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Between the Client and the Institutional System: Street-level Bureaucrats' Discretion, Positioning, and Trust in Institutional Encounters with Forced Migrants in Finland and Sweden

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This article examines street-level bureaucrats' positions between the institutional system and their clients with a forced migration background in their sensemaking of trust. Situated at the frontline of the institution, street-level bureaucrats are crucial agents for forced migrants settling in Nordic welfare states. Drawing on individual interviews with street-level bureaucrats in Finland and Sweden and theoretically leaning on street-level bureaucracy, positioning theory, and trust, this article explores how street-level bureaucrats navigate these encounters. By identifying five non-exclusionary ways in which street-level bureaucrats position themselves between the migrant client and the institutional system through their sensemaking of trust, I propose a typology of positions: resisting warrior, empathic carer, neutral mediator, pushing steerer, and critical questioner. Further, these positions reflect ambiguous narratives of being simultaneously an agent of the citizen and an agent of the state.

Introduction

Institutional encounters between street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) and migrant clients are central to how public institutions implement migration policy and deliver services and benefits in welfare states (Hagelund, 2009; Larsson, 2015; Nordberg, 2015; Ratzmann and Sahraoui, 2021; Weiss and Gren, 2021; Eriksson and Johansson, 2022; Misje, 2023; Schierenbeck *et al.*, 2023). Situated at the nexus of migration and social policy (Ataç and Rosenberger, 2018), the actions and non-actions of SLBs (Nordling, 2017) are crucial for migrants' future aspirations and trajectories. In addition, SLBs are central for migrants' institutional trust as they form 'the face' of the institution delivering services and benefits to the clients (Svenberg *et al.*, 2011; Turtiainen, 2012; Fersch, 2016; Sundbäck, 2023, Sundbäck, 2024b).

While Finland and Sweden can be argued to still be characterised by universal, broad social welfare benefits and services funded by taxation and to a large extent organised by the public sector (Kananen, 2014; Kangas and Kvist, 2018), they are being transformed by neoliberal changes, which increasingly emphasise efficacy, activation, and market-oriented solutions (Kamali and Jönsson, 2018). These changes also influence migration policies in various ways, such as leading to precarity (Elsrud and Lalander, 2022), emphasising welfare chauvinism (Keskinen, 2016; Bell *et al.*, 2023) or workfare (Larsson, 2015), and constructing the 'integrate-able' migrant

(Masoud, 2024). Moreover, in the aftermath of the 'long summer of migration' of 2015 (Kasparek and Speer, 2015), when the number of forced migrants to the Nordic countries rose, moral dilemmas (Borrelli and Lindberg, 2018) and bureaucratic violence (Abdelhady *et al.*, 2020) became part of SLBs' everyday work. Hence, the SLBs have been positioned between on one hand the migrant client and on the other hand the interests of the political institutional system, including efficient 'integration', putting pressure on the individual to proceed with their integration (Hagelund, 2009; Belabas and Gerrits, 2017; Weiss and Gren, 2021). As argued by Belabas and Gerrits (2017), SLBs are insistently pressed to evaluate whether existing integration policies are just and fair. Hence, their various positionings while talking about trust are an interesting topic to explore.

While scholars have examined the relation between SLBs and migrant service users by scrutinising deservingness (Razmann and Sahraoui, 2021; Schultz, 2021), discretion and internal bordering (Nordling, 2017; Misje, 2023), professionalism (Sotkasiira, 2018), and response repertoires (Hagelund, 2009), little research has foregrounded *positionings, street-level bureaucracy and trust* in institutional encounters. This article helps to fill this research gap by shedding light on the various ways in which SLBs position themselves between a particular group of migrants, namely forced migrants and the institution, in their sensemaking of trust.

The empirical data were collected as part of a study on perceived trust and distrust in institutional encounters between SLBs and young forced migrants in the welfare states of Finland and Sweden (see Sundbäck, 2023; Sundbäck, 2024a; 2024b). Drawing on twenty-four interviews with SLBs at institutions forced migrants settling in Finland or Sweden encounter (employment offices, municipal immigrant social service units, homes for care or residence for unaccompanied minors), I identify various positions employed by SLBs in their sensemaking of trust. Further, inspired by Ratzmann and Heindlmaier (2022), I identify SLBs' various positions though a *typology of positionings.* In this typology, I also add nuance to the notion of citizen and state agents proposed by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) when showing how SLBs position themselves in relation to the client and the state. While the notion of citizen vs state agent has been used as an analytical lens in previous research on SLBs, discretion, and migrant clients in the Nordics (Eriksson and Johansson, 2022), this article deepens the analyses of client vs state agents by relating them to positioning and to sensemaking of trust.

Street-level bureaucracy, positioning and trust in institutional encounters

Theoretically, this article leans on the notions of street-level bureaucracy, positioning, and trust. Due to the nature of the street-level bureaucratic work, SLBs possess substantial discretion and subsequently an ambiguous position in relation to structurally vulnerable forced migrants and to neoliberal welfare institutions. Hence, their positioning and use of discretion requires further exploration in order to better understand the dynamics of institutional encounters. This article explores SLBs positioning in relation to their sensemaking of trust, as trust has been shown crucial for the work of SLBs in general, and with forced migrant background service users in particular.

In *street-level bureaucracies*, as clients' cases are specific, complicated, and changing, the work of SLBs is unpredictable and cannot be fully organised by legislation, or formal institutional scripts and guidelines. Hence, SLBs need to use discretion to handle dilemmas related to, on the one hand, institutional policies, demands, and shortage in time and resources and, on the other hand, to the needs of clients (Lipsky, 1980; Eriksson and Johansson, 2022). Discretion allows SLBs to inhabit their professional roles in various ways (Zacka, 2017; Bell and Smith, 2022), to employ client-centred or authority-centred practices (Eriksson and Johansson, 2022) and to navigate moral discomfort (Weiss and Gren, 2021). Research points out various aspects of dilemmas faced by SLBs, highlighting how, in moral discomfort, SLBs need to balance between 'demanding and caring, pushing but not too much, being conscious of suffering whilst acknowledging resilience

and the limits of the system' in work with forced migrants (Weiss and Gren, 2021: 201). Coining the terms *state agent* and *citizen agent*, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) highlight the challenging position of SLBs as simultaneously furthest from power and closest to the citizens. Because SLBs are the furthest from centres of power but closest to the citizens, their positioning and tensions between being an agent of the citizen or an agent of the state, or perhaps something in between, is important to explore. In this article, I employ the term 'client' instead of 'citizen', as the clients have not yet obtained citizenship in the host country.

Positioning theory refers to the process in social interaction whereby individuals are formed through various discursive practices (Davies and Harré, 1990). By adopting a certain stance within an encounter, individuals position themselves and others in relation to that stance (Harré and van Langenhove, 1991). According to Van Langenhove and Harré (1994), adopting a position 'involves the use of rhetorical devices by which oneself and other speakers are presented as standing in various kinds of relations' (465). Positions can be viewed as loose sets of rights and duties that limit the possibilities of action and constitute a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role (Harré and van Langenhove, 1991). The theory is applicable in situations in which there are one or more persons positioned in relation either to each other or to their social surroundings (Harré and van Langenhove, 1991). I apply the notion of positioning to highlight the stances taken in relation to other persons and their social surroundings, here understood as the institutional encounters and welfare regimes in which SLBs operate, understanding positioning as a broader concept than role perceptions.

Trust has been argued to constitute a crucial tool for SLBs in their everyday work (Pinkney, 2013; Senghaas *et al.*, 2019; Davidovitz and Cohen, 2022; Davidovitz and Cohen, 2023). In the vast research on trust, the notion of trust is often approached as the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another, as outlined by Rousseau *et al.* (1998). However, as I show in the analyses and as has been argued previously (Senghaas *et al.*, 2019; Sundbäck, 2024a), SLBs'sensemaking of trust seems to largely centre on them as trust-takers and clients as trust-givers and trust becomes a central, strategic working tool for SLBs. Hence, trusting clients allows for an open relationship, where clients share detailed and honest information about their lives. Consequently, the trust lens in this article aims not to further scrutinse detailed sensemaking of trust among SLBs, but instead to fill earlier research gaps by taking the analyses in the direction of what the sensemaking of trust among the SLBs show about their discretion and hence positions.

Therefore, in order to illuminate the black box of institutional encounters, I examine SLBs various positionings as a result of (conscious or unconscious) discretion in sensemaking of trust, adding on to our understanding of street-level bureaucracy by proposing a typology of positionings.

Data and method

The analysis draws on twenty-four semi-structured individual interviews with SLBs at public employment services, municipalities' immigrant social services, and municipalities' homes for care or residence for unaccompanied minors. I refer to these contexts as either employment or social services, considering homes for care or residence as social services. Finnish and Swedish migration policy centres on two institutions: public employment services and social services. Therefore, these institutions were chosen as research sites due to their function as crucial 'frontline offices' for forced migrants.

In Finland, employment services (national public employment services and local government pilots on employment) offer integration programmes (language classes, study guidance) for unemployed jobseekers, and the municipalities' social services provide additional social support (help with housing and guidance in various societal matters). Similarly, the Swedish establishment

programme, run by the Swedish Public Employment Service, offers activities and education for newly arrived immigrants, helping migrants learn Swedish, find a job, and become self-sufficient as quickly as possible. The municipal social services provide additional social support, such as social allowances, preventive work, and guidance.

The data were collected in 2021–2022 in Sweden and Finland by the author as part of a larger study on trust in institutional encounters between SLBs and forced migrants. The interview guide included questions on the perception of (dis)trust and on building trust. The interviews were carried out in Finnish or Swedish at the workplaces of the interlocutors or online due to the COVID-19 pandemic with the use of a secure version of Zoom. As only five interlocutors identified as male, I chose not to reveal the interlocutor's gender in the citations.

The empirical data were coded in Nvivo and analysed using qualitative content analyses with an abductive approach, as a creative 'inferential process' (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014: 5). When analysing both empirical observations and theoretical propositions (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014), I identified various ways SLBs positioned themselves in relation to both their migrant clients and the institutional system within their discourses on trust. Because the various positionings that SLBs take implicitly or explicitly emerged as a central theme in the trust data, I chose to write it into a separate article.

Positions between the migrant client and the institutional system in light of trust

Within the data, I identified five types of positionings, which I call *resisting warrior, empathic carer, neutral mediator, pushing steerer,* and *critical questioner*. The names of the various positionings indicate the stance taken by the SLBs, positioned between the clients and the institutional system. Here, it is noteworthy that these positions are not mutually exclusive; instead, the interlocutors shifted between positions during the interviews, which aligns with the findings of previous positioning theory-based research (Heino, 2017; Tarkiainen, 2020). Hence, the distinctions between the positions, which are presented in turn below, are merely analytical by nature. Through the various stances in the positions, the interlocutors made sense of trust in various ways, including building trusting relations with clients, but also showing distrust towards the institution they represented, or contradictions between their own perception of trust and that of the institution.

Resisting warrior

As a resisting warrior, the SLB negotiates professional ethics and is a warrior of social justice for the migrant client. The term 'resisting' signifies here resistance towards the institutional system and questioning of the institutional scripts steering the client's action:

> I think I never have had to fight as hard or raise my voice as many times in any other job. According to me, the organisation is disgusting. [. . .] I have been very critical towards our management and towards my closest bosses.

> (SLB21, Social Services, Sweden)

Working with unaccompanied minors, this SLB expresses frustration because the organisation lacks an understanding of young clients' needs and wishes related to housing, service, and benefits. This results in challenges with building a trusting relation to the minors from the SLBs perspective. Hence, this SLB ends up taking a stance against the organisation and its management. The frustration can be partly explained by unclear administrative processes as a result of the high number of unaccompanied minors who arrived in Sweden during 2015–16. However, a similar

frustration towards 'the system' was evident in the narrative of an SLB in Finland. Here, I asked what trust meant in client encounters and the SLB replied:

> Personally, for me, trust perhaps entails a different thing than the institution's or our system's perception of trust. According to the system, it entails that you [referring to the SLB] follow the law. But for me, trust entails that I listen to the client and support the needs of the client, not the needs of the system, as supporting the needs of the system creates distrust [among clients] when it functions in a callously effective manner.

(SLB04, Employment Services, Finland)

According to this SLB, trust entails supporting the needs of clients, or what Belabas and Gerrits (2017) refer to as going the extra mile. Also, in this case, the SLB's resistance is related to the system not acknowledging individual needs and denying the clients' agency. Resonating with what Sotkasiira (2018) calls fighting professionalism, the resistance was directed at solving the client's problem and putting the needs of the client first.

In 2015–16, when unaccompanied minors were settled in homes for care or residence in Sweden, the services changed once the minors turned eighteen, pushing them to leave the homes. For some of the SLBs, the requirements of the institutional system did not feel ethically sane, creating what Borrelli and Lindberg (2018) term *moral dilemmas*:

> It did not feel humane; it was not really me. Some of the personnel cried and struggled with this. We wanted to be humane, but we could not; it was just organised in that way. [. . .] Even the personnel offered housing; some did it openly, while some did not mention it.

(SLB23, Social Services, Sweden)

In this case, as a consequence of the system perceived as inhumane, the SLBs becomes resisting by offering private housing. Moreover, as coming of age was a clear turning point in regard to being granted asylum, the Swedish Migration Agency asked the SLBs to help with age assessment. This created moral dilemmas for the SLBs as it was in their primary interest to create a trustful relationship with their clients and become trust-takers instead of engaging in reporting.

Regarding discretion (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000), resisting warriors use it consciously to support the client:

> The good part is that I can do what I call *dance in the system* [emphasis by the interlocutor], so that instead of cutting benefits or filing a clarification request, I contact the client and explain the matter before something happens.

(SLB04, Employment Services, Finland)

Instead of following the system requirements by punishing the client for not reporting and thus creating institutional distrust, this SLB informs clients about how to navigate the system without receiving clarification requests. In relation to time, the resisting warrior also pushes away from the neoliberal framework of efficacy (Kamali and Jönsson, 2018; Masoud, 2024), and sometimes stretches meeting times beyond the institutional recommendation to build trust. This situation recalls the findings of Belabas and Gerrits (2017: 141) on SLBs placing the 'interests and well-being of their clients above policy rule, even if this means acting against the spirit of those rules'. In line with Belabas and Gerrits (2017), in my data the SLBs deliberately breaking the rules only comprised a very small part of the whole sample.

Empathic carer

As an empathic carer, the SLB is strongly engaged with migrant clients on an emotional level, aware of the importance of emotion and engagement and thus located in the encounter with an emotional stance (Harré and van Langenhove, 1991) when striving to create trust. In order to be trustworthy, they take a caring approach, striving to make clients feel safe and secure. This position was quite frequent in the data. Some SLBs mentioned how empathy is especially relevant when it comes to building trust:

> Empathy is very important; that is actually the encounter – building the relation and building trust. That you have the client's situation in mind.
>
> (SLB20, Employment Services, Sweden)

As an empathic carer, the SLB talks about personal matters – hair, clothes, everyday life, music, or hobbies – to create a relationship that is relaxed and trustful. One SLB mentioned the importance of listening:

> I think it is important to give time to listen to each other. To be empathic and show that I can understand that it can be like this [referring to a complicated situation].
>
> (SLB19, Employment Services, Sweden)

In this case, the empathic carer sees the human behind the client and strives to engage and show that 'I care very much about you' (SLB22, Social Services, Sweden). They also seem to position themselves as trusting towards the client, in contrast to the critical questioner.

Within this position, similarly to the resisting warrior, SLBs make efforts to minimise the power gap, moving away from the fixed power asymmetries of client and professional to strengthen institutional trust. One SLB stressed the importance of not positioning yourself above the client but instead aiming to create a feeling for the client that 'here we are just two people discussing' (SLB05, Employment Service, Finland) when building trust. Consequently, the empathic carer positions themselves as understanding of the client and intentionally positions themselves as 'close' to the client.

In the empathic carer position, another dimension of the institutional encounter becomes visible – the emotional proximity of the SLB and the client based on in-group dynamics:

> What makes the encounter easier is that I myself have another ethnic background; I also speak with an accent. And then, when we have physical encounters, they can see that I do not have that classical Scandinavian appearance, and I have not been afraid to use this in conversations, like 'I fully understand; when I came to Sweden, it also felt difficult.' Then, the client opens up. We have, like, a common understanding.
>
> (SLB18, Employment Service, Sweden)

In this case, the SLB used their personal attributes to create an empathic and trusting relationship with the client. Echoing Watkins-Hayes (2013: 177) on racially representative bureaucracies, in this position the SLB might make use of an 'unique sensibility to service delivery', stemming from racialised identities.

In relation to the system, the empathic carer might feel bad or uncomfortable about institutional scripts or the system being punishable and inflexible and, in a sense, apologise about this to the client:

Sometimes I feel that they [the clients] need hands-on support and that I leave them alone. But we do not have resources.

(SLB09, Employment Service, Finland)

However, the empathic carer does not fight against the system as the resisting warrior would. Instead, the empathic carer focuses on making the client feel safe and recognised within a complicated system:

You tell the client that in my opinion, it would be great if we could provide you with money for the family reunification process. In my opinion, it is a human rights question. But the Finnish law is clear, and I cannot give you money for that.

(SLB14, Social Services, Finland)

Here, the SLB positions themselves as understanding and empathic towards the client and critical of the system, but they do not necessarily use their discretion to push for change and social justice.

Neutral mediators

In the neutral mediator position, the SLBs is critical of neither the system nor the client. In this position, the SLB, as a mediator of the system, provides information and ensures that the client has received and understood the information in order to build trust. Likewise, to build trust, neutral mediators make sure that not too much is promised to the client and that rules are followed strictly.

Positioning themself as a neutral mediator, the SLB serves solely as an intermediator between the institutional system and the client. When I asked how the SLBs perceived trust, one replied:

For me, trust entails that every client gets similar services in the way that I work in accordance with directives and rules, as they give the frame for my work.

(SLB 07, Employment Services, Finland)

As Harré and van Langenhove (1991) define a position as a set of rights and duties limiting possibilities of action, the neutral mediator sees their work as having strict rules or duties without the possibility to influence, in contrast to the resisting warrior who questions the sets of rights and duties in the interest of the migrant client. In comparison to the empathic carer, the neutral mediator is less affective, and their relationships with the client and the system are merely professional and distant, with little emotional engagement, resembling what Sotkasiira (2018) terms a 'neutral expert' who maintains an emotional distance from the situation. Sotkasiira views this neutral rhetoric as a protective coping strategy for the SLB, echoing Eriksson and Johansson's (2022) notion on the authority-centred pattern, where SLBs apply formal and directive-following understandings of their work.

Likewise, to build and maintain a trusting relationship, the neutral mediator asserts that:

We inform [the client] about why we act as we do and about the possibilities you have. We don't have that many other tools to use. Unfortunately, we cannot put in too many resources as we have huge masses to get through the system. Then, some of the clients might perceive that they did not get help.

(SLB03, Employment Services, Finland)

In the neutral mediator position, the SLB explains how the system operates, instead of taking a stance in relation to it, positively or negatively. In comparison to the resisting warrior, the neutral mediator does not use discretion to bend, change or break the rules. I understand this position as aligning with what Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) refer to as a state agent and from this position, it becomes natural to explain the system to make it understandable.

Pushing steerer

In the category of what could be referred to as a pushing steerer, the SLB position themselves relatively strict and less humane towards the client than in the empathic or resisting positions. In this position, the relationship is professional, and clients are seen more as a matter to be resolved than a human case. In comparison to the resisting warrior, who prioritises the needs of the client over the needs or order of the system, the pushing steerer seems to be a stronger supporter of the institutional system. An example of steering behaviour was an SLB at the Swedish employment services (SLB 16) being strict in their view on the language level needed for clients to obtain a cleaning job, which they explained by the need to be 'realistic' when accessing the labour market. In their guidance, the pushing steerer is strict on how the integration system and its patterns function – you have to complete one step (e.g. language training) before the next – indicating how they strongly follow institutional scripts and policy guidelines. In the following quote, the SLB is aware of their strict approach:

> I was strict with them, you know, and said that if this should lead to a job, you have to pull yourself together and show them what you got – now you have been away for many days! You have got a great opportunity here with an employer who lets you be away; if you fail this, you have only yourself to blame.

(SLB16, Employment Service, Sweden)

Asserting that the client has only themself to blame if the job opportunity fails reflects a neoliberal discourse in which the client is responsible for the way events turn out (Kamali and Jönsson, 2018). The SLB highlights how the objective of the employment services is self-sufficiency, for which the individual client is primarily responsible. At the same time, the pushing steerer makes it clear that the required language level is high. However, this strict approach was undertaken for the client to later be thankful that the SLB guided the client towards 'reality' and future independence when help would no longer be available to the same extent. The SLBs in this position were aware of the possibility of creating lack of trust or distrust among clients by being a pushing steerer, but they strove to explain for the clients that their action is done in the best interest of the clients' future. In relation to the client, pushing steerers strive to uphold power positions and function more as state agents than client agents, in the narrative of Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000). This position also echoes what Sotkasiira (2018) terms a 'know-all', who positions themself as knowing what is best for the client in a very steering way.

 In a similar vein, one SLB involved in managing a home for unaccompanied minors mentioned having to make decisions that clients may not consider positive but instead create a lack of trust:

> Of course there will be sad expressions, but it is about conveying the message so that people understand it is for their own good that I am making this change. I give you money for a bike, then we take away the bus card as no one will give you a bus card for free in the future.

(SLB22, Social Services, Sweden)

Here, the SLB took action in what they perceived to be in the best interests of the young migrant client, especially from a future perspective in which free bus cards would not be available. Hence, the pushing steerer takes the stance that it is crucial to be realistic and a bit 'tough' for the client's own good, moving away from a caring, empathic approach to one that is stricter and pushier.

From this position, an SLB in Finland also mentioned that perhaps slightly too much help is offered to clients:

> Maybe there is a little too much helping, and more critically, we could say that the client is responsible for themself and should do and learn how to do things here, and then we help them with that.

(SLB15, Social Services, Finland)

As positioning oneself entails taking a stance (Harré and van Langenhove, 1991), the pushing steerer mostly embraces and supports the institutional system while pushing the migrant client to become more active, in line with recent neoliberal turns in welfare services (Larsson, 2015).

Critical questioner

In the final position constructed, the SLB's standpoint is quite critical both towards the migrant client and the institutional system. In the data, SLBs taking a critical questioner approach were rare; however, as this position entails critical elements of both sensemaking of SLBs' trust and positionings between the client and the institutional system, I suggest a fifth positioning, namely the critical questioners.

When I asked about experiences of trust in institutional encounters, the critical questioner shared experiences of clients being too trusting and hence becoming passive and wanting the SLB to decide on their part, for example, about educational paths, which created frustration. Further, this position also entailed distrust towards the system:

> I can admit that in certain cases, I can feel distrust towards my clients. Here, we touch upon sensitive things, such as migration politics. These are things that actually are not anything I have to do with. These clients get a residence permit on the basis of asylum, and then they come to the Public Employment Office. But when I start looking into their history, I cannot help but think that they have not fled from Syria. I don't have any numbers on this, but quite a few that I have met over the years are not coming from war.

(SLB17, Employment Service, Sweden)

Here, the SLB positions themselves as critical of both the client's deservingness of asylum and of the Swedish migration policy. While SLBs taking a position of critical questioners entail a negative stance towards both the client and the system, the interlocutor did not blame the individual migrant as everyone has the right to seek a better life; rather, their distrust and frustration were directed at the migration policy. This distrust emerged after 2015 due to Sweden's government welcoming asylum seekers and highlighting the necessity for Sweden to help, while according to the SLB, society would not be able to integrate this big number of asylum seekers and in addition, they were – according to the experience of this SLB – not people fleeing war.

When I asked about the loss of trust in the Swedish migration system, the interlocutor recognised their shift from a more caring to a more critical perspective:

> I guess I do not have the same caring perspective as perhaps a colleague who assumes that everyone is a refugee with terrible experiences. That colleague probably feels sorry for

individual persons. I don't do that. [. . .] it is possible that I have moved from a more caring perspective to identifying myself more as a civil servant and with the rules; the rules we have are the ones in place, and I am quite strict within that frame. It has a lot to do with my experiences from 2015.

(SLB17, Employment Services, Sweden)

Interestingly, their criticism of the system is different from that of the resisting warrior, criticising the neoliberal, efficacy-driven institutional system. Further, this position is the only one associating trust with negative relations, such as clients being too trusting and also the only one revealing distrust towards clients.

Towards a typology of positionings among SLBs

Based on the analyses presented in the previous section, I would like to draw our thinking on SLBs' work in the context of forced migration and trust towards a typology of positionings. Recognising the epistemological rigour of typologies and the tendency to form our thinking in simplified ways (Bailey, 1994), I emphasise that the positions unfolded from the empirical data were dynamic and changeable, in line with research by Hagelund (2009), Belabas and Gerrits (2017), and Tarkiainen (2020). The typology is an interpretation of the various key stances SLBs take within each of the five positions, along with key characteristics of each position. Finally, I suggest an outline of the agent of the state/agent of the client in relation to the positionings (Table 1).

Here, I strive to expand the narrative by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) and Eriksson and Johansson (2022) on SLBs as either client or state agents and consider the positions on an analytical spectrum. The resisting warrior and empathic carer can be understood as positions where SLBs act as agents of the client, resonating with client-centred practices (Eriksson and Johansson, 2022). In the centre, the neutral mediator is neither critical of the system nor of the migrant client, but they are still positioned more strongly as an agent of the system than an agent of the client in their sensemaking of trust. For the pushing steerer and critical questioner, the focus is more on a matter to be resolved, aware of the possibility of distrust from the client's side. Pushing steerers are agents of the system who support the system, resonating with authority-centred practices (Eriksson and Johansson, 2022). Critical questioners, however, might show criticism towards the institutional system, while also being ambivalent towards the client as being undeserving but in the same time having the right to seek a better life. Hence, critical questioners can be interpreted as neither client agents nor state agents. The sensemaking of trust strongly centred around SLBs striving to gain clients trust, in line with previous research (Senghaas *et al.*, 2019; Sundbäck, 2024a). While this article centred on SLBs' trust discussions and how they used their discretion and hence took positions, I would suggest that this typology can be useful and further elaborated on and explored beyond the context of trust, forced migrants and the Nordics.

Conclusive discussion

In this article, theoretically informed by positioning theory, street-level bureaucracy and trust and empirically informed by interviews with SLBs supporting forced migrants' settlement, I show how SLBs in Finland and Sweden position themselves in relation to their migrant clients and the institutional systems in their sensemaking of trust. Hence, this article deepens our understanding of the multifaceted work of SLBs by revealing the diverse positions taken behind institutional walls and unfolding the 'faces' of the institution that migrant clients might meet in their initial settling. Echoing previous research on SLBs and discretion in work with migrants in the Nordics (Larsson,

Table 1. A typology of positionings among street-level bureaucrats in light of trust

	Resisting warrior	Empathic carer	Neutral mediator	Pushing steerer	Critical questioner
Key stances in positions	Supports needs of clients, not system	Sees clients' perspectives and feelings	Only gives information related to services	Strict relations to clients	Questions migration policy
	Uses discretion consciously	Draws on common ethnic backgrounds	Formal approach	Realistic in view on language level needed	Provocated by overly trusting clients
	Moral dilemmas	Warm, affective relation	Follows rules strictly	Clients to do things in a certain order	Ambivalent, but not blaming clients
	Bends institutional rules	Positive towards trust	Positive towards trust	Trusts clients	Distrusting clients, distrusting institutional system
	Positive towards trust	Trusts clients	Trusts clients	Not afraid of lack of trust in order to reach goal	
	Trusts clients				
Key character-ristics of positions:	Social justice, rights-based approach	Empathy, caring, helping approach	Mental distance, formal approach	Steering, teaching approach	Sceptical, critical approach
Agent of the client or the state?	Agent of the client	Both agent of the client and of the state:	Agent of the state:	Agent of the state:	Not agent of the state, nor agent of the client:
	Close proximity to clients, on the same side	Close proximity to clients, warm relationships	Representative of the system, distanced from the client	Hierarchic relationship, teaching from above	Critical towards both system and client

2015; Eriksson and Johansson, 2022), the interlocutors balanced tensions between the institutional demands and needs of clients.

My analyses reveal a typology of SLB positionings: *resisting warrior, empathic carer, neutral mediator, pushing steerer,* and *critical questioner*. Instead of being given and static, these positionings are continuously socially constructed and reconstructed in SLBs' interactions with migrant clients and institutional scripts. In this article, the typology outlined relates to how SLBs position themselves through their sensemaking of trust. Further, the article shows how SLBs take similar positions in their encounters, despite representing different institutions and transcending national borders. In line with Weiss and Gren (2021), my findings suggest that what matters in the various positionings is not primarily the institutional framework, but the ethics and reflexivity of the individual SLBs. Interestingly, SLBs seem to differ in their awareness of whether and how they position themselves and the consequences this positioning has for the client.

Through these various positionings, SLBs enact migration policy practices on local and individual levels. Thus, the SLBs' positionings in the encounters *modify individual migration trajectories*, which have an impact on the clients' processes of settling in the new host country and their futures. This impact is crucial to recognise, first, as clients may not be aware of the variety of positions that SLBs can occupy and second, as the non-transparency of positions might endanger equal access to welfare services and benefits.

While this article contributes to the academic discussion empirically with new data and analytically through a typological approach to various positionings in the encounters, the data does not offer sufficient answers to what personal antecedents, education, or profession influence the positionings. Nor does the data provide opportunities to explore what consequences the positions have for the client, such as access to service and benefits (see, e.g., Bell and Smith, 2022). These questions provide directions for future research on forced migration and street-level bureaucracy.

Finally, regarding practical implications, the suggested typology can function as a practical tool for SLBs and their institutions to reflect on trust dynamics, dilemmas, and various stances in relation to, on the one hand, institutional scripts and regulations and, on the other hand, the needs of clients.

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