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## 'Necessity Knows no Law' What is the Mediating Role of Psychological Safety Between Supportive Leadership Behavior and Prosocial Rule Breaking?

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# ‘Necessity Knows no Law’

*What is the Mediating Role of Psychological Safety Between Supportive Leadership Behavior and Prosocial Rule Breaking?*

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**Universiteit  
Leiden**  
The Netherlands

## **Preface**

Dear Reader,

After four months of working on my thesis, I finally reached the end of my master's degree. It has been a true pleasure to study leadership and management in the public sector at Leiden University, which gave me the leading scientific knowledge of this realm. I am convinced that this will be a great contribution to my career. As such, I have highly enjoyed applying the knowledge into my thesis. Especially since I applied quantitative measures and statistics as well, which I had never done before. This experience has pushed my view on leadership up to a higher level, and it is a honor to be equipped with this knowledge. I want to thank my supervisor, dr. J. van der Voet, for his support, which has been essential. I also want to thank my fellow students, Chanda, Daniëlle, Erdem, Julia and Pushpa for their support, and I wish you all the best for your (future) careers.

Kind regards,

Maurik Grootes

## **Abstract**

*Prosocial rule breaking* is a relatively new topic in public administration. Therefore, this research contributes to the literature by studying it in the Dutch social welfare domain. In the scientific realm of leadership and management, the question was if it could be influenced by *supportive leadership behavior*, and whether *psychological safety* functions as a mediator variable. Although no significant direct relation appears, important indirect associations have been found: between *supportive leadership behavior* and *psychological safety*; and between *psychological safety* and *prosocial rule breaking*. *Prosocial rule breaking* appears to be an inherent part of social welfare work, amidst a high bureaucracy, prosocial motivation and unpredictable and discretionary situations. As such, believed is that it is indifferent toward *supportive leadership behavior*. However, it is expected that the variables relate stronger in contexts where *prosocial rule breaking* is less obvious, and therefore more susceptible to *supportive leadership behavior*.

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## **1. Introduction**

In this chapter *prosocial rule breaking* is introduced together with the variables it will be researched with: *supportive leadership behavior* and *psychological safety*. This will make clear how these variables relate to each other and why they are important to be studied together. Consequently, the research question is presented, which will be followed by the theoretical and societal relevance. Since *prosocial rule breaking* is a relatively new topic in the literature of public administration, it will start with an example.

### **1.1. Example of Prosocial Rule Breaking**

Social welfare workers are required to safeguard a formal distance between them and their clients. As such, they are not allowed to travel alone with a client in a car for example. However, imagine that a client is in a youth detention center and needs to pick up her passport at the municipality. On top of everything she is pregnant. She could go in a controlled collective bus to the municipality, however, would it not be kind to take her in a private car for her comfort? If a welfare worker decides to do so, then a rule would be broken. However, it would be for a social purpose and therefore considered as *prosocial rule breaking*.

### **1.2. Prosocial Rule Breaking**

Traditionally, rules have been studied well in the public sector (e.g. Riccucci & Saidel, 1997). A relatively new concept in this context, however, entails the opposite and is known by the name of *prosocial rule breaking* (e.g. Morrison, 2006; John & Shafi, 2020). *Prosocial rule breaking* still has an understudied position in the literature of public administration. The concept considers deviance in order to better assist clients, and forms a risk rather than a gain for workers engaging in it (e.g. van der Voet, Steijn, and Kuipers, 2017). As such, social welfare workers may face a threshold when engaging in *prosocial rule breaking* (Warren, 2003). The idea is that *supportive leadership behavior* is able to significantly lower this threshold, since it is found to help workers deal with challenges and to create trust among them (Yukl, 2012).

### **1.3. Supportive Leadership Behavior**

According to Yukl (2012) *supportive leadership behavior* is a subtype of relations-oriented leadership together with developing, recognizing and empowering leadership behaviors. Generally speaking, relations-oriented leaders aim to improve employee performance and to enhance their adherence to the organization (Yukl, 2012). Supportive leaders, more specifically, appreciate the input of employees, are concerned about their well-being (Yukl et al., 2002; Yukl, 2012) and also consider them individually (as cited in Yukl et al., 2002). Moreover, they aim to increase trust among employees (Yukl, 2012). As such, *supportive leadership behavior* is expected to positively influence *prosocial rule breaking* among social

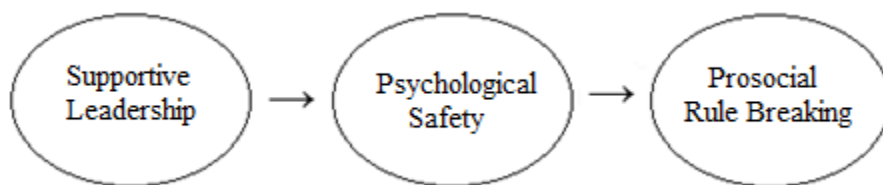
welfare workers, through its association with motivation and harmony. This relation could possibly be mediated by the variable of *psychological safety*, which is positively associated to supportive leadership (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990).

#### 1.4. Psychological Safety

Workers are found to benefit from *psychological safety*, especially in the light of an organizational trend to demand for more employee contribution (Newman et al., 2017). This means that a psychologically safe work environment is one in which workers feel secure to leave their ‘comfort zone’ and to be more creative and helpful in the team (Edmondson, 1999). Because of the harmonious tendencies of *supportive leadership behavior*, it is positively associated to *psychological safety* (Yukl, 2012; Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990) and therefore it is expected to function as a mediator variable between *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking*.

#### 1.5. Research Question

Due to the underrepresentation of *prosocial rule breaking* in the field of public administration, this research will contribute to the literature by analyzing the concept in the Dutch social welfare context, in the scientific realm of public management and leadership. The threshold that appears when workers aim to engage in *prosocial rule breaking* (Warren, 2003) can possibly be lowered by *supportive leadership behavior* through its harmonious encouragement (Yukl, 2012). Possibly, this relation is influenced by *psychological safety*, which is included as a mediator variable. The research question is: *what is the mediating role of psychological safety between supportive leadership behavior and prosocial rule breaking?*



**FIGURE 1. The research model.**

## 1.6. Theoretical Relevance

The central theoretical relevance of this research entails that *prosocial rule breaking* is still an understudied subject in public administration literature. Since it is an aspect that is meant to enhance service to clients, it is salient to be understood better in the public sector. After all, the effective assistance to clients is crucial in this context, especially in the usual absence of commercial incentives for workers.

In their conceptualization of *prosocial rule breaking*, Vardaman et al. (2014) suggest future research to study the concept on a person-supervisor framework, since they find that both may be related. That is to say, *prosocial rule breaking* may be subject to the way that a supervisor goes along with its workers. This research relates to this suggestion, by studying how *supportive leadership behavior* relates to *prosocial rule breaking* among workers. After all, supportive leaders are known for establishing a positive relation with their employees (Yukl, 2012) which could possibly influence the way that workers deal with rules. At the same time, Vardaman et al. (2014) state that research on the antecedents of *prosocial rule breaking* has been limited. Therefore, this research contributes to the literature by studying if *supportive leadership behavior* is a possible antecedent of *prosocial rule breaking*. This may give insights for leadership strategy.

Furthermore, Newman et al. (2017) state that one of the features related to *psychological safety* that can be studied better is employee discretion. Given the fact that *prosocial rule breaking* is done by employees without official authorization, it entails a form of discretion, and therefore relates to this scientific suggestion; since this research also studies *psychological safety* in relation to *prosocial rule breaking*. Besides, social welfare workers have been found to have a considerable amount of discretion (e.g. Evans, 2013). The findings may give insights to leaders and managers in their strategy.

## 1.7. Societal Relevance

With regard to the societal contribution, *prosocial rule breaking* may be a convenient asset of a worker, especially in the public sector because of its natural dependence on societal factors: changes in organization are common and may affect the routine of employees (Rainey, 2014). In addition, public service workers are found to be guided by prosocial motivation (Perry et al., 2010) and this research may reveal how that relates to *prosocial rule breaking*. Moreover, the scientific knowledge about the application of public strategic management is still limited (Höglund et al., 2018; Mazouz et al., 2016) and the environment of public organizations appears to be increasingly complicated (Christensen and Læg Reid, 2011; Poister, 2010). This means that public workers may need to be creative problem solvers who have to engage in *prosocial rule breaking* from time to time. This could be an interesting topic to be taken into account by leaders and managers.

Especially in the context of social welfare, *prosocial rule breaking* appears interesting to study. This is, for example, because Morrison (2006) finds that risk propensity and job autonomy are potential predictors



of *prosocial rule breaking*. Social welfare workers generally deal with pressuring and unpredictable problems of the social world (e.g. Smith & Donovan, 2003) which means that a degree of risk propensity appears to be present. Moreover, social welfare workers tend to have a considerable amount of autonomy (e.g. Evans, 2013). As such, *prosocial rule breaking* appears to be an effective topic to study in the context of social welfare that may give a valuable contribution to the literature of public administration. Because it reveals under what circumstances public workers (do not) engage in *prosocial rule breaking*.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In the following section, theory and concepts of the variables are presented in the light of the social welfare domain. Consequently, the causal mechanisms of the variables are presented, which will explain how they relate to each other. This will lead to the hypotheses generation.

### 2.1. Prosocial Rule Breaking

Contrary to rule breaking, rules itself have been studied substantially in public administration, including red tape (e.g. Giauque et al., 2012; Kaufmann & Feeney, 2014; Kaufmann et al., 2018) and bureaucracy (e.g. Gualmini, 2008; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Riccucci & Saidel, 1997). Authors have recognized positive ways of deviance (e.g. Galperin, 2003; Warren, 2003). Traditionally, however, literature has deemed this behavior as inappropriate (e.g. Raelin, 1984; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Vardi & Weiner, 1996). Whether positive or negative, deviance has been found to require a withdrawal from social norms (Warren, 2003).

An influential study by Morrison (2006) led to a breakthrough in the conceptualization of *prosocial rule breaking* because of the emphasis on that it entails intentional rule breaking with good aims for the organization. Risk propensity, job autonomy and perceived colleague *prosocial rule breaking* are found to increase the chance of *prosocial rule breaking* (Morrison, 2006). Dahling et al. (2012) find that *prosocial rule breaking* is linked to conscientiousness as well.

As street level bureaucrats, social welfare workers are found to make use of discretion in their stressful work environment through coping (Tummers et al., 2015; Tummers, 2016; Smith and Donovan, 2003). The apparent pressured work environment may entail that a degree of risk propensity (Morrison, 2006) is available. Moreover, social workers tend to cooperate with various actors, and offer treatments at households (e.g. Jeugdzorg Nederland, n.d.; Jeugdzorg Werkt, n.d.) which may mean that a degree of job autonomy (Morrison, 2006) is present as well. Additionally, the highly bureaucratic nature of public organizations (e.g. Gualmini, 2008) may urge *prosocial rule breaking* under pressuring circumstances. Evans (2013) finds that high public bureaucracy is not an impediment for workers of child welfare organizations to have discretion. In addition, it is found that child welfare workers are prosocially driven (Steijn & van der Voet, 2017; van der Voet et al., 2017; Pösö & Forsman, 2013; Bjerregaard et al., 2015). Which may relate to conscientiousness (Dahling et al., 2012).

Vardaman et al. (2014) state that for future research, *prosocial rule breaking* would be interesting to study on a person-supervisor framework. This research contributes to this calling since it investigates whether *supportive leadership behavior* affects *prosocial rule breaking* among employees. Which also means that it will study a possible antecedent of *prosocial rule breaking*, which appears to have been studied limitedly (Vardaman et al., 2014).

The definition of *prosocial rule breaking* by Morrison (2006) is mainly suitable for the private sector, since it focuses on increasing organizational success. In the public sector, client well-being is the priority. Moreover, social welfare organizations are not guided by commercial motivation. Therefore, this research uses a modified definition of *prosocial rule breaking*, but based on the definition of Morrison: “any instance where an employee intentionally violates a formal organizational policy, regulation or prohibition with the primary intention of” (Morrison, 2006, p.6) assisting clients.

## **2.2. Supportive Leadership Behavior**

A broad array of research has conceptualized leadership in many ways, with often overlapping objectives. The definitions usually share the aim of enhancing worker performance, depending on the context as well. Well-known leadership concepts include: task- and people-oriented; transformational; charismatic; shared; and supportive leadership behavior.

Task- and people-oriented leadership are basic concepts. According to Grit (2015) they can be detrimental in excessive amount. Being overly task oriented entails too much pressure, while being overly people oriented leads to limited effectiveness (Grit, 2015). Other concepts are more ambitious in their aims, as is the case for transformational leadership. This style aims to inspire followers toward organizational objectives, beyond personal interests (e.g. Bellé, 2013; Kearney & Gebert, 2009). Another example is charismatic leadership, which can motivate workers toward a mission during difficult times, such as in moments of crisis (e.g. Antonakis et al., 2014; Shamir & Howell, 1999). Shared leadership, on the other hand, has less emphasis on an individual leader by granting followers more voice (e.g. Carson et al., 2007; Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017).

In order to give an overview of what is known about leadership, Yukl (2012) presents 15 leadership behaviors, distributed among the main concepts of: task-oriented, relations-oriented, change-oriented and external leadership (Yukl, 2012). The subcategory of *supportive leadership behavior* falls under the category of relations-oriented leadership (Yukl, 2012). In general, relations-oriented leadership behavior is meant to improve employee effectiveness and to strengthen their dedication to the organization (Yukl, 2012). Supportive leaders, specifically, consider their employees, help them in moments of stress, and aim to establish trust in the team (Yukl, 2012). They consider employees personally as well (as cited in Yukl et al., 2002). A meta-analysis by Martin et al. (2016) finds that a positive leader-member relationship increases job performance.

Social welfare workers are known to work under pressure because of high workloads (Tummers et al., 2015), long waiting lists (van Gaalen, 2021; van Essen, 2021; Inspectie Justitie en Veiligheid, 2020) and because they tend to deal with problematic cases (Jeugdzorg Nederland, n.d.). Therefore, *supportive leadership behavior* may form an important asset in this context through its employee considering aspects

(Yukl, 2012; Yukl et al., 2002). Based on the extensive literature review of *supportive leadership behavior* by Yukl (2012) and the meta-analysis of leader-member exchange by Martin et al. (2016), this research defines *supportive leadership behavior* as: encouraging leadership that aims to strengthen the self-esteem of employees to increase performance (Yukl, 2012; Martin et al., 2016).

### **2.3. Psychological Safety**

According to Kahn (1990) *psychological safety* entails the ease of social engagement without fearing negative outcomes. According to Edmondson (1999) *psychological safety* relates to a work environment in which people feel safe to be who they are. *Psychological safety* is associated with the input of employees that is increasingly required by organizations (Newman et al., 2017; Lance Frazier et al., 2017). Through *psychological safety*, workers can feel at ease with this requirement (Edmondson, 1999; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2011). As such, it invites workers to take risks, to give each other constructive feedback and to cooperate better (Edmondson, 1999).

The external context of public organizations is specifically found to be volatile because of its dependency on political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal circumstances (Johnson et al., 2008; Rainey, 2014). As a result, work routines are contingent (Rainey, 2014) which probably increases the need of *psychological safety* for workers to adapt. Moreover, due to pressuring circumstances in the social welfare context (Tummers et al., 2015) workers may be required to take quick decisions and to take risks. In other words, workers could benefit from *psychological safety* in which risk taking is a basic element (Edmondson, 1999).

Newman et al. (2017) propose employee discretion to be studied in the light of *psychological safety*. This suggests that *prosocial rule breaking* applies to this proposal since it entails a form of discretion. Moreover, social welfare workers are found to have a significant amount of discretion (e.g. Tummers et al., 2015). This research uses the definition of Edmondson for *psychological safety*: “A shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking” (Edmondson, 1999, p.354).

## 2.4. Hypotheses Generation

*Prosocial rule breaking* may entail a challenge for workers, since it may appear intimidating to break a rule. Nonetheless, supportive leaders encourage their workers to face challenges (Yukl, 2012). Therefore, *supportive leadership behavior* may increase confidence among workers through harmonious tendencies (Yukl, 2012; Martin et al., 2016). Such a work environment probably entails less stress. The reduction of this negative characteristic will probably make workers less worried when engaging in *prosocial rule breaking*.

Supportive leaders set the example because their promotion of positive values is focused on the group. At the same time, they recognize unique characteristics of their employees since they consider them personally as well (as cited in Yukl et al., 2002) which may increase their self-esteem. Less stress, collective harmony, and increased self-esteem will probably make workers feel more at ease, this can easily spill over into *prosocial rule breaking*.

In other words, the threshold to engage in *prosocial rule breaking* will be lowered because of a harmonious and encouraging work environment that increases confidence. Confidence in a team may also entail that workers become less concerned about intracolleague judgement, should they engage in *prosocial rule breaking*. This may result in the normalization of it.

Moreover, *supportive leadership behavior* aims to increase the adherence of workers to the organization (Yukl, 2012). Given the fact that public organizations tend to be highly bureaucratic (e.g. Jung et al., 2020) certain procedures may form a threshold to adhere to the mission in practice (Steijn & van der Voet, 2017). Supported and confident workers will then probably be more feasible to engage in *prosocial rule breaking*. This reasoning leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: supportive leadership behavior positively influences prosocial rule breaking.

Both Edmondson (1999) and Kahn (1990) agree that a supportive style of leadership/management improves the *psychological safety* of followers. Kahn links *psychological safety* to *meaningfulness* and *safety*. Yukl (2012) explains that *supportive leadership behavior* is meant to express belief that members are able to face a challenge, which is linked to *meaningfulness* because it believes in the capacity of workers. Hence, workers will probably feel more valued. Once encouraged to work under difficult circumstances, workers will possibly feel more important and their level of *psychological safety* may increase.

*Safety* is related to *supportive leadership behavior* since Yukl (2012) explains that supportive leaders show understanding for the feelings of employees. Similarly, Edmondson (1999) states that supportive leadership results in a safe work environment for members. Moreover, Yukl (2012) links *supportive leadership behavior* to reciprocal trust among employees, which relates to *psychological safety* since it aims

for interpersonal confidence (Edmondson, 1999). Once employees find that their feelings matter, they will probably feel more secure to express them, and less afraid to lose face. Also, since a supportive leader aims to create reciprocal trust in the team, workers will possibly feel more psychologically safe to be who they are without being afraid for humiliation (Edmondson, 1999).

Morrison (2006) explains that the psychological basis for *prosocial rule breaking* is guided by a will to take initiative, which is similar to *psychological safety* since it is characterized by a conformity to take risks. Initiative and risk are both aspects that require workers to leave their comfort zone: a worker who takes initiative is usually a pioneer to make a decision; and risk taking entails trying out something unusual. As such, *psychological safety* and *prosocial rule breaking* probably relate to each other.

Moreover, *psychological safety* and *prosocial rule breaking* are both grounded on a sense of social responsibility (Morrison, 2006; Edmondson, 1999). This means that while both aspects entail risk taking, these are not uncalculated risks. In other words, the risks that workers dare to take are grounded on social responsibility. Moreover, *prosocial rule breaking* entails responsibility because after all, its implication is social.

This suggests that workers who experience *psychological safety* have a head start for *prosocial rule breaking* in comparison to workers who do not. In such a way, *psychological safety* probably is a stepping stone for *prosocial rule breaking*, especially in the light of *supportive leadership behavior*. This reasoning leads to the second hypothesis:

H2: supportive leadership behavior positively influences prosocial rule breaking through the mediating role of psychological safety.

### 3. Methodology

The following section presents the research design. It will start by explaining the type of research and will then go into detail about the data: research context, data collection method, and demographic characteristics. Consequently, the operationalization and analysis strategy are presented. This will be followed by the explanation of validity and reliability.

#### 3.1. Type of Research

This is a quantitative research that is explanatory, because it aims to explain the relation between *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking*. It is a large-n design since it consists of 844 participants in total. There are no normative implications which means that it is positive. Additionally, it has the component of mediation analysis, since *psychological safety* functions as a mediator variable between *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking* in the second hypothesis. Literature points out that there may be a positive relation between these variables in the public context of social welfare: the harmonious character of *supportive leadership behavior* may relate to *prosocial rule breaking*, possibly through the mediating confidence of *psychological safety*.

#### 3.2. Research Context

The context of the research is the Dutch social welfare domain. According to Stimulansz (n.d.) the social welfare domain entails all the initiatives that municipalities undertake for their citizens regarding: work, participation, self-reliance, healthcare and youth. Organizations that fall under this policy domain include: Jeugdzorg Nederland (n.d.) [youth care]; Parnassia (n.d.) [mental care]; Enver (n.d.) [care for children, youth and families]; CVD (n.d.) [psychosocial care]; Youz (n.d.) [care for youth and families]; Antes (n.d.) [care for psychiatry and addiction]; Pameijer (n.d.) [care for people with psychosocial, psychiatric and intellectual disabilities]; SOL (n.d.) [general social care]; MEE (n.d.) [network assistance]; Middin (n.d.) [social assistance for children, youth, adults and seniors]; Futuro (n.d.) [youth assistance]; DOCK (n.d.) [social assistance]; Firmitas (n.d.) [youth assistance]; ASVZ (n.d.) [care for people with intellectual disabilities]; and WMO Radar (n.d.) [social assistance]. While the social welfare domain used to be organized by the Dutch government, it became decentralized in 2015, and today it falls under the responsibility of the municipalities (Rijksoverheid, n.d.).

The decentralization paved the way for municipalities to organize and adapt the social welfare to local circumstances. As such, municipalities now have the option to focus on neighborhoods or on the policy domain in general. Other possibilities include: separate teams for the youth and cooperation among teams within and outside the municipality (van Zijl et al., 2021).

A research project by Leiden University and Erasmus University of Rotterdam, called *Teamwerk in de*

*Wijk* (Teamwork in the Neighborhood) studies the social welfare domain on a yearly basis since its decentralization in 2015 and aims to reveal its functioning and effectiveness. In order to analyze the functioning of the teams, data has been collected regarding the following aspects: teamwork, leadership, individual work experience, and innovation and performance (van Zijl et al., 2021).

### **3.3. Data Collection Method**

The collected data by van Zijl et al. (2021) includes information about *supportive leadership behavior*, *prosocial rule breaking* and *psychological safety* in accordance with the theory that is used in this research. Hence, it provides valuable insights which is the reason why it has been used.

The data has been obtained through a random sample, which gives a representative overview of the policy domain. Random sampling entails that all elements of a population, in this case the social welfare domain, have an equal chance of being selected for the sample and thus constitute a representation of the related context (Neuman, 2014).

The sample consists of social welfare workers. From October to December of 2020, executive teams of five social welfare organizations in five municipalities of the Netherlands have participated in the research. The participants are both professionals and leaders of the teams. A total of 87 teams have participated in the research. In order to improve assurance that the accumulated data is representative, only teams have been selected for the analysis from which at least 30 percent of the professionals have participated in the survey. This happened to be the case for 70 teams (80,5 percent). In addition, leaders of 69 teams (79,3 percent) have filled in the survey about their team. The sample consists of 844 public servants in total (van Zijl et al., 2021).

In general, the survey is according to the 5-point Likert-type scale (Likert, 1932) with the following answer possibilities: 1 (totally disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither disagree nor agree), 4 (agree) and 5 (totally agree). The first ten questions of the survey are the following ones: gender, age, educational level, function in the team, experience in the policy domain, related parent organization (if applicable), number of teams active in (if applicable), team in which most of the hours are spend, related experience and working hours per week (if applicable). In the last part of the survey workers were able to give additional written comments (van Zijl et al., 2021).

### **3.4. Demographic Characteristics of Data**

Of the 844 participants, 748 are female, 91 are male and five report being different or prefer to keep this information private. The average reported age of the workers is 41,77 years, the youngest is 20 years and the oldest is 66 years (the age of ten participants does not appear [correctly]). With regard to the highest achieved educational level, most of the participants (660) have obtained a bachelor's degree at a University



of Applied Sciences (*Hoger beroepsonderwijs; HBO*); 163 participants have obtained a degree at a University (*Universitair onderwijs; WO*); 15 participants have obtained a degree in secondary vocational education (*Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs; MBO*); three participants have finished high school (*voortgezet algemeen onderwijs*); two participants have obtained a PhD (*Doctor in de wetenschap*) and one participant has obtained a degree from an elementary school or in lower secondary education (*Basisschool / Lager voortgezet onderwijs*). The participants have an average work experience of 13,9 years, the highest reported experience is 48 years, and the lowest is zero. Moreover, an average workweek of 29,3 hours is reported, three hours per week being the lowest and 38 hours per week being the highest (although 6 participants did not report this) (van Zijl et al., 2021).

Interesting findings entail that the sample consists mainly of female workers: 88,6% in total. Moreover, workers are relatively high educated: most of them (78,2%) have a bachelor's degree from a University of Applied Sciences, and many (19,5%) have a University degree. Only 19 participants (2,3%) do not have a degree from a University (of Applied Sciences). Also, workers tend to have many years of experience (13,9 years on average) (van Zijl et al., 2021). The relatively high level of: education and experience indicate that the workers are motivated professionals

### **3.5. Operationalization**

A study by Jacobsen and Andersen (2015) on intended and perceived leadership strategies found that leaders usually overestimate their leadership strategy. Based on their finding that leadership performance is only related to the pertinent perception of employees (Jacobsen and Andersen, 2015), this research studies *supportive leadership behavior* in accordance to the perception of workers.

*Prosocial rule breaking* is measured according to three questions of the survey, based on the questionnaire of Dahling et al. (2012). These are the following: "I break rules that stand in the way of good customer service"; "I bend organizational rules so that I can best assist customers" and "I give good service to clients or customers by ignoring organizational policies that interfere with my job" (Dahling et al., 2012, p.25) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .69$ ). The higher the score that is given for these questions, the more it indicates *prosocial rule breaking*.

*Supportive leadership behavior* is measured according to three questions of the survey, based on the questionnaire of Yukl (2012). These are the following: "shows concern for the needs of individual members"; "shows concern for the feelings of individual members" and "provides support and encouragement when there is a difficult or stressful task" (Yukl, 2012, p.84) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ). The higher the score that is given for these questions, the more it indicates *supportive leadership behavior*.

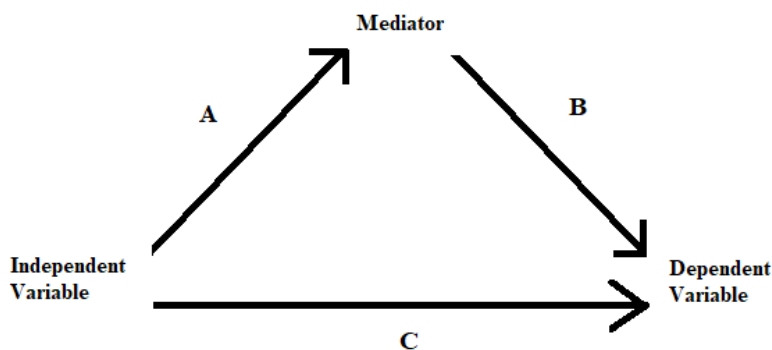
*Psychological safety* is measured according to four questions of the survey, based on the questionnaire of Edmondson (1999). These are the following: 'it is easy to ask other members of this team for help'; 'in our

team it is allowed to make a mistake’ ; “working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized” and “members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues” (Edmondson, 1999, p.382) (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .82$ ). The higher the score that is given for these questions, the more it indicates *psychological safety*.

### 3.6. Analysis Strategy

The mediation analysis is done according to the ground-breaking and broadly recognized mediation model of Baron & Kenny (1986). The theory states that mediation can be found through three conditions:

“(a) variations in levels of the independent variable significantly account for variations in the presumed mediator (i.e., Path *a*), (b) variations in the mediator significantly account for variations in the dependent variable (i.e., Path *b*), and (c) when Paths *a* and *b* are controlled, a previously significant relation between the independent and dependent variables is no longer significant, with the strongest demonstration of mediation occurring when Path *c* is zero” (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p.1176).



**FIGURE 2. Mediation model.**

Hence, this research will follow three steps in the mediation analysis. Step 1: demonstrate that the independent variable is correlated to the dependent variable (path C); step 2: demonstrate that the independent variable is correlated to the mediator variable (path A); step 3: demonstrate that the mediator variable affects the dependent variable through a controlled independent variable (path B and C). If all these steps appear significant, and during step three the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable (path C) decreases in comparison to step 1, then mediation takes place (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

The (control) variables are visualized through descriptive statistics in order to present the mean of the rates given by the social welfare workers. In order to test the hypotheses, a regression analysis is used, which includes control variables as well, in order to assure that no confounding variables interfere between the core variables. According to Neuman (2014) a regression analysis is a widely used method that is

suitable for the interpretation of statistics, and according to Baron & Kenny (1986) this method is suitable for mediation. In addition, a correlation matrix has been used, in order to outline how all the (control) variables relate to each other. The control variables are the following ones: *gender*, *age*, *completed education* and *work experience*.

The outcome variable, *prosocial rule breaking*, is an individual level concept that does not consider team characteristics. The mediator variable *psychological safety*, however, is a team level concept. Hence, these concepts could be aggregated into a multilevel analysis in order to demonstrate an average of the outcomes. However, this has not been possible in the scope of this project due to time constraint. It is recognized that this is not optimal. Hence, this forms a limitation of the research. Although workers in fact share team characteristics, this research analyzes all workers individually.

### **3.7. Validity and Reliability**

The Likert-type scale is a commonly used method in the social sciences and is known as an ‘objective measure’ since participants can usually choose between five options. When there is a matter of a large sample size (as in this research with 844 participants) it increases face validity because a clear indication will be given among the high amount of data (Hartley, 2013).

*Supportive leadership behavior* is measured according to the perception of employees only, which also increases face validity. This means that the measurement will not be confused by the self-perception of leaders. Moreover, Jacobsen and Andersen (2015) have found that leaders tend to overestimate their leadership strategy, and that leadership performance is related to the perception of the pertinent employees only.

Regarding content validity, the operationalization is in line with the conceptualization of the variables. *Prosocial rule breaking* is mainly conceptualized through the literature of Morrison (2006). It is defined as follows: “any instance where an employee intentionally violates a formal organizational policy, regulation or prohibition with the primary intention of” (Morrison, 2006, p.6) assisting clients. The measurement is established by Dahling et al. (2012), whose work is related to the work of Morrison (2006). The indicators are the following ones: “I break rules that stand in the way of good customer service”; “I bend organizational rules so that I can best assist customers” and “I give good service to clients or customers by ignoring organizational policies that interfere with my job” (Dahling et al., 2012, p.25). As can be seen, all the indicators signal *prosocial rule breaking* because they entail *rule breaking* in order to *improve customer service*. Moreover, *policies*, *regulations* and *prohibitions* (as described in the definition) are in fact *rules*, and it is expected that professionals are aware of that. Especially since they are well educated in general.

*Supportive leadership behavior* is conceptualized importantly through leadership literature of Yukl (2012). It is defined as follows: encouraging leadership that aims to strengthen the self-esteem of employees

to increase performance (Yukl, 2012; Martin et al., 2016). The measures used for *supportive leadership behavior* are established by Yukl (2012) as well, these are the following: “shows concern for the needs of individual members”; “shows concern for the feelings of individual members” and “provides support and encouragement when there is a difficult or stressful task” (Yukl, 2012, p.84). As can be seen, the indicators relate to the definition because they are about *showing concern for team members*, which is about *encouragement*. At the same time, it entails *support*, which is meant to increase *self-esteem* and *performance*.

*Psychological safety* has been conceptualized through the literature of Edmondson (1999). It is defined as follows: “A shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking” (Edmondson, 1999, p.354). The indicators have been established by Edmondson (1999) as well. These are the following: ‘it is easy to ask other members of this team for help’; ‘in our team it is allowed to make a mistake’ ; “working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized” and “members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues” (Edmondson, 1999, p.382). As can be seen, the indicators relate to the definition because they are about taking *risks* through asking for help; making mistakes, and bringing up problems. In addition, the feeling of *safety* is found by: the recognition of unique skills.

In addition, content validity is assured through the use of control variables, which decrease the possibility of confounding variables influencing the outcomes. The following control variables are used: *gender*, *age*, *completed education* and *work experience*.

The generalizability of this research does not go beyond its context: the social welfare domain. This is because literature points out that this context has certain peculiarities that make it unique (see theoretical framework). To sum up: social welfare workers are found to be guided by prosocial motivation (e.g. Steijn & van der Voet, 2017). Moreover, they are found to have a considerable amount of discretion (e.g. Evans, 2013). In practice, these aspects indicate that social workers have autonomy in their job. Together with pressuring and stressful circumstances, social welfare workers are found to make use of coping (e.g. Tummers et al., 2015). As such, the job is not straightforward. Hence, social welfare workers are not typical public servants that are strictly bound to bureaucratic procedures. This may entail that the relation between a leader and a worker is not the usual one either. These type of circumstances are not known to be present in other domains.

The population of the research is the Dutch social welfare domain that consists of all initiatives that municipalities undertake for the well-being of citizens regarding: work, participation, self-reliance, healthcare and youth (Stimulansz, n.d.). As has been explained, this domain became decentralized in 2015, and today it falls under the responsibility of municipalities. As such, the pertinent organizations vary per municipality. However, there is a common organizational objective that can be defined as follows: *Organizations that assist and stimulate children, youths, adults, seniors and families for a mental well-*

*being in order to participate effectively in society; and to get the best out of people with social/intellectual disorders/disabilities.* Based on this population, a random sample has been taken for the research.

The sample has been conducted between October and December of 2020. It is a random sample that consists of executive teams of five municipalities. Random sampling entails that all elements of a population, which in this case is the Dutch social welfare policy domain, have an equal chance of being selected for the sample. Hence, the sample will give a representation of the whole population (Toshkov, 2016; Neuman, 2014). Because of the random sample with a large number of participants, all sorts of circumstances have had an equal possibility to be included and therefore a consistency in measurement across time periods is ensured.

#### 4. Analysis

The following section is about analyzing the variables in contrast to each other, with the main focus on the core variables: *supportive leadership behavior*, *prosocial rule breaking* and *psychological safety*. First, the analysis will present the descriptive statistics of all variables (control variables included), which will be followed by a correlation matrix, to see what the associations among them are. Consequently, the hypotheses will be tested through a regression analysis. This will be followed by the discussion.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Gender**

	Frequency	Percent
Male	91	10,8
Female	748	88,6
Different/private	5	,6

By far and away most of the workers are female. This is another peculiar aspect of the social welfare domain, together with prosocial motivation and discretion. This also means that the research will mainly study female behavior.

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Age**

	Frequency	Percent
20-29	117	13,9
30-39	277	32,8
40-49	208	24,6
50-59	164	19,4
60-69	68	8,1

*Note.* 10 participants did not fill in their age (correctly).

The average age of workers is almost 42 years (41,77). Most of them (32,8%) are in their 30s. Age appears to be distributed quite well in the social welfare domain. 42 years is somewhat a usual average, under the assumption that most professionals start their career in their 20s and end in their 60s.

**Table 3. Work Experience**

	Frequency	Percent
0-9	329	39,0
10-19	276	32,7
20-29	160	19,0
30-39	63	7,5
40-49	16	1,9

*Note.* Three participants did not report their work experience.

The average work experience is 13,9 years. Roughly half of the workers (51,7%) have a work experience of between 10 to 29 years and almost 10 percent (9,4%) have more than 30 years of experience in the social welfare. Workers tend to have many years of experience which indicates that they are committed to their work.

**Table 4. Completed Education**

	Frequency	Percent
- Elementary school/ lower secondary education	1	,1
- Secondary education	3	,4
- Secondary vocational education	15	1,8
- University of Applied Sciences (bachelor)	660	78,2
- University	163	19,3
- PhD	2	,2

Social welfare workers appear to be well educated. By far and away most of the workers (78,2%) have a bachelor's degree from a University of Applied Sciences. And almost twenty percent of the workers have a University degree. This means that practically all social workers have finished higher education. Only 2,3% (19 people) did not. This high level of education is another indication that social welfare workers are committed to their work, because the level of intellectual investment is high.

**Table 5.** Descriptive Statistics of Core Variables

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
- Supportive Leadership Behavior	1,00	5,00	4,2792
- Prosocial Rule Breaking	1,00	5,00	3,5059
- Psychological Safety	1,00	5,00	4,2906

*Supportive leadership behavior* and *psychological safety* appear to be concepts that are present in the social welfare domain. Both of the variables have an average score of 4,3 which stands for *agree* in the survey. This means that workers tend to recognize it undoubtedly. *Prosocial rule breaking*, however, appears less present with an average score of 3,5 which is between *neither disagree nor agree* and *agree*. Its presence appears to be less common, but certainly not absent.



**Table 6.** Correlations of all Variables.

		PSRB	SLB	PS	Gender	Age	Work Experience	Completed Education
Prosocial Rule Breaking	Pearson Correlation	1	,043	,096**	-,064	,115**	,100**	,079*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,216	,005	,063	<,001	,004	,022
Supportive Leadership Behavior	Pearson Correlation	,043	1	,425**	-,020	-,067	-,031	,010
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,216		<,001	,563	,055	,375	,770
Psychological Safety	Pearson Correlation	,096**	,425**	1	-,047	,010	,000	-,019
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,005	<,001		,169	,771	,992	,576
Gender	Pearson Correlation	-,064	-,020	-,047	1	-,167**	-,085*	,036
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,063	,563	,169		<,001	,014	,294
Age	Pearson Correlation	,115**	-,067	,010	-,167**	1	,712**	,034
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	,055	,771	<,001		<,001	,324
Work Experience	Pearson Correlation	,100**	-,031	,000	-,085*	,712**	1	,025
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,004	,375	,992	,014	<,001		,464
Completed Education	Pearson Correlation	,079*	,010	-,019	,036	,034	,025	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,022	,770	,576	,294	,324	,464	

*Note.* PSRB, SLB and PS stand for: Prosocial Rule Breaking; Supportive Leadership Behavior and Psychological Safety.

Pearson correlations do not appear, except between *work experience* and *age* ( $r = 0,712$ ) which is probably due to the many years of experience that the workers tend to have (13,9 years on average). Statistical significance is more common. In harmony with the expectation is that *supportive leadership behavior* and *psychological safety* ( $p = <0,001$ ) are statistically significant. The same goes for *psychological safety* and *prosocial rule breaking* ( $p = 0,005$ ). Against the expectation, *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking* ( $p = 0,216$ ) are not statistically significant, which does not reject the null hypothesis.

Regarding the core and control variables together, *prosocial rule breaking* is statistically significant to *age* ( $p = <0,001$ ), *work experience* ( $p = 0,004$ ) and *completed education* ( $p = 0,022$ ). Therefore, the control variables are useful for hypotheses testing, in order to assure that they do not influence outcomes between the core variables. The other core variables (*supportive leadership behavior* and *psychological safety*) do not demonstrate statistical significance to control variables.

#### 4.1. Hypotheses Testing

*Hypothesis 1: supportive leadership behavior positively influences prosocial rule breaking*

*Hypothesis 2: supportive leadership behavior positively influences prosocial rule breaking through the mediating role of psychological safety*

As has been explained in the methodology, the mediation analysis will be done according to the method of Baron and Kenny (1986). This method entails the following steps: 1) demonstrate that the independent variable is correlated to the dependent variable; 2) demonstrate that the independent variable is correlated to the mediator variable; and 3) demonstrate that the mediator variable affects the outcome variable, through a controlled independent variable (since the mediator and the dependent variable may be both correlated since they are caused by the independent variable).

**Step 1: demonstrate that the independent variable is correlated to the dependent variable**

**Table 7.** Regression Analysis of Supportive Leadership Behavior, Prosocial Rule Breaking and Control Variables.

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	5,053	,719		7,030	<,001
Supportive Leadership Behavior	,045	,031	,050	1,444	,149
1 Gender	-,280	,190	-,051	-1,474	,141
Age	,116	,075	,077	1,557	,120
Experience	,072	,084	,042	,864	,388
Education	,307	,129	,082	2,374	,018

*Note.* Prosocial rule breaking is the outcome variable.

Contrary to the expectation, table 7 reveals statistical insignificance between *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking* ( $p = 0,149$ ). The direction is positive, as was expected in the theory. The strength, however, is low: ( $\beta = 0,050$ ), which goes against the expectation as well.

With regard to the control variables, only *education* remains statistically significant to *prosocial rule breaking* ( $p = 0,018$ ).

**Step 2: demonstrate that the independent variable is correlated to the mediator variable**

**Table 8.** Regression Analysis of Supportive Leadership Behavior, Psychological Safety and Control Variables.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
	(Constant)	5,905	,593		9,957	<,001
	Supportive Leadership Behavior	,348	,026	,427	13,545	<,001
1	Gender	-,136	,157	-,028	-,870	,385
	Age	,067	,062	,050	1,091	,276
	Experience	-,032	,069	-,021	-,470	,638
	Education	-,065	,107	-,019	-,613	,540

*Note.* Mediator variable: psychological safety.

In accordance with the expectation, statistical significance is found between *supportive leadership behavior* and *psychological safety* ( $p = <0,001$ ). The direction is positive, as was expected as well. Moreover, the strength is high ( $\beta = 0,427$ ), which is also in harmony with the expectation. There are no statistically significant control variables.

*Step 3: demonstrate that the mediator variable affects the outcome variable, through a controlled independent variable*

**Table 9.** Regression Analysis of Psychological Safety, Prosocial Rule Breaking and Control Variables [including Supportive Leadership Behavior for the last step in accordance to Baron & Kenny (1986)].

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	4,472	,759		5,895	<,001
Psychological Safety	,098	,042	,089	2,344	,019
Supportive Leadership Behavior	,011	,034	,012	,312	,755
Gender	-,267	,190	-,049	-1,407	,160
Age	,110	,074	,073	1,472	,142
Experience	,075	,083	,044	,904	,366
Education	,313	,129	,083	2,429	,015

*Note.* Dependent variable: prosocial rule breaking.

In accordance to the expectation, statistical significance is found between *psychological safety* and *prosocial rule breaking* ( $p = 0,019$ ). The direction is positive. However, the strength is low ( $\beta = 0,089$ ). The statistical insignificance of *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking* lowered from ( $p = 0,149$ ) to ( $p = 0,755$ ). The direction stays positive and the strength stays low ( $\beta = 0,089$ ). Which, again, is against the expectation. *Education* remains the only statistically significant control variable to *prosocial rule breaking* ( $p = 0,015$ ).

## 4.2. Discussion

Only 10,8% of the workers are male. This means that female behavior is an important aspect of this research. Moreover, age groups appear to be well distributed, since the average age is 41,77 years. Under the assumption that professionals usually start in their 20s and stop when they are in their 60s.

The social welfare domain appears to consist of workers that are committed to their job, with an average work experience of 13,9 years. Another indication of this commitment is that workers are highly educated in general: 97,7% of workers have a bachelor's degree at least. High education and many years of experience indicate that workers put effort in their job, both intellectually and professionally. Such an attitude is probably important in the social welfare domain, since social workers are responsible for the well-being of people in the end.

The correlation matrix reveals statistical significance between *prosocial rule breaking* and: *age* ( $p = <0,001$ ), *work experience* ( $p = 0,004$ ) and *completed education* ( $p = 0,022$ ) which means that it was a salient practice to use *age*, *work experience* and *completed education* as control variables. During the regression analysis, however, only *education* remained statistically significant to *prosocial rule breaking*.

Workers report a mean of 4,3 for *psychological safety* (4 stands for *agree* in the questionnaire) and 4,3 for *supportive leadership behavior*. This means that both concepts are undoubtedly present in the social welfare. Moreover, both of the concepts are correlated regarding significance ( $p = <0,001$ ), strength and direction ( $\beta = 0,427$ ). In accordance to the expectation, *supportive leadership* and *psychological safety* are well present and correlated.

Of the three core variables, *prosocial rule breaking* is the most out of step. First of all, the mean is 3,5, which is in between of *neither disagree nor agree* and *agree*. While its presence is certainly not disagreed in general, its presence is not clearly agreed either. This finding goes against the expectation, since it was believed that *prosocial rule breaking* would be clearly present. Second, it is the variable that shows the lowest statistical significance to the other core variables (*supportive leadership behavior* and *psychological safety*). *Prosocial rule breaking* only meets the expectation regarding direction, which remains positive in the light of *supportive leadership behavior* and *psychological safety*; and regarding the statistical significance with *psychological safety*, although low in strength ( $\beta = 0,089$ ).

Nonetheless, *psychological safety* was only the expected mediator variable. According to Baron and Kenny (1986) the essence of mediation is correlation between the independent variable (*supportive leadership behavior*) and the dependent variable (*prosocial rule breaking*). This correlation is statistically insignificant and weak, as such, mediation does not appear to be the case. It has, however, a positive direction.

## 5. Conclusion

*Prosocial rule breaking*, *supportive leadership behavior* and *psychological safety* appear to be concepts that are present in the Dutch social welfare domain. However, not in the way that was hypothesized in this research. That is to say, *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking* are not statistically significant, and although there is a slightly positive statistical direction, its strength remains low. This also means that *psychological safety* cannot play a mediating role. Notwithstanding, these concepts remain important in the social welfare domain, because indirect significance and strength has positively been found among them.

The most important correlation that has been found is between *supportive leadership behavior* and *psychological safety*. This correlation is statistically significant, strong, and positive. Second, *psychological safety* and *prosocial rule breaking* are statistically significant in a positive way as well. The strength of this relation, however, is low. Third, *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking* are statistically insignificant and the strength is low. The statistical direction, however, is positive, which invites for further research on these concepts. While too weakly correlated for mediation in this research, *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking* may be of more prominence in other settings.

Based on the theoretical framework, the expectation was that there would be a significant, positive and strong relation between *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking*. Especially because of the apparent discretionary tendency of social welfare work (Smith & Donovan, 2003; Tummers et al., 2015; Tummers, 2016; Evans, 2013) and because of the prosocial tendency of social workers (Steijn & van der Voet, 2017; van der Voet et al., 2017; Bjerregaard et al., 2015; Pösö & Forsman, 2013). These findings were interpreted as indicators of *prosocial rule breaking*, grounded importantly by the literature of Morrison (2006) in which was explained that risk propensity and job autonomy are possible predictors of it. The descriptive statistics reveal that *prosocial rule breaking* is somewhat present in the social welfare domain, since the mean is 3,5 on a scale from 1 to 5. However, it does not happen in the light of *supportive leadership behavior*.

It was expected that *supportive leadership behavior* would be positively correlated to *prosocial rule breaking* because it is meant to improve worker performance, to encourage them to face challenges and to create trust in the team (Yukl, 2012). As such, workers would feel more secure, and engage easier in *prosocial rule breaking*. *Supportive leadership behavior* appears to be clearly present in the social welfare domain since the descriptive statistics reveal a mean of 4,3 for it. However, it does not influence *prosocial rule breaking*.

A reason for the absence of this relation may be that social welfare workers do not need the support from a leader to engage in *prosocial rule breaking*, because it is a natural characteristic of their work due to high

bureaucracy. Prosocial motivation appears to be an important aspect of social workers (e.g. Steijn & van der Voet, 2017; van der Voet et al., 2017) which may easily mean that the well-being of clients is more important than rules in certain situations. Van Zijl et al. (2021) state that social welfare workers may derive this prosocial tendency from their educational background. Pösö and Forsman (2013) find that although social workers experience stress, this is compensated by the influence that they have on their clients. Similarly, Bjerregaard et al. (2015) find that care workers identify with their clients, which forms a central source of motivation. Consequently, the descriptive statistics of this research indicate job commitment of social welfare workers through an average work experience of 13,9 years and through high education (97,7% have a bachelor's degree at least), which signals professional and intellectual competency. Therefore, it appears that the best interest for clients is so inherent to the job of social welfare workers, that it is indifferent toward *supportive leadership behavior*, at least when it comes down to *prosocial rule breaking*. Future research could point out where social workers derive this tendency from, and how their educational background relates to it.

Another reason for the absence of a relation between *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking* may be caused by the job autonomy and discretion (e.g. Tummers et al., 2015; Evans, 2013) that social welfare workers tend to have, which may mean that engaging in *prosocial rule breaking* is relatively easy and does not require *supportive leadership behavior*.

In the public sector, *prosocial rule breaking* is about daring to deviate from rules in order to improve assistance. It is a decision that is grounded on the well-being of clients and forms a risk rather than a gain for workers engaging in it. Therefore, *supportive leadership behavior* probably remains an important aspect for it. Supportive leaders encourage workers, aiming to increase their dedication to the organization. At the same time, they aim to create trust in the team (Yukl, 2012). Therefore, its importance for *prosocial rule breaking* is still expected. However, not in the Dutch social welfare context.

Hence, the answer to the research question: *what is the mediating role of psychological safety between supportive leadership behavior and prosocial rule breaking?* Is the following: there is a positive tendency between *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking*, which is not strong nor significant enough to be mediated by *psychological safety*. Notwithstanding, this positive tendency invites for more research, because it may indicate that the concepts are more correlated in other contexts. Possibly, due to the peculiar circumstances of the Dutch social welfare domain (prosocial motivation and discretion) the relation between *supportive leadership behavior* and *prosocial rule breaking* remains unacknowledged.

### 5.1. Rival Ideas on Mediation

Important to note is that the Baron and Kenny model has been disputed by, for example, Hayes (2009) and Zhao et al. (2010). They state that a type of mediation is still possible through paths A and B without having correlation in path C. However, they do not refer to this as mediation in the sense of Baron and Kenny. Hayes defines it as “X’s indirect effect on Y through M” (Hayes, 2009, p.413) and Zhao et al. as “indirect-only mediation” (Zhao et al., 2010, p. 200). These mediation types are deemed insufficient for this research since the original purpose was to find a correlation between X (*supportive leadership behavior*) and Y (*prosocial rule breaking*). Mediation by *psychological safety* was a secondary option. Relying on indirect mediation models would not be in line with the purpose of this research.

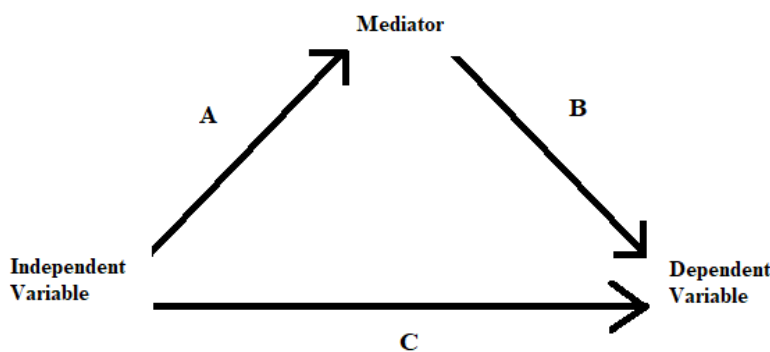


FIGURE 3. Mediation model.

### 5.2. Limitations

The public social welfare domain is distinguished by peculiar circumstances including prosocial motivation of workers (e.g. Steijn & van der Voet, 2017; van der Voet et al., 2017), and a considerable amount of discretion (e.g. Evans, 2013; Tummers et al., 2015). As such, the findings of this research are only reliable to this type of contexts. In contexts with less prosocial motivation and discretion, *prosocial rule breaking* may be less obvious and therefore more susceptible to *supportive leadership behavior*.

Second, the outcome variable *prosocial rule breaking* is an individual level concept, in contrast to *psychological safety* which is a team level concept. A multilevel analysis would have been optimal to analyze both concepts together. However, due to time constraint in the scope of this research, this has not been possible. As such, this research is conducted solely on the individual level, without involving team characteristics.

### 5.3. Future Research

In this research *prosocial rule breaking* appears to be indifferent toward *supportive leadership behavior* because prosocial motivation is an inherent aspect of social welfare workers. Literature has found that social



workers tend to be prosocially motivated (e.g. Steijn & van der Voet, 2017; van der Voet et al., 2017). In order to better understand this characteristic, a next step could be to find out where this tendency comes from, and how it is influenced by education. This may be, for example, important for the recruitment of workers and possibly for educational policy implications.

Second, it would be interesting to analyze *prosocial rule breaking* in other public domains, especially in those where workers tend to have less prosocial motivation. It could be that *supportive leadership behavior* then becomes more important. Studying *prosocial rule breaking* in the social welfare environment of another country could also give interesting insights, since the findings of this research may have been influenced by Dutch cultural aspects, including tolerance.

Third, research could contribute to theory building of *prosocial rule breaking* in the public sector, since literature is still limited in this regard.

#### **5.4. Practical Implications**

Despite the finding that *prosocial rule breaking* is indifferent toward *supportive leadership behavior* in the Dutch social welfare context, *supportive leadership behavior* remains a salient aspect in this environment. Especially because it tends to be a pressuring and stressful environment (e.g. Tummers, 2016; Smith & Donovan, 2003) that requires support for workers to feel secure (Yukl, 2012). Moreover, harmony in the team is probably essential since it should be a safe haven for the workers who tend to deal with problematic cases. Unsurprisingly, it has been found that *supportive leadership behavior* is significantly, strongly and positively correlated to *psychological safety*. Therefore, the practical implication of this research is that *supportive leadership behavior* is essential for a well-functioning social welfare domain.

#### **5.5. Theoretical Contribution**

The indirect correlations that have been found can be useful in the scientific realm of public leadership and management: *supportive leadership behavior* and *psychological safety* are statistically significant ( $b = <0,001$ ) strong and positive ( $\beta = 0,427$ ). Moreover, as can be seen in the descriptive statistics (table 5), both variables have an average rate of 4,3. Hence, *supportive leadership behavior* appears an important basis for *psychological safety*. Possibly, this may be because of the stressful work environment (e.g. Tummers et al., 2015) which may encourage leaders to invest in the psychological well-being of employees. Additionally, *psychological safety* and *prosocial rule breaking* are statistically significant ( $p = 0,019$ ). Possibly because these variables share similar objectives, including social responsibility (Morrison, 2006; Edmondson, 1999) and risk taking (Edmondson, 1999; Warren, 2003).

In addition, this research may give insights to Newman et al. (2017), who suggested to study *psychological safety* in the realm of discretion, which relates to *prosocial rule breaking*: statistical

significance has been found ( $p = 0,019$ ). The statistical strength is low, but the direction is positive ( $\beta = 0,089$ ). On the other hand, Vardaman et al. (2014) expressed that antecedents of *prosocial rule breaking* have been studied limitedly. This research may also give insights to them, through the finding that *psychological safety* is a possible antecedent of *prosocial rule breaking* in the social welfare domain. Although no strong correlation has been found, the significance and positive direction invite for more research on these variables, in other contexts. Vardaman et al. (2014) also suggested to study *prosocial rule breaking* on a person-supervisor framework, which relates to this research. However, no significance nor strength has been found in this case, only a slight positive direction.

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