Clients' Help Deservingness, Crowd Situational Stress And Discretionary Decision-making: An Experimental Study Of Regulatory Street-level Bureaucrats In China

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CLIENTS' HELP DESERVINGNESS, CROWD SITUATIONAL STRESS AND DISCRETIONARY DECISION-MAKING: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY OF REGULATORY STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT: *Following the publication of Lipsky's classic study, a large body of literature has explored the determinants of street-level bureaucrats' discretion. Among these determinants, clients' help deservingness has been widely studied as a salient factor in service delivery contexts, which may differ from the contexts in which regulatory street-level bureaucrats operate. Another factor, situational stress, has not drawn much attention yet in experimental studies. This article examines the impact of clients' help deservingness, situational stress, and their interaction effects on street-level bureaucrats' discretion based on the results of an experimental study conducted in a regulatory context. The experimental subjects were* Chengguan *officers who are typical Chinese street-level bureaucrats responsible for urban affairs management. Our results suggest that clients' help deservingness affects discretionary decision making, which is consistent with previous research. Countering conventional thinking, this study found that situational stress alone does not influence* Chengguan *officers' discretionary decision making, but it weakens the effect of clients' help deservingness.*

INTRODUCTION

Following the publication of Lipsky's classical theory on street-level bureaucracy, a large body of literature has explored various behaviors of street-level bureaucrats, such as discretionary decision making (Scott 1997), rule abidance and deviation (Brockmann 2017; Zang and Musheno 2017; Assadi and Lundin 2018),

responsiveness (Einstein and Glick 2017) and coping behaviors (Tummers et al. 2015; Baviskar and Winter 2017). Discretion, which refers to the freedom of street-level bureaucrats to follow or deviate from rules or procedures to address clients' needs or restrict clients' choices (Lipsky 2010; Hupe and Buffat 2014), is widely exercised in the daily operations of street-level bureaucrats (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Andrews, Ashworth, and Meier, 2014), such as in caseworkers' interactions with their clients (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011) and police officers' law enforcement decisions (Tasdoven and Kapucu 2013; Buvik 2014).

The literature has identified a broad range of factors that influence discretionary decision making, such as the individual characteristics of street-level bureaucrats (Keiser 2010), organizational control (Scott 1997), the immediate social context (Raaphorst and Loyens 2018) and citizen-clients' characteristics (e.g., gender and race) (Scott 1997; Einstein and Glick 2017; Jilke and Tummers 2018). In terms of citizen-clients' characteristics, recent studies have investigated the effects of clients' deservingness/worthiness on street-level bureaucrats' discretion (Jilke and Tummers 2018), and found that street-level bureaucrats tend to give more assistance or priority to deserving/worthy citizen-clients (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). However, most of the quantitative research on public administration is based on data from social service delivery areas, which may differ from law enforcement contexts (May and Wood 2003; Jensen 2018).

Another important factor is the context in which discretionary decision making plays out. On the frontline where street-level bureaucrats meet citizen-clients, situational factors may impose pressure or cues on street-level bureaucrats, which could "lead to a decision that runs counter to officials' own idea of what is the appropriate decision" (Raaphorst and Loyens 2018:22). However, the research on the effects of situational factors on discretion is still in its infant stage (Henderson 2011; Henderson and Pandey 2013; Raaphorst and Loyens 2018), and more empirical evidence is needed to deepen our understanding of this issue.

This article attempts to explore the discretionary decision making of street-level bureaucrats by studying the following research questions:

- *How does clients' help deservingness affect street-level bureaucrats' discretionary decision making in a regulatory context?*
- *How does situational stress affect street-level bureaucrats' discretionary decision making?*
- *Do clients' help deservingness and situational stress interact to affect the discretionary decision making of street-level bureaucrats?*

This article aims to contribute to the literature in the following ways. First, we seek to deepen our understanding of discretionary decision making in a regulatory context, which may be different from the service delivery contexts examined in most studies. Specifically, street-level bureaucrats mostly *restrict* clients' choices to maintain social order according to the policies, societal rules or norms applied in the regulatory context, whereas street-level bureaucrats in the service delivery

context usually provide clients with *benefits*, such as help, aid, support or welfare (Jensen 2018).

Second, this article examines situational factors that have received limited attention in most of the current experimental studies. Specifically, this article explores how the crowd may affect street-level bureaucrats' discretionary decision making when enforcing laws. Overall, studying these situational factors extends the traditional views on the determinants of street-level bureaucrats' behavior.

Third, this article uses experimental methods to help us better understand street-level bureaucrats' psychological process when enforcing laws (James, Jilke, and Van Ryzin 2017). To date, limited experimental research has explored street-level bureaucrats' discretionary decision making (Tummers et al. 2015), with a few exceptions including Scott (1997), Einstein and Glick (2017) and Jilke and Tummers (2018). Moreover, in a review article on behavioral public administration, Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2017) identified street-level bureaucracy as an area that requires more experimental research.

Fourth, unlike the behavioral research in other disciplines, public administration researchers are increasingly using professionals instead of students or internet users as experimental subjects to improve external generalizability. In the research on street-level bureaucracy, Scott (1997) and Jilke and Tummers (2018) have pioneered this trend and used caseworkers and teachers as subjects to study the discretion of street-level bureaucrats.[1] This article follows this trend in examining a group of typical street-level bureaucrats,[2] namely *Chengguan* officers. The conclusions thus have better external validity.

Fifth, most findings on street-level bureaucrats are developed in western contexts, while our data come from a Chinese regulatory agency. Thus, our findings are likely to extend street-level bureaucracy theory to a new cultural context.

The subjects of our study: *Chengguan* officers in China

In China, *Chengguan* officers (Urban Management and Law Enforcement officers), a kind of para-police responsible for non-criminal regulation,[3] have been playing an increasingly important role in the management of quotidian urban affairs since the scattered legislative powers of various administrative units were integrated under a single department in 1996 (Swider 2014; Flock and Breitung 2016; Hanser 2016; Zang and Musheno 2017; Xu and Jiang 2018).[4] China's first urban administrative law enforcement department was established in Beijing's Xuanwu District in 1997 (Ma and Che 2008; Liu, Liu, and Dong 2010). In 2016, 3074 of 3091 sampled city-level and county-level (district) governments had *Chengguan* departments (Ma 2016).

One of the essential tasks for *Chengguan* officers is to enforce the rules and regulations relating to what in China is called "urban management" such as city appearance and sanitation, noise control, unlicensed construction sites, street vendors, waste treatment and parking (Zang and Musheno 2017). Like other street-level bureaucrats, *Chengguan* officers often exercise discretion in enforcing laws (Zang and Musheno 2017).

In China, *Chengguan* officers often have a negative image because they come into conflict with street vendors when enforcing the law, which sometimes even triggers social unrest (Xue and Huang 2015; Hanser 2016).[5] In Tang's (2014) report on citizens' perceived image of public officials, *Chengguan* officers ranked at the bottom. The citizen-clients that *Chengguan* officers encounter are often from low-income groups, which usually receive sympathy from the public when facing law enforcement (Xue and Huang 2015). According to a poll conducted jointly by *China Youth Daily* and *Sina News* in 2007, 96.5% of respondents had witnessed *Chengguan* officers confiscating vendors' goods, and 70.6% of respondents did not support the officers' actions (Wang 2007).[6] Moreover, reports of *Chengguan* officers abusing their clients have been published on social media sites and the mainstream media, resulting in nationwide outrage toward *Chengguan* officers (Hanser 2016). Therefore, we may assume that *Chengguan* officers can feel pressure from the public when enforcing laws. This creates opposing tensions for *Chengguan* officers. They must maintain public order and keep the urban environment clean in accordance with the rules, while enforcing laws in a "smart" way to avoid potential conflicts and maintaining social stability, a big concern of government leadership (Xue and Huang 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The study of street-level bureaucrats has convincingly and consistently shown that discretion is a normal part of frontline bureaucrats' decision making. They may make use of it. Some scholars have therefore described street-level bureaucrats as the "ultimate policymakers" (Lipsky 2010). By nature, government policies are unable to cover all of the uncertainties or complexities that street-level bureaucrats are likely to encounter in their service delivery or regulatory practices (Jones 2001; Hupe and Hill 2007). Therefore, discretion plays an indispensable role in making street-level bureaucrats' jobs easier, safer and more rewarding (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000).

Numerous factors can influence the discretion of street-level bureaucrats, two of which, namely clients' help deservingness and the situational stress caused by bystanders, are highly relevant in the regulatory context of *Chengguan* officers.

Clients' help deservingness

The conventional public service values hold that street-level bureaucrats should treat all clients equally without favoritism. However, empirical studies on public administration, social policy, policing and criminology, political science and economics have shown that street-level bureaucrats treat their clients differently based on their perceived deservingness (Goodsell 1981; Johnson and Morgan 2013; Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014; Baviskar 2019; Harrits and Møller 2014; Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh 2015; Einstein and Glick 2017; Brooks 2015).

In terms of different treatments to clients, discrimination has been a long-standing topic in street-level bureaucracy studies. Research has identified the effects of clients' race, age, gender and socioeconomic background on street-level bureaucrats' discretion in different settings, such as police patrols (Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014), professors' responses to students (Milkman et al. 2015) and evaluations of public housing applications (Einstein and Glick 2017). In terms of racial discrimination, Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel (2014) and Kochel, Wilson, and Mastrofski (2011) indicate that police officers tend to stop ethnic minorities and make arrest more often than they do to whites, and Regoeczi and Kent (2014) find that police officers in the state of Ohio in the U.S. are more likely to issue tickets to black drivers than to white drivers.

In contrast to negative discrimination, street-level bureaucrats may favor certain groups of clients. The early research revealed that some street-level bureaucrats preferred easy cases and avoided labor-intensive ones, even in the emergency services (Roth 1972). Jilke and Tummers (2018) find that street-level bureaucrats tend to prioritize motivated clients over unmotivated clients in service delivery. Moreover, clients with more knowledge about the services are more likely to receive more benefits from welfare programs because they can generate pressure on street-level bureaucrats (Hasenfeld and Steinmetz 1981; Tripi 1984).

Moreover, street-level bureaucrats' compassion toward their clients (typically vulnerable recipients) informs their use of discretion (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Jensen and Pedersen 2017). Clients with greater needs are more likely to receive more benefits in welfare programs (Goodsell 1980; Goodsell 1981). Consistent with the early research, Scott (1997) confirmed that street-level bureaucrats provide more assistance to clients with high help deservingness (females) than to clients with low help deservingness (males). Similarly, Jilke and Tummers (2018) examined the effect of students' deservingness on teachers' discretion, and found that teachers paid more attention to students with high levels of need deservingness (low performance and minority groups). All these findings are based on studies of western bureaucrats, and we do not know whether these hold true in China.

When enforcing the law, *Chengguan* officers often encounter unpopular clients, such as low-income or aged street vendors, who deserve compassion from officers. Although the behaviors of these unpopular clients may be at odds with the *Chengguan* officers' mission of maintaining public order, the officers still have difficulty restricting their behaviors (Flock and Breitung 2016). In a qualitative study on China, Chen and Lu (2013) found that frontline *Chengguan* officers tended to apply no penalties to unlicensed street vendors who were perceived as deserving of help, such as low-income or elderly vendors, which is consistent with Scott's (1997) laboratory based findings. Moreover, our interviews with *Chengguan* officers also confirm that street-level bureaucrats tend to exercise discretion when dealing with unpopular clients who are perceived to be deserving of help, as demonstrated in a *Chengguan* officer's response,

> "Look at the stall lady. I know that she is physically disabled, so I always turn a blind eye if there is no inspection from the upper level,

even though street vendors are forbidden in this area." (Interview # 2017121402)

Therefore, in line with conventional empirical findings, we expect that,

Hypothesis 1: *Chengguan* officers tend to be more lenient toward clients with high help deservingness.

Situational stress caused by crowds of bystanders

Bureaucrats and their clients interact not in a vacuum but in social settings that constrain the behavior of both parties, including the discretion of street-level bureaucrats (Bruhn and Ekström 2017; Zacka 2017; Raaphorst and Groeneveld 2018; Raaphorst and Loyens 2018). However, such situational imperatives, which refer to the "situations with which operators must cope on a daily basis" (Wilson 1989:36), have not received sufficient attention. Some street-level bureaucrats, such as police officers, work in social environments that can cause considerable harm to their personal welfare. As Lipsky (2010) states, "workers face physical and psychological threats when they leave the safety of the office or service headquarters" (120). Thus, safety can be a major concern for street-level bureaucrats. Similarly, Wilson (1989) believes that situational imperatives may have the greatest effect on street-level bureaucrats when they have to deal with uncooperative or threatening clients in face to face situations. For example, the first priority of police officers or prison guards is to remain unharmed, and this imperative affects how they interact with their clients in real-world situations. Thus, in face-to-face interactions, the personal values and organizational goals of these officers often take a back seat in determining their behavior. In other words, street-level bureaucrats exercise discretion in controlling their unique work situations (Lipsky 2010:190). This article aims to provide more empirical evidence on the effects of such situational factors on street-level bureaucrats' discretionary decision making.

Obviously, we are not able to investigate all situational factors. As a starting point, we focus on one particularly interesting situational factor – crowds. Street-level bureaucrats and citizens interact in a social setting, which may draw a crowd of bystanders. Street-level bureaucrats are not directly accountable to the bystanders, thus they do not have formal obligations to explain or justify their behaviors. However, bystanders, as citizens, are the ultimate principal to which the entire bureaucrats and elected officials are accountable. According to Bovens (2007)'s definition of accountability, bystanders may serve as an informal forum in these situations. Bystanders are naturally interested in looking at how street-level bureaucrats use power. Street level bureaucrats may become conscious of the presence of citizens and to certain degree feel the informal obligation to justify their conduct. In some cases, the crowd will witness the whole law enforcement process, especially in the current social media era in which almost everyone has a smart phone. In some cases, the crowd may put pressure (which might evolve into a

threat) on street-level bureaucrats, and even interrupt their work routines (Lipsky 1971; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Henderson (2011) vividly documented this dynamic in an emergency response situation,

> "Perhaps most important is the paramedic's description of the crowd that had gathered because of the incident. The medic noted that this crowd began to get excited, adding another level of stress on the paramedic while treating the patient. This stress prompted the medic to move an injured child into the ambulance before providing medication to ease his pain." (221)

The criminology research on police behavior is especially relevant here because the police display similar patterns of behavior when interacting with citizen-clients.[7] Moreover, the current research findings on the impact of the presence of bystanders on police decisions is mixed (Smith and Visher 1981; Klinger 1996; Engel, Sobol, and Worden 2000; Brooks 2015). However, they all agreed that police officers emphasize a dominating routine while interacting with clients to control work situations (Lipsky 2010:122; Terrill and Mastrofski 2002). Police officers have professional norms to assert their authority in front of bystanders, and feel obligated to project their image as fighters against crime (Engel et al. 2000; Lipsky 2010:190, 123). Earlier research started with an examination on the impact of visibility on police decisions and found no differences in taking crime reports or making arrests in both public and private settings (Friedrich 1977, cited from Sherman 1980). Friedrich (1977) found that police officers are more likely to use deadly force in public settings than that in private settings. Some further research findings in the 1980s were mixed (Riksheim and Chermak 1993). Friedrich (1980) later found no impact of visibility on police decisions. Sherman (1980) and Smith (1986)'s findings indicate more excessive forces were used by police officers in private settings.

In terms of studying the impact of bystanders, the current research finding did not provide a clear answer either. An early research expected that the presence of bystanders might undermine the capacity of the police to control the situation, prompting them to make arrests quickly in order to establish control (Smith and Visher 1981). Engel et al. (2000)'s research indicated that police officers tended to be more tolerant when few bystanders are present, and might simply issue a warning. Terrill and Mastrofski (2002) provided a rather opposite result based on an observational study in two US cities, which found no impact of the number of bystander on police using force. What is more challenging in the era of social media is that policing is experiencing so called "new visibility" or "legitimacy crisis" (Goldsmith 2010; Miller 2016). Bystanders with a cell phone could capture the law enforcement process and have the potential to influence public opinion and inform authority about police officers' decision (Miller 2016). The impact of bystanders' appearance towards police decision in the new era is under explored.

Although most of the unlicensed street vendors that *Chengguan* officers interact with on a daily basis are nonviolent, some interactions are not friendly (Xue and Huang 2015; Hanser 2016). *Chengguan* officers may fine unlicensed

vendors or confiscate their tools, and these situations can easily escalate. Chinese media often report stories of *Chengguan* officers or vendors being hurt or even killed when their interactions get out of control. In this context, the presence of a crowd may make a tense work situation even more complicated. According to Hanser (2016), the appearance of a crowd during an encounter between *Chengguan* officers and street vendors is likely to increase "sympathies and solidarities between street vendors and other citizen residents" (364). Moreover, as enforcers of laws and regulations relating to the management of the urban environment who just experienced legitimacy crisis, the presence of a crowd may experience more crowd induced pressures, leading to a more lenient decision. Therefore, we propose that:

> Hypothesis 2: Crowd pressure leads *Chengguan* officers to be more lenient toward their clients.

Interaction effect

Existing literature provides little evidence on the interaction effects of client help-deservingness and crowd situational stress on street-level bureaucrats discretion. Police literature provides some mixed findings on the impact of the interaction of situational factors and client characteristics towards police decision. In his early study, Klinger (1996:76) suggests that police officers are more likely to arrest hostile suspects when bystanders were present. There is also an alternative view which holds that police officers are less likely to take aggressive actions because of the possibility of escalating into a riot (Reiss 1971). The large-N examination conducted by Engel et al. (2000) in the US demonstrates different impact mechanisms in routine traffic encounters and non-traffic situations. They found that the interactions between bystander appearance and suspects demeanor were predictors of police sanctions in routine traffic encounters, while this causal mechanism was not supported in nontraffic situations.

When it comes to the *Chengguan* context, the client help-deserving variable in this study is different to hostile suspects or suspects demeanor examined in the police context. As abovementioned, *Chengguan* officers may be more lenient toward their help-deserving clients. As *Chengguan* officers generally have low legitimacy before the public, the crowd situational stress may increase their concerns of a potential conflicts with the public. As a result, the effect of client help-deservingness on the discretion officers might increase under the crowd situational pressure.

Therefore, we expect that,

> Hypothesis 3: The presence of bystanders will moderate the effect of client help-deservingness on the discretion of *Chengguan* Officers. In particular, the effect of client help-deservingness on discretionary decision of *Chengguan* officers (as expected in Hypothesis 1) will be stronger when there is crowd situational stress.

EXPERIMENT DESIGN

To test the above hypotheses, we conducted a scenario-based survey experiment using a 2×2 factorial and between-subjects experimental design. To understand *Chengguan* officers' working practices, we first conducted 15-day in-depth interviews with *Chengguan* officers and field observations of their law enforcement processes.[8] Based on the interviews and observations, we then designed vignettes featuring typical scenarios *Chengguan* officers are likely to encounter in their daily work. The vignettes presented scenarios in which *Chengguan* officers punished unlicensed street vendors, during which the officers needed to exercise discretion in determining the fine.

This scenario was selected for a number of reasons. First, regulating and punishing unlicensed business activities is a routine working practice of all Chinese front-line *Chengguan* officers.[9] Second, similar to other regulators, the formal rules that *Chengguan* officers are expected to enforce are vague compared to the reality they face on the street. For example, *Chengguan* officers often need to make discretionary decisions when determining fines, which provide an opportunity to study discretion. Third, street vendors comprise a diverse group, which includes both vulnerable individuals and ordinary citizens. Fourth, most of the encounters between *Chengguan* officers and street vendors occur in streets with high levels of human traffic, thus their interactions can easily attract the attention of bystanders. Finally, the regulatory law enforcement is assumed to take place during a "sensitive" period, namely a campaign for gaining accreditation as a National Civilized City[10], which requires the officers to help maintain a high standard of city appearance. Because street vendors operate in business occupied public spaces and affect city sanitation, their actions are at odds with the requirements (Rumerman 2004; Xue and Huang 2015; Hanser 2016).

The experimental treatments included unlicensed street vendors with different levels of help deservingness (high or low) and the presence or absence of crowd situational stress (yes or no) (see Table 1).

Cues on the help deservingness of unlicensed street vendors

Studies have used different cues to operationalize the help-deservingness of clients, such as gender difference (females as high deservingness clients and males as

TABLE 1
Experimental Design

		Help deservingness of unlicensed street vendors	
		Low	*High*
Crowd pressure	No	Vignette 1 (N = 119)	Vignette 2 (N = 103)
	Yes	Vignette 3 (N = 93)	Vignette 4 (N = 107)

low deserving) (Jilke and Tummers 2018).[11] Criminology and policing research also indicted that seniority is good predictor of noncoercive police decision (Smith and Visher 1981; Schafer et al. 2006; Sun, Payne, and Wu 2008). Based on our interviews and observations of the working practices of *Chengguan* officers, we followed Petersen et al. (2011) and used the age difference of the street vendors to operationalize the help-deservingness cue.[12] In the high help deservingness vignette, we described the unlicensed street vendor as an old man, while in the low help deservingness vignette, the street vendor was described as a young man.

Crowd situational stress cue

The two vignettes with situational crowd stress treatments included the following information: *many passersby are surrounding the vendor and begin to watch.* The other two vignettes had no crowd information.

Discretion

We only use the fine imposed on the unlicensed street vendor to measure the *Chengguan* officers' discretion, which is consistent with Scott's (1997) measurement of discretion in a financial assistance context. In practice, the fines *Chengguan* officers impose are not fixed, but can range from 20 to 200 Chinese *yuan*, according to the City Urban Management and Law Enforcement Bureau's regulations.

SUBJECTS

Gaining access to the Chinese bureaucracy and collecting data are notoriously difficult to achieve (Zang and Musheno 2017). We were given permission to collect data from City X's and City Y's Urban Management and Law Enforcement Bureau. City X and City Y, which are located in Province J in southern China, have more than 2000 and 500 *Chengguan* officers respectively. The data collection was conducted via a Chinese e-survey platform *Lediaocha*. The subjects (*Chengguan* officers) were invited via WeChat and QQ[13] to fill in the online survey. The platform randomly assigned each respondent one of the four vignettes (see Table 2). We adopted a top-down approach in the data collection process. After we gained approval for data collection from the bureau leaders of both cities, the leaders assigned an officer to help us post the survey links and survey instructions into their WeChat and QQ work groups of team leaders. Each team leader reposted the information to their WeChat and QQ work groups of *Chengguan* officers. Therefore, all the *Chengguan* officers could receive survey request information and interested officers clicked the link of the third-party e-survey platform to fill in the questionnaire. Given that the survey link is circulated by the official communication channels of *Chengguan* officers, this could increase the legitimacy of the experiment and seriousness of officers' response while it inevitably brought in some social desirability bias. However, the social desirability bias may be low because

participation is completely voluntary, and team leaders only encouraged officers to participate.

We have received 798 uncompleted responses and 510 completed responses in City X, and 408 uncompleted responses and 108 competed responses in City Y. We further excluded 113 and 38 responses by contracting officers without law enforcement status respectively in both cities. In total, we got 467 valid responses (with 397 from City X and 70 from City Y). Different from other studies, we only invited *Chengguan* officers with formal law enforcement status and excluded contracting officers who have no law enforcement status.[14] To exclude invalid questionnaires, we cleaned the data using the following steps. First, we excluded questionnaires completed within two minutes (N = 5), because it is impossible to answer all of the questions in such a short time. Second, we excluded questionnaires with the same IP address and device serial number (N = 34), which indicate that the same subject may have responded to the survey more than once. Third, we excluded questionnaires with extreme outliers using Tukey's (1977) test (N = 6) that 5 questionnaires with fines of 1,000 Chinese *yuan* which obviously exceed the regulated amount and 1 questionnaire with inaccurate age. Finally, 422 questionnaires were retained for the analysis.

A power analysis suggests that, assuming a medium effect size of 0.5, having 20 subjects in each treatment condition would result in a power of 0.99 in our 2×2 factorial design. We have at least 93 subjects in each of the four treatment conditions, therefore our experiments have sufficient power. To ensure the homogeneity of the different treatment groups, we checked the differences in all of the available background variables between the four groups. As shown in Table 3, the group

TABLE 2
The Description of the Four Vignettes

In the city's "national civilized city campaign," the urban environment and sanitation of the city are an important part of the forthcoming evaluation. Suppose you are in the following scenario, please make your judgment based on your own work experience.

Vignette 1: During your patrol, you find an unlicensed street vendor (a young man) is making and selling goods on the sidewalk. While his business is blocking the human flow, wasted water generated from the food-making process is polluting the street.

Vignette 2: During your patrol, you find an unlicensed street vendor (an old man) is making and selling goods on the sidewalk. While his business is blocking the human flow, wasted water generated from the food-making process is polluting the street.

Vignette 3: During your patrol, you find an unlicensed street vendor (a young man) is making and selling goods on the sidewalk. While his business is blocking the human flow, wasted water generated from the food-making process is polluting the street. Many passersby are surrounding the vendor and beginning to watch.

Vignette 4: During your patrol, you find an unlicensed street vendor (an old man) is making and selling goods on the sidewalk. While his business is blocking the human flow, wasted water generated from the food-making process is polluting the street. Many passersby are surrounding the vendor and beginning to watch.

TABLE 3
Balanced Randomization Checks and Descriptive Statistics of the Samples

	Low help deservingness/ without crowd pressure group	High help deservingness/ without crowd pressure group	Low help deservingness/ with crowd pressure group	High help deservingness/with crowd pressure group	Total	Groups difference test
Gender % Male	89.92	91.26	83.87	88.79	88.60	Chi-square = 2.995 $p = 0.392$
Age	33.76	33.96	32.70	33.43	33.49	ANOVA, F = 0.676 $p = 0.567$
Tenure	8.47	8.65	7.70	7.88	8.19	ANOVA, F = 0.505 $p = 0.679$
City % City X	84.87	85.44	82.80	81.31	83.60	Chi-square = 0.849 $p = 0.838$
N	119	103	93	107	422	

difference tests on gender, age, tenure and the cities are all insignificant (at the 0.10 level). Therefore, the randomization of the different treatment groups was effective.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The average fines varied between the four treatment groups, as supported by the ANOVA test ($F = 29.95$, $p < 0.01$). As shown in Figure 1, the average fine for all groups is 122.05 *yuan* (the black line), and the group averages range from 75.49 *yuan* to 165.38 *yuan*.

We conducted an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to examine the effects of clients' help deservingness and crowd situational stress on *Chengguan* officers' discretion (see Table 4). Using effect coding could get reasonable estimates of classical main effects and interaction effects, while dummy coding could only provide simple effects when interaction terms are included in the regression model.[15] To ensure "the regression coefficients in a regression model are equivalent to the
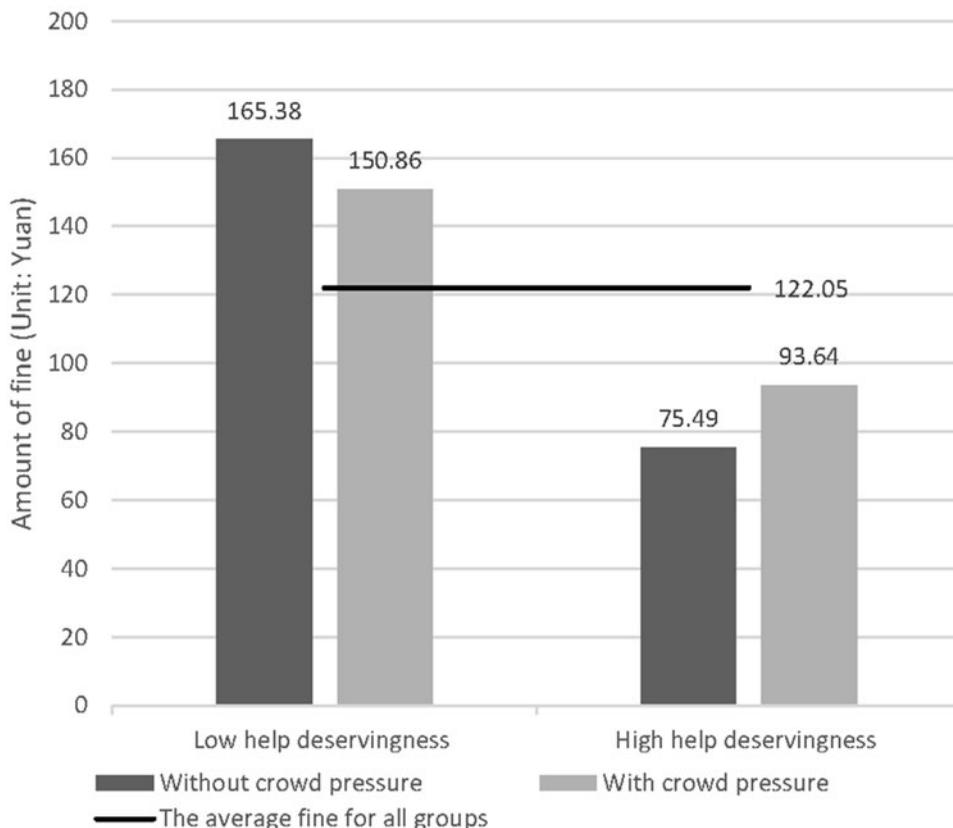
Figure 1. The average fines in the four treatment groups.

TABLE 4
Regression Results of the Main and Interaction Effects of the Treatments on Discretion

	Discretion (the amount of fine)		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
F1 Help deservingness	−74.403***	−73.554***	−73.729***
	(8.074)	(8.055)	(8.000)
F2 Situational stress	1.864	1.821	0.982
	(8.085)	(8.055)	(8.033)
Interaction (F1 * F2)		32.677**	32.012**
		(16.109)	(15.984)
Control variables			
Gender (Male = 1)			−4.999
			(12.601)
Age			0.326
			(1.200)
Tenure			0.166
			(1.230)
City (City X = 1)			−32.680***
			(11.449)
Constant	121.922***	121.342***	140.834***
	(4.032)	(4.027)	(36.195)
R-squared	0.169	0.177	0.199
N	422	422	422

Note: $*p < 0.1$; $**p < 0.05$; $***p < 0.01$.
Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors in parentheses.

classically defined main effects and interactions" (Kugler et al. 2012:12), we used effect coding to analyze the factorial experimental data, with coding factor 1 (help deservingness) "street vendors with high help deservingness" coded as 0.5 and "street vendors with low help deservingness "coded as −0.5; and factor 2 (situational stress) coded in a similar way with 0.5 for" situational stress" and −0.5 for "without situational stress."

As shown in model 1 of Table 4 on the main effect on *Chengguan* officers' discretion, the effect of clients' help deservingness on the fines imposed by the officers is negative and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), which is consistent with our expectation (Hypothesis 1). Regression results show that main effect of help deservingness is −73.55 (Model 2), suggesting that the average amount of fines *Chengguan* officers imposed on old vendors were 73.55 yuan lower than that on young vendors.

As shown in model 1 of Table 4, the main effect of crowd situational stress on *Chengguan* officers' discretion is negative, but not statistically significant ($p > 0.1$). This is contrary to our Hypothesis 2, which means that crowd pressure alone does not cause *Chengguan* officers to be more lenient.

The interaction term in model 3 of Table 4 indicates that the interaction effect on discretion is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). In other words, the effect of clients' help deservingness on *Chengguan* officers' discretion depends on the situational stress. However, the result of the particular interaction effect challenges our Hypothesis 3, which expects that the effect of client help deservingness on discretionary decision of *Chengguan* officers (as expected in Hypothesis 1) will be stronger when there is crowd situational stress. As shown in Figure 2, when *Chengguan* officers are confronted with unlicensed street vendors with low help deservingness, the average fine decreases from 165.38 *yuan* when there is no crowd to 150.86 *yuan* when there is a crowd watching. When *Chengguan* officers are confronted with help-deserving street vendors, the fine increases from the situation without crowd stress to the situation with crowd situational stress (from 75.49 *yuan* to 93.64 *yuan*).

To further examine how the presence of bystanders influences *Chengguan* officers, we tested whether officers feel more difficulties when bystanders are watching. Perceived difficulty is measured by asking *Chengguan* officers to rate "to what extent do you find it difficult to enforce the regulation in this situation" in each experimental scenario on a five-point Likert scale. Results, as shown in Table 5,
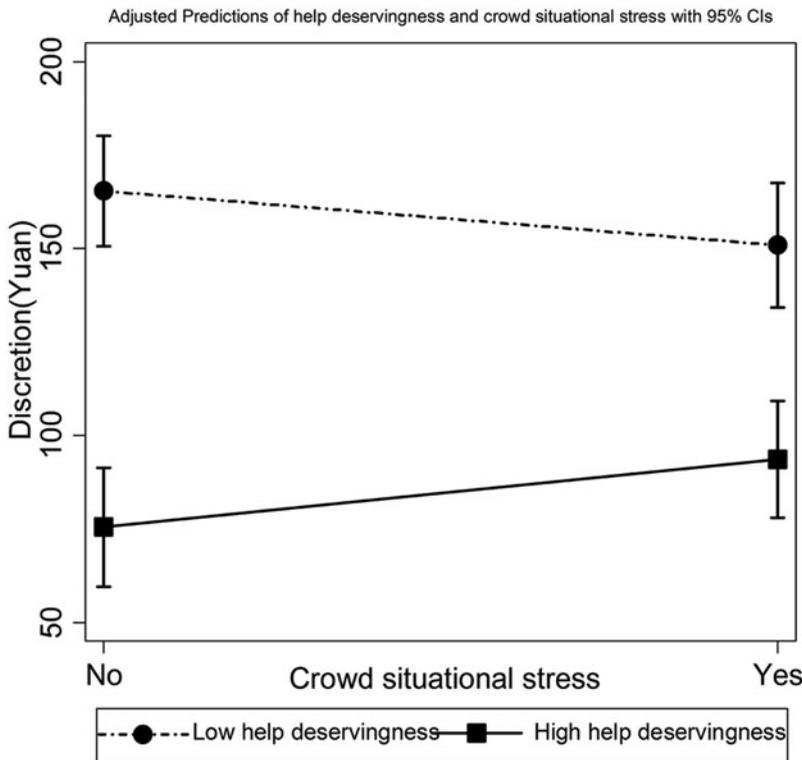

Adjusted Predictions of help deservingness and crowd situational stress with 95% CIs

Figure 2. Two-way interaction between situational stress and help deservingness.

TABLE 5
Regression Results of Help Deservingness and Situational Stress on The Perceived
Difficulty of *Chengguan* Officers' Fine Discretion

	Perceived difficulty[a]		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
F1 Help deservingness	0.187*	0.181*	0.187*
	(0.095)	(0.095)	(0.095)
F2 Situational stress	0.539***	0.540***	0.535***
	(0.095)	(0.095)	(0.096)
Interaction (F1 * F2)		−0.210	−0.202
		(0.190)	(0.190)
Control variables			
Gender (Male = 1)			−0.050
			(0.150)
Age			−0.018
			(0.014)
Tenure			0.022
			(0.015)
City (City X = 1)			−0.143
			(0.136)
Constant	3.754***	3.758***	4.341***
	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.430)
R-squared	0.083	0.086	0.094
N	422	422	422

Notes: [a]A single question, "to what extent do you find it difficult to enforce the regulation in this situation," is used to measure the perceived difficulty of law enforcement (1 = very easy, 5 = very difficult).
*$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$.
Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Standard errors in parentheses.

confirm the positive impact of crowd situational stress on the perceived difficulty of *Chengguan* officers' discretionary decision making ($p < 0.01$). Specifically, *Chengguan* officers felt that it was more difficult to enforce laws when there were bystanders watching.

DISCUSSION

This article examines the influence of situational stress, clients' help deservingness and their interaction on street-level bureaucrats' discretionary decision making. In this section, we discuss the relevance of our findings in relation to the existing research on street-level bureaucracy.

Our analytical results add further evidence showing that citizen-clients' help deservingness influences how street-level bureaucrats exercise discretion in regulatory contexts. Research conducted in service delivery contexts, such as Scott (1997) and Jilke and Tummers (2018), indicates that street-level bureaucrats prioritize and give more assistance to help deserving citizen-clients. Our experimental results in a regulatory context confirm these findings by showing that *Chengguan* officers impose smaller fines on aged street vendors than on young vendors.

We also find that street-level bureaucrats take situational factors (crowd pressure in this case) into account in their discretionary decision making. Different to the existing experimental research on how street-level bureaucrats deal with paper work, *Chengguan* officers mostly engage in face-to-face interactions with their clients on the street. Therefore, their discretion is likely to be shaped by the complex situational factors during their face-to-face interactions. Our experimental results suggest that crowd situational stress alone does not impact discretion, but it interacts with citizen-clients' help deservingness in influencing how street-level bureaucrats exercise their discretion. The experimental results further show that the difference in the amount of fines imposed to high and low help-deserving vendors became smaller when *Chengguan* officers face crowd situational stress. This suggests that the presence of bystanders constrains *Chengguan* officers' degree of discretion. The amount of fine actually moved toward the average level, with high help-deserving clients getting bigger tickets.

To reveal the mechanisms through which crowd situational stress affects *Chengguan* officers' discretion, we interviewed a sample of *Chengguan* officers, who provided varying explanations on this finding in relation to their law enforcement practices. The *Chengguan* officers explained that the crowds they encountered often hold different views on their law enforcement. Some people were sympathetic toward the vendors, especially when the vendors were vulnerable, and these people expected the officers to be more lenient. By contrast, other people cared about whether the laws and regulations were enforced equally for different vendors and would not be happy to see certain vendors receiving favorable treatment. Under this circumstance, the *Chengguan* officers stated that an appropriate strategy was to enforce the laws and regulations faithfully and avoid being perceived as biased. Therefore, *Chengguan* officers tend to be more cautious when facing a crowd. As an officer said in an interview,

> "Sometimes we do not pay too much attention to procedures, but when there are people watching, we must be cautious and faithfully enforcing laws based on regulations." (Interview #2018042501)

This means that the crowd appears to play a supervisory role in reducing the room for *Chengguan* officers to exercise their discretion. Even if they want to be lenient toward help-deserving vendors, they have to consider the potential of the erosion of the perceived legitimacy of their agencies and the implications to their future law enforcement.

Another mechanism is that *Chengguan* officers care more about their perceived authority when facing a crowd because they do not want to be perceived as weak or losing face when bystanders are watching, especially in the face of rude or angry vendors. As one interviewee said,

> "The presence of bystanders is tricky, Chengguan officers do not want to lose face when people are watching." (Interview # 2018062501)

Moreover, the situation can easily escalate after some exchanges of words. If there are no bystanders, officers do not need to worry about losing face in front of people. As another *Chengguan* officer stated in an interview,

> "Under this circumstance, we also need to make bystanders feel reverence. Otherwise, we will have no future law enforcement authority." (Interview # 2018072502)

Regression analysis shows that the presence of bystanders produces more pressure on *Chengguan* officers. Our interviews with *Chengguan* officers further indicated the officers had more specific concerns about their encounters with crowds, such as being misinterpreted by people in the crowd. One officer vividly described a typical scenario in their law enforcement process,

> "When bystanders watch, they usually take photos and upload them to different social media platforms. Most netizens have no ideas of what happened in the field, but only make their judgment based on the available photos, which usually generate criticisms toward Chengguan officers. (At this moment) we would definitely be very cautious." (Interview #2018042502)

CONCLUSION

The research on street-level bureaucrats' discretion has mostly focused on the characteristics of either the bureaucrats or the clients. In this article, we go one-step further and quantitatively show that bureaucrats' discretion is affected not only by the clients' characteristics, such as help deservingness, but also by situational factors such as the presence of a crowd of bystanders. We thus add more evidence to support the recent research on how social interactions and situations affect the behavior of street-level bureaucrats (Bruhn and Ekström 2017; Raaphorst and Loyens 2018). We believe this new line of research complements the existing research and presents a more comprehensive view of the factors that influence the discretion of street-level bureaucrats.

The experimental findings of this article deepen our understanding of the psychological processes of street-level bureaucrats' discretionary decision making in

real-world situations. As discussed above, there are few experimental studies in the street-level bureaucracy literature. We moved one-step further toward opening the black box of the psychological processes of interpreting and implementing regulatory rules by street-level bureaucrats. We found that bureaucrats pick up cues like clients' help deservingness in discretionary decision making and that crowd pressure alone does not produce an effect, but it weaken the effect of client's help deservingness towards discretionary decision making of street-level bureaucrats.

However, this article has some limitations. First, the experimental design might not capture all of the real-world complexities that *Chengguan* officers encounter because it is based on a highly simplified situation. Second, this article focuses on a particular type of street-level bureaucrat, namely *Chengguan* officers in mainland China, which may limit the generalizability of the empirical findings to other cultural and organizational contexts. Third, as demonstrated in the research context section, *Chengguan* officers are a group of street-level bureaucrats with relatively low legitimacy among the public. The crowd situational pressure generated interaction effects might only apply to street-level bureaucrats with low legitimacy.

A future research agenda is to classify various situations that street-level bureaucrats face in their daily operations. Although a number of qualitative studies have analyzed the behaviors of street-level bureaucrats in different stressful situations (e.g., Henderson 2011; Henderson and Pandey 2013; Raaphorst and Loyens 2018), quantitative studies on the effects of situational factors are still lacking. Furthermore, the empirical literature is mostly based on single types of street-level bureaucrats, such as teachers, social workers or police officers (Portillo and Rudes 2014), and whether the effects of the observed factors hold across different types of street-level bureaucrats remains to be investigated. Thus, more comparative studies are needed.

Our research findings contribute to a deeper understanding of street-level bureaucrats' behaviors, which carries useful practical implications:

First, street-level bureaucrats should realize that they have "natural" tendencies toward treating clients with different levels of help deservingness differently in the same context. This may be part of their unconscious thought processes, which helps bureaucrats to be more responsive to citizens' needs and contributes to a better relationship between citizens and governments. However, street-level bureaucrats should also balance competing values such as treating citizens equally versus responding to citizens' needs.

Second, street-level bureaucrats like *Chengguan* officers who often face crowd pressure when enforcing the regulation require additional training on handling the pressure more effectively. Street-level bureaucrats should learn to deescalate the situation if crowd pressure is high, and to make sure that laws and regulations rather than crowd pressure will drive their discretionary decision making.

Third, although crowd pressure is perceived as a negative element for most street-level bureaucrats, it can reduce the deviations in their discretion. In contrast to conventional thinking of creating rules or red tapes in order to prevent power abuse or rule misuse in their discretions, making frontline interactions with clients

more visible to bystanders can "nudge" the discretionary decision making of street-level bureaucrats.

NOTES

1. Some research has examined professionals' decision making based on vignette based experiments, such as Phillips' (2009) study on police officers' decision at traffic stops. However, most of these studies do not use dialogues based on street-level bureaucracy theory.
2. In China, street-level bureaucrats include but are not limited to police officers, welfare workers, emergency call operators and environmental inspectors.
3. *Chengguan* officers are not granted the right to use force or conduct arrests.
4. Urban trade and markets were very prevalent in China before the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. In the pre-reform era (1949–1977), the private economy, such as street vending, was considered illegal by the Socialist Transformation Movement. After the reform in 1979, the government began to accept the private economy as part of economic development. With the rapid development of urban markets in the 1990s, the emergence of urban problems in public space, such as pollution and unlicensed street vendors, demanded governmental regulation. For details, see Wang (2003), Flock and Breitung (2016), Hanser (2016) and Xu and Jiang (2018).
5. In some serious reported cases, *Chengguan* officers and street vendors became victims of these conflicts.
6. The situations improved after *Chengguan* officers were widely criticized by the mainstream media and the public. According to a public opinion poll in Guangzhou city in 2013, over half of the respondents considered the *Chengguan*'s law enforcement had improved (Guangzhou Public Opinion Research Center 2013).
7. Criminology researchers define situational factors in a broader sense, which cover not only visibility to bystanders, but also citizen characteristics and attitude, victims-suspect relationship, victim preference, and evidence strength. For details, see Brooks (2015).
8. The aim of the field observation and interview is to understand *Chengguan* officers' daily law enforcement work practices. From July 3, 2017 to July 19, 2017, the authors interviewed 16 managers and officers in the *Chengguan* Bureau of City Y, of which 9 interviewees are middle managers and 7 are *Chengguan* officers. In the interview processes, we did not intentionally ask *Chengguan* officers specific questions relevant to the two cues. Therefore, the demand effects are very limited if the seven officers responded to our survey experiments later. None managers were requested to fill in our questionnaire in the later stage.

   In the questionnaire data analysis stage, we conducted a second round of

interview with 10 *Chengguan* officers to confirm the findings that are at odds with our conventional thinking and explore the mechanism behind it.

9. According to interview #2018041801, even *Chengguan* officers in the region of Tiananmen Square have to deal with street vendors.
10. The accreditation process usually lasts three years, including six major evaluation components, oral presentation, application materials evaluation, questionnaire survey, online survey, field investigation and observations. In the field investigation processes, urban environment sanitation that *Chengguan* bureau is in charge of is an important component.
11. Jilke and Tummers (2018) provided three deservingness cues, including earned deservingness, needed deservingness, and resource deservingness. We only measure one of them, needed deservingness.
12. In their study of public attitudes to welfare, Petersen et al. (2011) operationalize a deservingness cue based on age difference (aged man and young man).
13. WeChat and QQ are two of the most popular social media platforms in China.
14. In their working practices, *Chengguan* officers with law enforcement status are usually assisted by contracting officers without law enforcement status.
15. For details, see UCLA: Statistical Consulting Group. "FAQ: What is effect coding?". https://stats.idre.ucla.edu/other/mult-pkg/faq/general/faqwhat-is-effect-coding/ (accessed July 8, 2019)

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