline worker (Hershcovis and Reich 2013). We found studies that describe the strategy of countering aggression with aggression (such as Vinzant, Denhardt, and Crothers 1998, 34). However, we also found studies where frontline workers became aggressive as in this way they could relieve their own frustrations. Brown (1988, 143–4) describes two US police officers who go to the park “to check out the lovers” by pulling alongside a car, jumping out of the patrol car and getting the occupants out to check their identification. Hence, aggression is not always evoked by the clients, but can also come from other sources of stress.

Linking Professional Membership to Coping

After describing the ways and families of coping found, we can now connect professional membership to the coping behavior identified. We focus on the four largest professions present in the studies: social workers, teachers, healthcare professionals, and police officers. Table 6 shows how the different coping instances per profession are divided between the three families of coping.

Three conclusions can be drawn from this table. Firstly, the family “moving towards clients” is substantial for all professions. This shows that one of the general findings—that frontline workers often “move towards clients”—also holds true when looking at specific professions. Secondly, all professions seem to move away from clients on a frequent basis (especially social workers and healthcare professionals). Thirdly, healthcare professionals and teachers score very low on the family of coping “moving against clients,” in contrast to police officers and social workers. Healthcare professionals and teachers are historically seen as “helping professions,” while police officers—and increasingly social workers—are more focused on sanctioning and disciplining (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

Related to this, we examined whether professions differ in the way they deal with rules in stressful situations: are they bending rules, breaking them or rigidly following them? This is shown in table 7.

Table 6
Relationship Between Families of Coping and Profession

Profession	Moving Towards Clients	Moving Away From Clients	Moving Against Clients	Total
Social workers	38%	40%	22%	100%
Teachers	69%	26%	6%	100%
Healthcare professionals	57%	39%	4%	100%
Police officers	37%	22%	41%	100%

Table 7
Relationship Between Dealing With Rules and Profession

Profession	Rule Bending (Moving Towards Clients)	Rule Breaking (Moving Towards Clients)	Rigid Rule Following (Moving Against Clients)	Total
Social workers	36%	13%	51%	100%
Teachers	56%	31%	13%	100%
Healthcare professionals	27%	64%	9%	100%
Police officers	33%	22%	44%	100%

Regarding rule breaking, we notice that social workers (13%) and police officers (22%) are far less inclined to break the rules than healthcare professionals (64%) and teachers (31%). This is likely related to the higher importance of the rule of law and a judicial system surrounding police officers and social workers (Brayne and Carr 2012). Other potential explanations are their differing levels of discretion, the visibility of their actions (related to transparency issues), and media attention. Related to this, both professions more often use the coping strategy “rigid rule following.” Of all the professions studied, teachers seem most inclined to bend the rules when confronted with stressful situations (56%).

CONCLUSION

The first goal of this article was to contribute to theory development by conceptualizing coping during public service delivery and developing a related classification. The second goal was to provide a general overview of how coping during public service delivery has been studied since 1980.

This article elevates coping during public service delivery to a definitive concept (Blumer 1954) with a clear definition and operationalization. Coping during public service delivery is distinct from other types of coping, often studied in organizational behavior and occupational health psychology. Coping during public service delivery is now closely linked to the public administration literature, and with it, three families of coping and nine ways of coping are evident.

Overall, frontline workers, regardless of their professional identities, cope by “moving towards clients.” As noted, this finding corresponds to the work of Dias and Maynard-Moody (2007) and the idea of Public Service Motivation (Perry 1996; Wright, Moynihan, and Pandey 2012). This tendency to move towards clients, even under conditions of stress, can also be connected to the findings of Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003, 2012). They argue that workers draw more upon a “citizen agent narrative,” concentrating on the character and worthiness of clients in deciding how to allocate resources in service delivery, than the “state agent narrative” which addresses law abidance and fidelity to administrative rules and supervision. Furthermore, it relates to work on policy alienation, which has consistently shown that one of the most important reasons frontline workers resist policies is because they think the policies are not meaningful for society or their own clients (Loyens 2014; Tummers 2011). In sum, frontline workers seem to want to perform meaningful public service keying

on their own clients, even in stressful situations. However, this does not mean that they never take policy rules into account. Frontline workers do not break the rules often, especially not when they belong to professions where the “organization of discipline” and technological surveillance has a firm grip on the workplace (Gilliom 2001; Kupchik 2011; Monahan and Torres 2010; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

Indeed, our analysis shows that social workers and police officers break rules less often than healthcare professionals and teachers. Related to this, they far more often use the coping strategy “rigid rule following.” This moves beyond the *particular* stressful context and shows that the professional background of public service workers and the accountability measures deployed by the organizations where they work can influence the ways of coping they deploy in interactions with their clients. The importance of professions and the contexts of their workplaces are not often touched upon in street-level bureaucracy or coping research, but important links can be found in literature on the sociology of professions (Noordegraaf 2011).

We also found that the ways in which frontline worker cope is dependent on particular situational characteristics. Role conflicts in which policy rules conflict with client’s demands or worker’s own professional values may lead frontline workers to bend or break rules. When workers are confronted with clients in need and feel that they have some discretion in their work, they may use personal resources to benefit the client, or take instrumental action to alleviate the problem. These findings correspond with work of coping in psychology, which concludes that choosing for a particular way of coping is situational: it is influenced by how people evaluate the stressful context (Folkman and Moskowitz 2000).

These conclusions bring us to a future research agenda, focusing on new methodological and theoretical venues. First, regarding the methodology, we found that studies on coping during public service delivery are largely single country qualitative case studies. This is understandable given the importance of the local context in which these frontline workers operate. However, conducting comparative studies that cut across various countries, sectors, or types of frontline work can show to what extent contextual factors influence ways of coping. Moreover, using a wider range of methods in public administration research (such as participant observations, surveys, and experiments) can increase understanding, as all have their strengths and weaknesses (Perry 2012). Scale development approaches are needed to measure the ways of coping. The developed classification of families and ways of coping can be used for scale development. The few quantitative studies found have tended to develop their own scales without following the guidelines of psychometric scale development. This hampers reliability and validity (DeVellis 2011). Furthermore, the quantitative studies all draw on single surveys from a single source at a single point in time, thereby suffering from common-source bias (Favero and Bullock 2014). Future scholars are advised to take precautions to reduce common-source bias. They could for instance develop a multisource study, where coping (independent variable) is measured via employees and performance (dependent variable) is measured via supervisor ratings. Finally, our review did not uncover any study that involved field or laboratory experiments. Experiments could be carried out to determine causal linkages.

Regarding new theoretical venues, future research can further analyze the antecedents of coping during public service delivery. In this article, we introduced how professional membership and situational factors (such as workload and discretion)

may influence particular coping behavior. Investigating the role of professionalism as noted in the literature on the sociology of professions (Noordegraaf 2011; Teodoro 2014) or the role of servant leadership in organizational behavior (Van Dierendonck 2011) offers promise to “move beyond” Lipsky. The work of Lipsky has been extremely valuable. However, focusing on one stream of literature can also have pitfalls, such as forming a barrier to insights (Tummers and Karsten 2012). We can miss important connections that are extensively described in other streams of literature.

Related to this, more research on coping during service delivery that gives attention to personal antecedents influencing coping behavior is needed. Ways of coping can be dependent on personality characteristics, such as self-efficacy and rule obedience. For instance, frontline workers scoring high on self-efficacy may be more often inclined to take instrumental action when dealing with stressful situations (Bandura 1977). Individual characteristics such as age and gender can also influence ways of coping (see for instance Bal et al. 2013) and need greater attention.

Our systematic review reveals that workers remain focused on their clients even under conditions of high stress, suggesting that the citizen agent narrative has considerable sway in how they act. Nevertheless, scholars are renewing their attention on the state agent narrative, particularly whether and how law and policy regime fidelity is being achieved. This is especially related to twenty-first-century public administration, such as New Public Governance (involving collaboration with non-state actors), performance management, digitalization, enhanced technological surveillance, and transparency pressures. Such forces can invoke stress and hence coping (Brodin 2011; Hood 2007). However, to date, little is known about how frontline workers are adapting to these new management strategies while engaging in the delivery of services. Bringing the construct of “coping during public service delivery” and related families of coping to bear on this inquiry is important to theoretical advancement of research on frontline work.

APPENDIX 1 – PRISMA CHECKLIST**PRISMA Checklist (Based on Liberati et al. 2009)**

			Page
Title	1	Identify the report as a systematic review, meta-analysis, or both.	1
Abstract			
Structured summary	2	Provide a structured summary including, as applicable: background; objectives; data sources; study eligibility criteria, participants, and interventions; study appraisal and synthesis methods; results; limitations; conclusions and implications of key findings; systematic review registration number.	2
Introduction			
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of what is already known.	3–4
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of questions being addressed with reference to participants, interventions, comparisons, outcomes, and study design (PICOS).	3–4
Methods			
Protocol and registration	5	Indicate if a review protocol exists, if and where it can be accessed (e.g. Web address), and, if available, provide registration information including registration number.	NA
Eligibility criteria	6	Specify study characteristics (e.g. PICOS, length of follow-up) and report characteristics (e.g. years considered, language, publication status) used as criteria for eligibility, giving rationale.	11–12
Information sources	7	Describe all information sources (e.g. databases with dates of coverage, contact with study authors to identify additional studies) in the search and date last searched.	9–11
Search	8	Present full electronic search strategy for at least one database, including any limits used, such that it could be repeated.	9
Study selection	9	State the process for selecting studies (i.e. screening, eligibility, included in systematic review, and, if applicable, included in the meta-analysis)	9–11
Data collection process	10	Describe method of data extraction from reports (e.g. piloted forms, independently, in duplicate) and any processes for obtaining and confirming data from investigators.	9–11
Data items	11	List and define all variables for which data were sought (e.g. PICOS, funding sources) and any assumptions and simplifications made.	NA
Risk of bias in individual studies	12	Describe methods used for assessing risk of bias of individual studies (including specification of whether this was done at the study or outcome level), and how this information is to be used in any data synthesis.	NA
Summary measures	13	State the principal summary measures (e.g. risk ratio, difference in means).	NA

Continued

APPENDIX 1 *(continued)*

			Page
Synthesis of results	14	Describe the methods of handling data and combining results of studies, if done, including measures of consistency (e.g. I) for each meta-analysis.	NA
Risk of bias across studies	15	Specify any assessment of risk of bias that may affect the cumulative evidence (e.g. publication bias, selective reporting within studies).	9, 12
Additional analyses	16	Describe methods of additional analyses (e.g. sensitivity or subgroup analyses, meta-regression), if done, indicating which were pre-specified.	NA
Results			
Study selection	17	Give numbers of studies screened, assessed for eligibility, and included in the review, with reasons for exclusions at each stage, ideally with a flow diagram.	11
Study characteristics	18	For each study, present characteristics for which data were extracted (e.g. study size, PICOS, follow-up period) and provide the citations.	12–14
Risk of bias within studies	19	Present data on risk of bias of each study and, if available, any outcome level assessment (see Item 12).	NA
Results of individual studies	20	For all outcomes considered (benefits or harms), present, for each study: (a) simple summary data for each intervention group (b) effect estimates and confidence intervals, ideally with a forest plot.	NA
Synthesis of results	21	Present the main results of the review. If meta-analyses are done, include for each, confidence intervals and measures of consistency	12–28
Risk of bias	22	Present results of any assessment of risk of bias across studies (see Item 15).	NA
Additional analysis	23	Give results of additional analyses, if done (e.g. sensitivity or subgroup analyses, meta-regression [see Item 16]).	NA
Discussion			
Summary of evidence	24	Summarize the main findings including the strength of evidence for each main outcome; consider their relevance to key groups (e.g. healthcare providers, users, and policy makers).	15–20
Limitations	25	Discuss limitations at study and outcome level (e.g. risk of bias), and at review-level (e.g. incomplete retrieval of identified research, reporting bias).	19–22
Conclusion	26	Provide a general interpretation of the results in the context of other evidence, and implications for future research.	20–22
Funding	27	Describe sources of funding for the systematic review and other support (e.g. supply of data); role of funders for the systematic review.	See funding note

Note: Some checks are not applicable as they are meant for a meta-analysis, not a systematic review.

APPENDIX 2 EXAMPLES OF COPING INSTANCES

Examples of Coping Instances for Coping Family "Moving Towards Clients"

Way of Coping	Social Worker	Teacher	Other Profession
Rule bending	"You've got people sitting in front of you with all these problems. Yesterday it was a man who is drug addicted, his whole life is really in chaos, and he's just found out that his mother is not his real mother . . . he looks really sick, and basically, he's just a mess. They [the Job Network] want to cut off his payment but I recommended that his income be maintained." (McDonald and Marston 2008, 322)	[Quoted in Results section] "I'll kind of use the system and tweak the system to get more benefits — not so much for me, but for the kids on my casework. [...] I like to do the best that I can, and I'll bend the system, and occasionally I'll snap it in half." (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 113)	"Similarly, the administrative requirements for issuing a stay permit for family reunion included the criterion that the legal immigrant who applied for her/his family to join her/him should have 33 square metres of space in their accommodation for each additional family member. However, this rule was judged by the FO employees and other social actors as exaggerated and was applied selectively." (Triandafyllidou 2003, 279)

Continued

APPENDIX 2 (continued)

Way of Coping	Social Worker	Teacher	Other Profession
Rule breaking	"Some workers also mentioned helping undocumented children to change their status and become documented while in child welfare system foster care. The latter seemed to be an explicit strategy in site 1. 'Eve' expressed this in the following way: "there's advocacy for legal assistance, especially for children in foster care to become citizens so that they're not deported, which you won't find in other parts of the country." (Križ and Skivenes 2012, 795)	"Many academics moved beyond simply coping into policy reinterpretation and reconstruction which also had the effect of changing the policy at the point of 'delivery' but often in a deliberate way. The first of these reconstructive strategies could be termed 'curriculum innovation'. A reduction in the number of optional modules available is one way in which academics can reduce their teaching workload. This is done by simply deleting options from the programme, even reducing the element of optionality altogether in one or more years." (Trowler 1997, 308)	[Quoted in Results section] Scholar describes how secondary school teachers in Chicago coped with a new and stringent accountability policy on student failure, which they strongly disagreed with. Where students were failing classes, many teachers tried to improve their instructional practices. However, some teachers indicated that they passed students who had not actually satisfied the course requirements. (Anagnostopoulos 2003, 306)
Instrumental action	"Social workers on one of the specialist teams in our study routinely recorded unmet need as part of a systematic attempt to draw attention to perceived gaps in services, such as the child-care needs of parents of younger children." (Ellis, Davis, and Rummery 1999, 276)	"The most difficult parents to deal with are those that still have not come to terms with their child's handicap or label" (...) "She said that she tries to identify the parents, and make a concerted effort to answer their questions, schedule additional conferences, encourage them to visit the school, and refer them to outside professionals and organizations." (Handler 1986, 102)	[Quoted in Results section] "A while ago, a pretty large group of 56 Slovenians entered (...) According to the Dublin Agreement you cannot re-apply for legal status in the European Union when you have been rejected by an EU country, but we were stuck with them (...) So we came up with the idea to create a terminal D at the airport. A temporary facility with beds and everything. So we could keep those people outside our borders. That is something that you have to create out of nothing." (Wagenaar 2004, 645)

Continued

APPENDIX 2 (continued)

Way of Coping	Social Worker	Teacher	Other Profession
Prioritizing among clients	[Quoted in Results section] "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." (Križ and Skivenes 2012, 795)	"Overall, the results indicate that teachers' cream-skimming is explained by a shortage of resources (operationalized as the percentage of lesson time devoted to actual teaching) and that shortage of time for teaching is caused mainly by issues of student discipline and well-being." (Baviskar 2013, 20–21)	"All patrolmen must decide how serious they regard different violations and where they will apply their energies. One of the more clear-cut choices facing a patrolman is whether to concentrate on serious felony violations or to emphasize the enforcement of a wide range of violations (...). One patrolman said he would be more aggressive in the high-crime area of the community because "the kids down there are more likely to have weapons or other kinds of things in the car, they're more likely to be dirty, and you have gang activity..." (Brown 1988, 145, 166)
Use personal resources	[Quoted in Results section] "I gave money to some young ones. [...]. That girl didn't have a thing, especially milk for the kid." (Dubois 2010, 126)	"Thus when Joseph Mitchell, a first year woodshop teacher at a high school in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, could not get wood to use in his classes, he spent approximately five hundred dollars of his own money to supply his students." (Kelly 1994, 129)	"And it's weird, I looked in the newspaper. I saw his funeral announcement and I went to the funeral (...) I just went for my own, I don't know why... I, for some reason, I guess I felt I needed to follow up and so I did. And I sent the family a condolence card (...)." "Compensatory acts were also a way of dealing with feelings of inability to help. Some try to do whatever they can in order to feel they have had some positive influence. These compensatory acts may include comforting the family, attending funerals, or visiting their patients in hospital." (Halpern et al. 2009, 181–2)

Continued

Examples of Coping Instances for Coping Family “Moving Away From Clients”

Way of Coping	Social Worker	Teacher	Other Profession
Routinizing	[Quoted in Results section] “Since exemptions from the activation requirement invited close scrutiny, and social workers then had to justify the exemptions to managers or colleagues, the most rational and efficient action for the social workers became to refer “all” clients to Jobbcentrum or Källan.” (Thorén 2008, 88–89)	[Quoted in Results section] Scholar describes how academics in the United Kingdom coped with complex rule-systems in a routinizing way by signing virtually any document that students asked them to, regardless of whether they fully understood it. (Trowler 1997, 307)	“The school psychologists’ tendency to routinize their work became most evident when they were asked about a hypothetical situation. Each participant was readily able to report the routine steps he or she would take in the situation (parent meeting, staff meeting, obtaining documentation from the former school, documenting the child’s behaviors, setting up numerous behavioral interventions, initiating a focus of concern, waiting until the interventions failed, and then looking for another placement).” (Summers and Semrud-Clikeman 2000, 269)
Rationing	“Sometimes I don’t feel like hearing everything they have to say”, Sophie Delvaux admits. “So I get out of it by saying it’s not my place, because it would probably end up weighing on my mind.” (Dubois 2010, 133)	“Others had deliberately made themselves unapproachable and their teaching and assessments very difficult in order to reduce the intolerably great demands made upon them by the greatly increased number of students.” (Trowler 1997, 307–8)	[Quoted in Results section] Scholar quotes a police officer who tells clients who apply for citizenship: “ <i>The office is very busy today; return tomorrow if you wish</i> ”. (Triandafyllidou 2003, 275)

Examples of Coping Instances for Coping Family "Moving Against Clients"

Way of Coping	Social Worker	Teacher	Other Profession
Rigid rule following	[Quoted in Results section] Scholar comments that some officials view sanctioning as "the most important process they have in terms of case management and producing results." Some officials for instance choose the path of letting clients attend daily classes before having their application for benefits submitted. Missing a class or turning up inappropriately dressed means having to start over the following week. (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011, 220, 211)	"One teacher used management time to check that students wore their school identification cards and to send those who didn't to the discipline office. This effectively reduced the number of students in the class by two or three students each day." (Anagnostopoulos 2003, 308–9)	Scholar mentions police officers giving citizens a citation for parking on the sidewalk, in order to let them know the police is around and watching. (Brown 1988, 158)
Aggression	"I saw this woman, she had two kids, and she was complaining about not having a housing allowance. She had 550000 (€104500) of income. Right... And then she says: "Oh, anyway, the housing allowance wouldn't even be enough to pay for the goldfish's food'. So it didn't take me long. I told her: 'Listen, lady, now you walk out that door and get the hell out.' She was coming to fuck with me." (Dubois 2010, 36)	No examples available.	[Quoted in Results section] "Two highly aggressive young officers were having trouble coping with a rather uneventful evening, and decided to go to the park to "check out the lovers". This game, which was rationalized as looking for would-be rapists or muggers, involved pulling alongside a parked car in which a couple was necking or otherwise engaged, jumping out of the patrol car and getting both occupants out in order to check their identification." (Brown 1988, 143–4)

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