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LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION FOR REFUGEES. STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS' PERSPECTIVES ON POLICY IMPLEMENTATION GAPS IN SWEDEN

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Labour Market Integration for Refugees. Street-Level Bureaucrats' Perspectives on Policy Implementation Gaps in Sweden

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Abstract

From the 1990s onward, there has been growing body of scholarly accounts and official reviews suggesting that the Swedish labour market integration policy has failed in its objectives. This article examines the reasons for the persistence of policy failures in the labour market integration of migrants to Sweden from the perspectives of bureaucrats working at the end of the policy chain. A particular focus is laid on the implementation of the so-called individualized approach in the Swedish integration policy. The data is derived from official documents and semi-structured interviews with public employment service case workers. Notable gaps between policy as written and policy as performed are revealed. Contributing factors included, besides complex client needs, organizational factors resulting in limited time resources available for employment service workers and a limited range of services on offer for their clients.

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Introduction

According to the Swedish government, participation in working life is key to integration and the elimination of any sense among migrants that they are not full-fledged members of the society (Government Offices of Sweden 2014). While, on the part of its overall migrant integration policies, Sweden has for long ranked high in the international Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX n.d.), the effectiveness of the country's labour integration policies for migrants, including the policy paradigms within which these polices have been developed, has increasingly come under scrutiny in the government's own audit reports (e.g., Swedish National Audit Office 2005,5; 2014,3; 2017,4). In consequence, new policies have been introduced to deal with the perceived failures (e.g., Government Bill 1997/98,16; 2009/10,60; 2016/17,175).

There are many reasons why a policy may fail. It might be poorly designed and fail to tackle the problem it is intended to solve, or it might largely be merely symbolic and never even seriously meant to tackle it (cf., e.g., Bovens and 't Hart 2011). As suggested by some (e.g., Hall 1993), policy failures and attempts at adjustment may then very well lead to future failures. It is that scenario that this article explores in its country context: the persistence of policy failures related to migrant labour market integration in Sweden. This it does by analysing implementation gaps from the perspective of bureaucrats who work at the end of the policy chain, making operational decisions while acting based on official policy.

Throughout the integration process, and particularly during the first years in the new country, migrants come into contact with the formal institutions charged with facilitating their (hopefully) smooth entry into society. In some cases, these street-level bureaucrats are formally assigned case workers or teachers, while in others the question may simply be of one of a myriad of public-sector workers whom individual migrants encounter as they attempt to

navigate the complexity of the integration process. Quite commonly, these front-line bureaucrats maintain direct and continuous contact with their clients for a long period of time, all the while they gradually become part of the new society.

To investigate the role of Swedish bureaucrats in the implementation of their country's integration policies, the theory of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980) is drawn upon in this article. The key insight utilized is that, in order to fully understand public policy implementation, the bureaucrats working with it at the end of the policy chain – at the 'street level' – need to be looked at (cf. Hill and Hupe 2002). The implementation of policy, or the translation from policy to practice, relies on the available resources as well as the bureaucrats' attitudes and the degree to which they feel committed to the organization and the specific policies (Hupe and Buffat 2014; Lipsky 1980).

Sweden's integration policies have, over time, increasingly come to focus on individual migrants' entry into the country's labour market. Today, every step of the reception process targeting newly arrived immigrants is focused on assisting them in finding employment. This article looks at how case workers at the Swedish Public Employment Service (*hereafter* PES), which today has the main responsibility in the integration of newly arrived migrants through specific introduction programmes, experience and handle their authority when implementing integration policy. To allow for a more in-depth perspective, the analysis concentrates on the implementation of what is characterized, specifically, as an 'individualized approach' to integration policy. Individualization is a key concept put forth in the strategic guidelines of the 2010 Swedish Establishment Reform (*Etableringsreform*) and a central means relied upon in the subsequent Establishment Programme (*Etableringsprogrammet*; Ordinance 2017, 820), the stated aim of which is to empower newly arrived migrants and enable their speedier integration into the labour market. According to the new policy, newly arrived migrants have the right to

timely and tailor-made assistance to improve their employment prospects, which includes individualized support for job search, training, re-qualification, and language training (Government Bill 2009/10:60, 36). Tailor-made provisions, however, tend to require considerable discretion from street-level bureaucrats (Tummers et al. 2015). Accordingly, this article asks to which extent policies and organizational practices in the delivery of Swedish labour market integration policy for migrants actually allow for individualized interventions and migrant empowerment.

The data sources for this study included official documents and semi-structed interviews with Swedish PES case workers. The article is organized as follows. First, the Swedish Establishment Reform and the individualized approach relied upon in the country's integration policy are outlined. After that, the theoretical perspectives relevant to understanding implementation gaps in integration policy are discussed. The data and methods used in the study are described more closely in the third section. Next, the case workers' perceptions regarding their professional judgement and discretionary agency in their dealings with their migrant clients and in implementing the called-for individualized approach are investigated, followed, in the subsequent section, by an examination of the migrant clients' perceptions related to their experiences of their encounters with PES case workers and of the consequences of those encounters for their labour market prospects. Finally, the findings from the study are summarized, together with a brief discussion of its implications for future policy work in the area of migrant labour integration.

Individualized approach in Swedish integration policy

In an international perspective, Sweden is generally considered an outlier when it comes to integration policy. The relevant policies and practices, it is typically noted, all speak of a uniquely strong orientation towards, and prioritization of, specifically, labour market integration for migrants, as well as of a multicultural integration line that places comparatively few demands on migrants to become full members of the *demos* (e.g., Borevi 2014; Fernandez and Jensen 2017). While, formally, the comprehensive integration policies in Sweden have tended to rank as the most responsive, evidence-based, and financially well-supported of all the countries included in the Migrant Integration Policy Index (e.g., Huddleston et al. 2015), there are today, however, new challenges impacting the integration of newly arrived migrants. Swedish policymakers, for example, have already some decades ago noted with concern how it takes very long for refugees to find employment. Yet, after widening notably during the 1990s, the gap in employment rates between the native and foreign-born population in the county has not significantly narrowed since then (Åslund et al. 2017). To tackle the perceived policy failures, the Swedish government has introduced several reforms in the past three decades, all aimed at facilitating a speedier integration of refugees into the labour market and other spheres of social life. Probably the most comprehensive one of these, the so-called Establishment Reform, implemented in 2010 by the country's centre-right government, transferred the responsibility for the integration of newly arrived refugees from the municipalities to the central government, or, more precisely, the country's public employment service PES. The reform was built around policy goals conceptualized as centralization, activation, individualization, and freedom of choice; these, together, were to speed up newly arrived migrants' integration into the Swedish labour market and the society at large (Swedish Government Bill 2009/10, 60). Here the Swedish developments followed a broader

international trend. From 2000 on, individualization had become a powerful discourse in European labour markets (see, e.g., van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007). The rationale offered was that the heterogeneity of the labour market required stronger consideration of jobseekers' individual characteristics (Eichhorst et al. 2008). Adjusting service provision to service recipients' individual circumstances rather than relying on some one-size-fits-all approach was, however, also promoted from the perspective of effectivization of public services (van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007).

In the Swedish Establishment Programme, individualization was articulated in two principal ways. First of all, it was thematized through a focus on newly arrived migrants as responsible for their own integration and labour market inclusion (Swedish Government Bill 1997/98,16).[†] A combination of incentives and control mechanisms was set out to underline the importance of migrants' own responsibility for their active participation in the programme. One such incentive is an establishment benefit paid for 24 months (Swedish Government Bill 2009/10:60, 105). Secondly, individualization was articulated in the programme through an emphasis on the empowerment of the migrant (op. cit., 34). The migrants involved were now to be provided with an individually tailored two-year introduction plan that includes elements of Swedish language training (SFI, Swedish for Immigrants), courses on Swedish society, and participation in labour market initiatives (e.g., validation of educational and professional experience, internships, job training). The overall package for them accommodates different interventions based on different individual circumstances, replacing all earlier one-size-fits-all approaches. Previous work history, educational background, and the persons' aspirations related to their future working life in Sweden are to influence the content of the individual

[†] The Establishment Programme targets refugees, individuals granted subsidiary protection status, and family members of individuals aged 20 to 64 who belong to these groups.

establishment plans developed by PES case workers in collaboration with their migrant clients. To empower the latter and to achieve the desired individualization of the services provided, the reform allowed more freedom (Lipsky 2010) for PES case workers to exercise their professional judgement and use their discretion. One key goal of the reform was to make newly arrived migrants register themselves at PES right away and thus meet their case workers earlier than before. In the old programme, they were first enrolled in language training, and only after having reached a certain level of Swedish language proficiency could they register themselves at PES and start participating in labour market activities. With the implementation of the Establishment Programme, they were also now able to participate in different types of establishment activities at the same time, such as language training combined with an internship job.

Persistent Implementation Gaps

Official evaluations of the Establishment Programme as a whole and the PES role in it in particular, however, show that the implementation of the new policy has suffered from several problems. There have been issues with the delivery and quality of procured services as well as with early contact with working life, the assessment of migrants' competence and knowledge acquired from past contexts as well as their validation for Swedish labour market purposes has taken excessively long, and the co-operation between the state, the municipality, and the business community has not worked well (e.g., Swedish National Audit Office 2014; 2015; 2017; 2019; Swedish Agency for Public Management 2012). Despite the government's express aim of enabling early interventions, the National Audit Office's 2015 report, for instance, shows that newly arrived migrants still had to wait for months for their establishment plan and that they did not receive equivalent service throughout the country. The political goal of achieving fast labour market integration following the conclusion of the two-year

Establishment Programme (see Swedish Government Bill 2009/10:60, 69) has proven evidently difficult to achieve as well, prompting the country's government to issue strict directives to PES to significantly improve its performance in this regard (Ministry of Labour 2018).

Against the background of these and other unachieved migrant integration policy objectives in the country (for more on them, see, e.g., Cheung and Rödin 2018; Ennerberg 2020; Larsson 2019; Lidén et al 2019; Spehar 2021), this article seeks to respond to the urgent need for a deepened understanding of the causes and consequences of the situation from the policy and migrant perspectives. This it does by taking its point of departure in the experienced implementation gaps related to the Establishment Programme, based on an examination of the perceptions of street-level bureaucrats and migrant clients.

Street-level bureaucrats as policy implementers

Previous policy-oriented research on street-level bureaucracies (*hereafter* SLBs) has focused on policy implementation challenges in sectors such as social policy (e.g., Jewel and Glazer 2006), employment policy (May and Winter 2009), education policy (Taylor 2007), and environmental policy (Zhang and Yao 2018). In this article, the theoretical approaches drawn upon in studies in those fields are applied to the migrant integration policy field as well, to help increase our understanding of implementation failures in that particular sector. A small but growing body of work has already explicitly addressed the question of how SLBs perceive working with migrant clients, with the explorations ranging from the degree to which SLBs choose to go beyond the call of duty when engaging with migrant clients (Belabas and Gerrits 2017; James and Julian 2020) to the role played by cultural values and other norms in the meetings between migrants and front-line officials (Hagelund 2010; Volckmar-Eeg 2020) and

the way clients characterize different types of SLB based on their encounters with the public sector (Schierenbeck and Spehar 2021). While the findings from such research offer important insights into the dynamics and challenges of the encounters between SLBs and their migrant clients, there is a need for further investigation regarding the capacity of SLBs to implement integration policy in a manner that bridges the gap between policy as written and policy as performed (see Lipsky 2010, 17).

As research on SLBs has shown, street-level bureaucracy work is characterized by an implicit tension between resource constraints and the inexorable demands for public service (Lipsky 1980). The *problem of resources* is both central and permanent for all types of SLBs. Hupe and Buffat (2014) have coined the term 'public service gap', which refers to the situation where 'what is required of street-level bureaucrats exceeds what is provided to them for the fulfilment of their tasks' (ibid., 556). It is hypothesized that when facing different challenges and dealing with pressures, street-level bureaucrats' discretion will assist them by prioritizing certain rules as appropriate to follow, to ensure successful implementation (Brodkin 1997; cf. Noordegraaf and Steijn 2013). In the SLB literature, this discretion is understood as the space for manoeuvre between the rules and procedures governing SLBs' work and the necessity to improvise in order to respond to the individual needs of one's clients. Since SLBs operate in complex social environments structured by rather ambiguous laws, regulations, and restrictions, without discretion street-level bureaucrats' tasks would be nearly impossible to accomplish. Different organizational settings in which bureaucrats work can either amplify or constrain their discretion, thus affecting the prospects of policy implementation (Hupe and Buffat 2014).

In Lipsky's (2010) initial argument, the question of bureaucrats' dealing with discretion was analytically addressed in terms of *coping strategies*. These are what individuals resort to when

confronted with a need to deal with a gap between demands on them and their available resources. To cope with that gap, street-level bureaucrats may, for example, modify their initial job conceptions by reducing their ideal image of their job to a more pragmatic version. According to Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003), actions and decisions by individual street-level bureaucrats are shaped in particular by their personal beliefs and norms about what is fair and unfair, which clients are 'deserving' or 'undeserving', and which are the easy and which the difficult cases. In what follows, this article takes up the theme of street-level bureaucrats' coping behaviour, asking to what extent the bureaucrats actually engage in it and exercise their professional discretion in order to produce a desirable outcome in pursuing the individualized approach characteristic of the current Swedish labour market integration policy.

Data and methods

From a policy perspective, most studies on government efforts to promote labour market integration in Sweden have tended to focus on examining the design or the underpinning logic of specific policies and programmes, without including the perceptions of those implementing the policies and those directly affected by it (e.g., Andersson 2020; Calmfors and Sánchez Gassen 2019; Emilsson 2015; Valenta and Bunar 2010). Studying the perceptions of street-level bureaucrats and their migrant clients would, however, allow for a more nuanced understanding of the functioning of the institutional systems for labour market integration and of the effects those systems have on people coming under their scope. While not always easily reducible to statistically generalizable data, street-level bureaucrats' and migrants' accounts of their experiences can nonetheless result in identifiable clusters and trends that open up avenues and provide material for further research, contributing to the improvement of programmes in terms of their development and delivery. The same empirically observable, 'objective' indicators such as workload, budget issues, policy guidelines, and so forth may be perceived

and assessed differently by the individual street-level bureaucrats and migrant clients concerned. In other words, it might well be the case that the researcher observes an implementation gap that is not perceived as such by the actors involved – or the other way around.

This study builds on multiple data sets from two separate but methodologically and theoretically related research projects exploring the integration process for migrants to Sweden; both projects departed from the perceptions and experiences of street-level bureaucrats and newly arrived migrants.[‡] In them, interviews were conducted with respondents located mostly in and around Gothenburg, Sweden's second-largest city, which has taken in a substantial number of newly arrived refugees. The data from the first of the two projects derive from research carried out in collaboration between the author and the City of Gothenburg, as part of a mapping exercise to better understand how refugees having arrived in Sweden since 2015 and street-level bureaucrats working within the Swedish Establishment Programme (also known in the field as 'introduction programme') experience and perceive the utility of the integration services and activities offered. The interviews for it were conducted in 2017 and 2018, on the premises of Integration Centre meeting place for migrants and Swedes in Gothenburg. The second data set was collected in fall 2020 and spring 2021 as part of a broader, international research project funded by the Swedish Research Council. All interviews for it were conducted virtually, due to the pandemic.

[‡] A newly arrived migrant is here defined as a person who has been granted a residence permit as a refugee or for other protective reasons, as well as a person who has received a residence permit because of their connection to such a person. There is no commonly accepted end-date for how long a person is considered 'newly arrived'. The commonly found definition is that the attribute encompasses the time period for which the individual remains enrolled in the Swedish PES's establishment programme, or a maximum of two years (Västra Götaland County Administrative Board 2019).

Interviews with Swedish PES case workers

A total of eight case workers from PES in the greater Gothenburg area were interviewed. Information about the study was spread through local managers at PES offices in and around the city of Gothenburg, to all their employment officers working in the Establishment Programme. The case workers interested in participating in the project then contacted the project researchers. The recruitment, in other words, was through self-selection. One criterion for participation was, however, that the case workers had several years of experience working with migrant clients at PES, and could thus contribute with reflections covering a longer period of time (cf. Hill and Buffat 2014). The interview questions concerned the degree to which, in the opinion of the case workers, various factors put forward in previous research – such as organizational characteristics, client attributes, the clarity and adequacy of policy objectives and means, and the amount of resources made available – influenced their capacity and discretion when encountering migrant clients and implementing the individualized approach prescribed by the prevailing policy. To be able to distinguish between person-bound factors, such as perceptions, and context-bound factors, the interview questions also inquired about the organization's trajectory in terms of changes in the action prescriptions and resources given to street-level bureaucrats: How had their work context changed over time – before and after the Establishment Reform of 2010 as well as before and after the high influx of refugees to Sweden during the 2015 European migrant crisis? How had the changing contexts impacted the case workers' discretion and how did they treat their clients in the new context? How did the case workers perceive the current policies for the integration of newly arrived migrants in Sweden? Were they fit for their intended purpose?

Interviews with migrant clients

The migrant clients in this study were all of Syrian origin. In 2021, there were approximately 196,000 people born in Syria living in Sweden, making Syrians the largest group of foreign-born residents in Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2022). A total of thirty-eight respondents were interviewed individually. The interviews were conducted by a research assistant supported by licensed professional interpreters, and they lasted a little over sixty minutes each. The individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic by an Arabic-speaking research assistant. These interviews lasted from just under thirty minutes to approximately seventy-five minutes.

The recruitment of the migrant participants was primarily through snowball sampling, via contacts in public agencies and non-governmental organizations. The main criterion for inclusion was that the respondents had to have previously participated or be currently enrolled in the two-year Establishment Programme. The majority of the respondents included in the study had received their residence permits sometime between 2014 and 2017. Previous research has shown that factors such as age, gender, education level, family situation, and country of origin have a significant effect on the individual integration process. In view of this, it was deemed important to include in this study an intersectional perspective to take into account how different factors such as those just mentioned affect newly arrived migrants' experiences. When recruiting interview participants, a special effort was therefore made to arrive at as varied a selection as possible, in order to allow more experiences and perspectives to come into play.

The structure of the migrant interviews encouraged respondents to reflect on their general experiences of labour market integration and the way their encounters with case workers at Swedish PES had impacted their career prospects, if at all. The interviewees were also asked

about their level of trust in their PES case workers, whether they felt themselves to have been treated fairly, and whether their case workers had been responsive to their needs and requests during the programme.

Ethical considerations

Due to the political sensitivity of the research topic (success vs. failure in policy implementation), all interviews have been anonymized as regards personal information, with all interviewee names changed. Most interviewees appeared willing and capable of speaking openly during the interviews, even about difficult matters. All respondents volunteered for the study and provided their informed consent to participate in it. A consent form they were asked to read and sign before each interview session explained the study objectives, the aims and procedures of the interview, as well as their right to anonymity, confidentiality, privacy, not to answer any question, and withdraw from the study at any time. Before audio recording the conversations, respondents were asked for their permission, reassuring them that all data and information would remain strictly confidential and that their identities would be protected. Where a written consent was not possible, an oral consent was obtained.

Implementing individualization: PES case workers' perceptions

Since the 2010 Establishment Reform, individualization has been the key concept in the strategic guidelines of the Swedish PES. PES case workers have the mandate to adjust the policy guiding their actions according to their migrant clients' individual needs and increase their freedom and responsibility. An individual plan is put together following an individual assessment of each client's skills, education, and family situation. The obligatory activities for the migrant clients in the Establishment Programme during the two years of its duration include

the language course Swedish for Immigrants, civic orientation (a minimum of 100 hours' basic course on the Swedish society), and various training elements preparing participants for work, such as internships or skills and knowledge validation. Other activities can include education on different levels, job application support, and/or support and advice for starting a business.

The idea of individualization, as expressed in the Establishment Programme, is premised on the possibility of strengthening and increasing case workers' professional discretion. However, merely giving more space for manoeuvre to the case workers does not automatically equip them to individualize the counselling they perform. In the perception of the case workers interviewed for this study, factors such as the availability of resources, the organizational context, and client attributes could all negative impact their ability to meet the individual needs of their newly arrived migrant clients registering at PES.

High caseload and complexity of the clients

In the interviews with the PES case workers, the factor most frequently emphasized as negatively affecting the level of individualization achieved was related to available resources – namely, the limited amount of time that case workers reported they could devote to each individual client. According to the interviewees, their case load was constantly high, sometimes well over one hundred clients per case worker. Due to this, they had less time than they felt they needed for each of their clients, which in many cases led to impersonal meetings. Case workers Simon and Adam reflected on their high case load as follows:

> You get stressed out and you don't feel like you're doing a good job, as there's never enough time. And it's hard to then meet all your clients' individual needs. You are responsible for, like, 150 clients, but maybe you can only work qualitatively with ten of them. (Simon)

> The case workers get burnt out and don't even have time to actually meet all the clients enrolled in the programme, as they should. The clients we meet tell us about how difficult it is to get in touch with employment office administrators. (Adam)

The perceived lack of time for counselling tasks was, however, attributed not only to the experienced high case load. Besides managing activities aimed at migrant clients' greater labour market activation, Swedish PES case workers also co-ordinate, together with municipalities, activities related to migrant clients' language training and civic orientation, and administer their benefits. Several interviewees emphasized that the organizational structure at their PES did not sufficiently allow for the recognition of their migrant clients' complexity. Individualization through counselling was, moreover, seen as an especially complex task when the question was of newly arrived migrants. Very frequently, those in this group were in the need of assistance also in other matters than those directly related to their labour market integration, such as when it came to their housing, their children's schooling, their contacts with other authorities, and the like. Responding to these needs usually took time from skills assessment and job matching for them. Also, the fact that many newly arrived migrants lacked Swedish skills was commonly perceived as a factor negatively impacting the quality of counselling. Many counselling sessions were conducted with interpreters, which not uncommonly led to miscommunication and misunderstandings that took time to clear and thus prolonged the sessions. Case worker Maria described the situation as follows:

> We have lots of meetings done through an interpreter, and it's clear that the quality of those meetings varies greatly. Ensuring a good meeting when we do it through an interpreter brings specific challenges, such as how to identify and resolve misunderstandings, and it requires more from all those involved, to make sure everything is understood and we get through.

Constrained discretion

The individualization approach in the Establishment Programme required considerable case worker discretion to enable the adjustment of the intervention to the specific needs of each individual client. However, according to the interviewed case workers, their leeway in responding to their clients was limited. This, however, was not only because they did not to have sufficient time available for their encounters with their clients, as described above; it was also owing to the increased standardization of organizational practices at their workplace and the limited number of personalizable activities they could offer to their migrant clients. The Establishment Programme components, they maintained, were still highly standardized, in contradiction to the policy aspirations of the individualization approach. Especially the early stages of the migrant inclusion in client meetings, the case workers criticized, suffered from a highly formalized structure. Registration and profiling procedures, for example, were the same for all clients. Case workers Anna and Simon spoke of the consequences of this standardization the following way:

> The discussions between the case workers and their migrant clients are very much steered by what data I need to register in the system. (Anna)

> All individual plans look more or less the same, and that is very weird, but it satisfies the system, so…. What we work with is numbers; you don't see the individual behind them. (Simon)

The interviewees further argued that following an organizational reform of the Swedish PES in 2008, the case workers had had less time and opportunities for direct contacts with employers in the labour market, which they considered very detrimental to their ability to match migrant

jobseekers with suitable jobs. Moreover, their administrative workload had increased in recent years due to increased needs of documentation and follow-up, leaving case workers less time to spend on their main task, which was supposed to be meeting with their clients and counselling. As the above Anna complained, 'There is an incredible amount of administrative work now, if I compare the 1990s and the 2000s', while Adam continued, 'Today we spend more time on administrative work with the computer than we do in meetings with our clients; we had more time for our clients up until about fifteen years ago.'

The ongoing re-organization of the Swedish PES, since 2014 has brought increased digitalization of the services offered. In consequence, all jobseekers today, to a far higher degree than before, must manage their programme participation digitally. The fewer opportunities for face-to-face counselling and the diminished communication the changes have meant in practice, the interviewees told, had negatively affected their ability to develop adequate action plans for their clients. Moreover, digitalization had also raised questions about how much, and exactly what, information should be communicated during the meetings between case workers and migrant clients, and how far the migrant clients' own responsibility extended in areas like information search. As one case worker, Sara, described some of the issues: 'How much responsibility should be put on the individual...what's for us, what's up to the client, versus what's our role here and now.'

Also, in regard to the content of their counselling, the case workers in this study felt themselves constrained. All too often, in their view, they had to choose amongst the existing programmes and the service providers available in each municipality. As one of them, Linda, put it, 'The available resources, rather than individual needs of the client, very often decide what services we offer to the client.'

Although the Establishment Programme in fact included a fairly large range of measures to which the immigrant clients could be referred, finding solutions that suited each individual client was nonetheless experienced as difficult. Maria described the problem for her part as follows:

> For the group of migrant clients who have higher education or lots of professional experience in some particular profession, there are not always enough options to offer that match that education or experience. More likely, the limited range of initiatives and measures available will result in the client's full potential and previous work experience not being fully utilized. This constrains us in our work with immigrant clients, and it is also frustrating for the client.

Coping strategies

As previous research has shown, street-level bureaucrats develop different coping strategies to deal with the challenges they face (e.g., Tummers et al. 2015). In this study, several such coping strategies could be identified. Among these, the most prominent were what we might call routinizing and cherry-picking clients, or, using personal resources like one's available time to help certain clients more than others.

The interviewed case workers shared high ideals and strong ambitions to do good work with migrant clients, and they felt bad about resorting to their coping mechanisms. They emphasized, however, how in different situations they were in practice forced to handle their clients differently than they ideally would and wanted to. A high case load could, for example, lead to not being able to meet clients in person and thus to routinizing the social dimension of the case worker–client relationship. 'A caseload close to 300 makes it difficult to meet all clients, so, instead, group meetings are organized, phone and email are preferred, as opposed

to meeting in person which is more time consuming', explained Adam. The interviewees also emphasized that some migrant clients needed more extensive support while others were perceived as more independent. As Simon described the reasons for what in actual fact amounted to cherry-picking at his PES office, 'Some clients we really must take by the hand. You need to work closely with them. But you can't do that with all of them; we simply don't have enough time in a workweek for that.'

The degree of complexity of the cases the PES workers worked on varied. This formed the basis for some of the cases being considered as more of a priority and more important to invest time in than others. Anna spoke of such considerations in her case:

> I think that, in the case of those who are far from the labour market, those who are sick, whether it's about a physical or mental illness...it should be less time-consuming for me to make the decision that this or that person is not suitable for the labour market and that the social services should take over. But at the same time, if the person says I want to, I really want to work, it's really important to me…. It's almost always some relatives that they want to bring to Sweden, whom they need to support financially…. In those cases I can feel that I do want to use any room I might have for manoeuvre, to really try and find some suitable activation programmes for them…. It takes a lot of time, actually, but still, I can feel that it's important for me to do that.

Going the extra mile for some clients, as Anna here wanted to do, could also result from the client showing extra motivation and determination and actively seeking help and support. This had been the case with Maria, among others. As she described some such cases:

> Some of my clients are more active in asking for support and guidance. Some give us an extra phone call or knock on the door and say, 'Please, I don't know what to do, I need some guidance.'

Correspondingly, case workers were also clear about their reasons for de-prioritizing certain clients. As the same Maria elaborated on them:

> For example, when you meet someone that you feel about, like, 'Oh, God, poor thing', or 'How pathetic is this!' or 'We can't ask that much of you because it's going to be too much for your anyway.' You wouldn't say it aloud, but you think like that. With that you've then, deep down there somewhere, set the bar for yourself for what you can expect from that person and what you can accomplish with them, and that I think then also influences what you might offer and not offer to that person – you might then not give them all the help you otherwise could, in other words. Not that it means that you've then done something wrong in doing so, but it still means that you sort of differentiate between people, in terms of what they get offered and what not.

Implementing individualization: migrant clients' perceptions

When it comes to migrant clients' experiences of their encounters with Swedish PES case workers, the most frequently mentioned and discussed issue in the interviews was the clients' perceived lack of support. It is worth stressing that most of these respondents emphatically did not call into question the overall quality of the case workers, with some interviewees observing that "some case workers are more helpful and qualified than others". However, the interviewed migrants were often of the impression that their PES case workers were inadequately engaged in their service provision work. Several of them described job search meetings with their case worker in which, over time, one was left with the impression of being on one's own when in fact help was needed. Yaren was one of them:

> It is very good that we have this introduction programme [Establishment Programme]. However, I don't think that they are trying very hard to help us with the basics we need. I search for the information I need myself; my case worker at PES didn't guide me through how to validate my education, how

> to apply to a university. Luckily, I know English and I can find my way around without having to have someone helping me search for the information I need, but people who don't know Swedish, they will get lost.

Less common, but not entirely isolated, phenomenon experienced by the migrant clients was street-level bureaucrats entirely absent from the establishment process. Waleed reported of his experience in this regard as follows:

> At PSE I haven't met or spoken to any case workers; we don't make any plans. I don't know – I don't even know who he or she might be. Who is the person we should talk to? Trying to get in touch with a case worker is like trying to get an appointment with a minister or the king. You send an email and wait for a reply for ages, just to make an appointment.

Another migrant interviewee, Sarah, described in detail multiple meetings with case workers assisting her in finding a job. In due course, she nevertheless found herself with a feeling of being left on her own when actually needing some help. As she explained it:

> They didn't give me any guidance at all. They told me that I had to do it on my own, that I had to search on my own. Even when I got back to them after finishing my MA, they said, 'Oh, you're so good, your CV is good, and you have all those academic grades and so on, but you should nevertheless go continue and get a teaching license, as that would be better for you.' And yeah, they didn't put me in any touch with any kind of jobs. They just assumed that I'd know how to take care of everything myself.

Lack of tailored support

To a greater or lesser extent, migration to Sweden necessarily involved, for all PES client interviewees in this study, a restart of life. Starting over was perceived by all interviewees as a strenuous challenge, regardless of whether one had a long professional experience behind one's back or had never participated in the labour market before. Against this context, interviewees pointed to several shortcomings in the individualized person-centred approach.

A recurring theme in the interviews was the feeling that one was treated impersonally by PES case workers, which left interviewees with the impression that the case workers were uninterested in their needs and circumstances. Several interviewees complained that they did not have any say over the training courses and internships selected for them by the case workers. Zahira, for instance, reported that 'My introduction plan is almost over, and I have not done anything for my career here. Yet, when I tell my case worker at PES what I want to do, she sends me to other things.' Most interviewees felt that their case worker demanded from them flexibility in their preferred occupational choice, and did so without any real interest or understanding of their previous work-related experience or training. One highly educated migrant client, Seada, who had already received her educational validation in Sweden, described in a rather pessimistic, indeed disillusioned tone her view of what would be the result of relying on the opportunities identified for her by her PES case worker:

> So here's the problem. The PES might be able to help with finding lots of employment offers, but not in the professions you dream about. Personally, I haven't studied for eight years just to get a job at McDonald's or work as a carpenter or a painter. What was the point in getting all that education then? So, given that I have studied for so many years and that I've succeeded in having my previous education validated here in Sweden, I think I should stand a chance of finding a better job. But the case workers can't offer me that; they can only send me to McDonald's or to a hairdresser's or something of that kind.

A similar experience was described by Amjad, who had a university degree in economics. He wanted to enrol in a short-term truck driver training programme, simply to be able to quickly enter the labour market. He asked his PES case worker if there were any such training programmes available that would open the door for him for transport-related professions. According to Amjad, the case worker nevertheless replied that the PES could not offer him any

such training, because of his academic degree in economics from his home country. This frustrated Amjad deeply:

> I mean, you have a shortage of truck drivers in this country, so it'd be good to support the ambitions of those who want to work as truck drivers. It would be useful for me and it would be useful for this country. It would save time, money, and effort for all.... The PES support system doesn't work. You feel like you're dealing with one giant computer [instead of human beings]. Even when you try to discuss with your case worker a particular situation, the answer you get from them is always, 'Sorry, we can only offer you this or that' or 'Sorry, that is all we can do for you.' You can't change anything.

Hadeel had come to Sweden with a great deal of practical and professional experience from her home country. Her occupational identity as a practicing midwife was of great importance to her. However, having no university degree in medicine, she was not eligible to practice any medical professions in Sweden. Since her arrival in the country, she had, on the contrary, been sent by PES for several internships that, she claimed, had no relation to her professional field of her field of interest. Furthermore, according to her, she had not been allowed any influence over the content of her introduction plan in the Establishment Programme. Aware that the profession of midwife is regulated in Sweden, she nonetheless kept longing for an internship that would give her an opportunity to demonstrate her medical skills:

> Maybe some women want to sew, maybe cook, serve food – it varies. I like working in my profession, you know. I would like to work at some health centre. Not here, here, here, and here – different places all the time. No, it's wrong; it's not right.

Concluding discussion

In Sweden, where state institutions are today responsible for facilitating migrants' establishment in society, encounters between street-level bureaucrats and their immigrant clients are fundamental for the implementation of the government's integration policy. Since the Establishment Reform of 2010, service individualization has become a priority for the latter, following its official recognition as a key factor in any successful labour market integration of migrants. This study has examined the degree to which the individualization approach, so central in official discourse, is actually implemented in policy practice. The interview data with Swedish PES case workers and their migrant clients revealed notable gaps between 'policy as written' and 'policy as performed' (Lipsky 2010, 17). The organizational practices (including time available and the range of services offered), combined with the complexity of client needs, set limits for the actual scope for individualized interventions by PES case workers in the field. As the findings suggest, case workers do not have enough time for the encounters with the newly arrived migrants to be able to offer them individualized service and interventions, nor do they have access to tools they need for the purpose. The responses to the interviews with migrant clients point in the same direction. Besides providing more leeway for case worker discretion, however, the individualization approach was argued to also bring about the empowerment of the migrant clients. This was to be realized by offering the latter measures judged suitable for, and indeed tailored to, the persons' particular needs, in light of their previous work experience and education. Yet, as the interviews with the migrant clients in this study show, these measures all too often were experienced as not adjusted to their personal needs and aspirations. Furthermore, the interviewees felt that they were often enrolled in or offered programmes that they found insufficiently challenging to them. The overall organization of the integration services availed to them also generated frustration, due to poor interactor communication and lengthy waiting periods. The experience of the interviewed

migrant clients was, moreover, that their case workers were often not readily accessible. Limited opportunities for face-to-face meetings along with meetings increasingly moved to email or phone allowed less room for migrant clients to express and negotiate their individual needs and aspirations within the system.

Even if we factor in the systemic pressure from having to quickly develop services and service management in response to a large number of new migrant arrivals in the country, it seems clear, then, that the way Swedish policymakers have promoted individualization in the migrant integration field has not at the same time equipped case workers adequately, to permit them to handle their task of individualizing the services they offer to migrant clients. Indeed, concurrently with promoting individualization, state actors have introduced other policy measures that in fact impede individualization, thus creating policy inconsistency (cf. Hudson et al. 2019). For example, at the same time as the individualized approach was promoted and case workers were entrusted with more room for their discretionary agency, one witnessed an increased development of standardized frameworks in service provision and rapid spread of digitalization of services. According to the interviewees in this study, the discretion at the disposal of their PES case workers remained limited from the start and only decreased over time. To cope with their heavy workload and demanding working conditions, the case workers, for their part, described how they had reduced their ideal image of their job in implementing the policy-prescribed Establishment Programme to a more pragmatic version of it, opting to prioritize speed over attention to their migrant clients' needs and aspirations. Since the complexity of the cases they dealt with varied greatly, some clients were, moreover, viewed by the case workers as more important to prioritize and invest time in than others (cf. Hill and Hupe 2002). The individuals the case workers were more inclined to invest extra time in were those perceived as particularly needy or more likely to 'succeed' quicker in terms of the policy

goals, and those who were more vocal and assertive in pushing for solutions to their situation (cf. Tummers et al. 2015).

Implementing individualized services is a complex task, as a growing body of literature on the topic testifies (cf. Rice et al. 2018). For integration researchers, the findings from this research yield an important observation relevant for the arguments inherent in the deficit approach to understanding integration outcomes. The strength of that literature rests on the manner in which it highlights the existence of programmatic and policy initiatives that can allow migrants to compete meaningfully in the labour market. However, as the findings from this study illustrate, the mere existence of policies, programmes, and measures intended to support migrant integration into the labour market is not enough to guarantee that they will be successful. As the examination above suggests, the intermediary role of case workers in policy implementation is fraught with complexities, challenges, tensions, and even ambiguity due to policy contradictions. The PES case workers in this study lacked the means to produce the sort of flexibility for rapidly implemented pragmatic solutions that policymakers appear to expect of them. It is therefore important for all actors (including migrants themselves) to have some understanding for the complex process that administering integration in today's society is. A tentative lesson to be drawn from this study is that successful implementation of individualized migrant integration programmes presupposes case workers with sufficient time and discretion to explore, identify, and act upon the specificities of each client, flexibly adjusting to the latter's needs the frequency, scope, and content of the counselling they perform.

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