Street-Level Bureaucrats' Role Identity – Self-Conceptualization and Associated Challenges

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to explore how street-level bureaucrats' perceptions and experiences reflect administrative reform trends within public employment services. We position our research within (1) street-level bureaucracy theory and narratives of professional identities as state agent, citizen agent and professional agent (Cecchini & Harrits, 2022; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000) reflecting public sector ethics of justice and of care (Stensöta, 2010) as well as (2) literature on administrative reforms paradigms and the changing relationship between citizens and the state (Bogumil & Jann, 2020; Konle-Seidl, 2008). Based on survey data collected from 393 placement officers advising short-term unemployed workers in the German public employment services, this study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the perceptions and experiences of these front-line workers. Data was collected by asking a closed question to assess own understanding of the predominant role identity (including categorizations such as salesperson, social worker, clerk, service provider, among others) and open-ended questions to uncover the underlying rationales behind specific role identities and to identify the most significant challenges faced by the case managers in their interactions with clients. The analysis of the data combines quantitative text analysis (Multiple Correspondence Analysis) to identify patterns in the data and qualitative techniques to extract explanations and narratives from respondents' open-ended responses. This research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how street-level bureaucrats understand their roles within bureaucratic systems, and how these role identities shape their interactions with clients.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The public sector is subject to constant change due to administrative reforms. Policy change and the introduction of automation technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) can trigger these administrative reforms. Street-level bureaucrats play a decisive role in realizing and implementing administrative reforms. Their perceptions and experiences can influence how administrative reforms are implemented. This means that bureaucrats also influence public service provision and the perceived quality of citizen-state interaction (Lipsky, 2010; Morten Jacobsen et al., 2019).

The cooperation of street-level bureaucrats is essential for the successful implementation of administrative reforms. However, street-level bureaucrats are not a homogeneous group (e.g., Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). It is important to understand what attitudes front-line workers in the public sector have towards their work and how they see themselves. Therefore, the question is: *What are the differences in the self-perception of street-level bureaucrats concerning their work and the provision of public services today?*

Based on survey data collected from 393 case managers who advise short-term unemployed in German public employment services, this study examines the perceptions and experiences of these front-line workers. Data collection was conducted through a closed single-choice question to assess their own understanding of the prevailing role identity (including categorization as a salesperson, social worker, clerk, or service provider) and open-ended questions to uncover the reasons for specific role identities and to identify the main challenges faced by case managers in their interactions with clients.

The data analysis uses quantitative text analysis (Multiple Correspondence Analysis, MCA) to identify patterns in the data and qualitative techniques to extract explanations and narratives from respondents' open-ended responses. With MCA we describe and visualize the association between case managers' role identity and the underlying rationales, as well as the most significant challenges the case managers face in their interactions with clients (Clausen, 1998, p. 2).

The goal is to re-evaluate established conceptualizations of street-level bureaucrats' professional identities in public employment services. We draw on empirical material gathered 20 years after substantial reorganization in line with welfare-to-work (or activation) policies, including significant changes in internal

organizational principles and critical interactions with citizen-clients (so-called "Hartz" reforms (2003-2005) (Konle-Seidl, 2008)). The heterogeneity of street-level bureaucrats' self-perception has two implications. Firstly, the diverse professional identities influence state-citizen interaction. Secondly, they can influence organizational changes, such as those brought about by digitalization (Ball et al., 2023), since the types may have different preferences regarding the instruments employed when new policies are being implemented.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical background on professional identities in street-level bureaucracies. Section 3 presents the research design. The empirical results are presented and discussed in section 4. Section 5 summarizes the results and analysis of their implications.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Professional identities in street-level bureaucracies

In street-level bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 2010), well-established conceptualizations of professional identities are based on narratives of case workers as state agents, citizen agents, and professional agents (Cecchini & Harrits, 2022; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). These professional identities differ in what (or who) the street-level bureaucrats consider and/or privilege in final decision-making, thus reflecting public sector ethics of justice, which stresses universal rule application, and ethics of care, which emphasizes responsiveness towards individual clients (Stensöta, 2010).

The most prominent conceptualization comes from Maynard-Moody and Mushenos (2000) seminal piece, where the authors illustrate the *state agency* and *citizen agent* narratives. While the former, the state agent, is oriented towards policy regulations and administrative procedures and emphasizes the role of a representative of the state, the latter stresses the unique circumstances of individual citizen-client and considers rules and procedures in a second step to enforce the initial judgment, thus seeing him-/herself as citizen-agent. More recently, Cecchini and Harrits (2022) demonstrated the relevance of professional knowledge in front-line work for professional identities, drawing on literature on professions and professionalism. They theorized a third professional agency narrative based on two empirical studies in the preschool and school context and the literature on professionals and professionalism. This narrative follows "a problem-solving logic where front-line workers draw on their education-

based and/or experience-based knowledge on 'what works'" (Cecchini & Harrits, 2022: 43). Other research has distinguished street-level bureaucrat's identity based on grid-group cultural theory: *Fatalists* passively following the rules, *hierarchists* asking for management-approved rule interpretation, making expectations for deserving clients, *individualists* prioritizing individual cases and rationing of services based on personal preferences and *egalitarians* creatively applying, bending or even breaking rules and rationing of services to counterbalance social injustice (Hood, 2010; Pivoras & Kaselis, 2019).

In the context of German public employment services, several typologies of case workers ("placement officers") were developed in the past decades (e.g., Gottwald & Sowa, 2019). The earliest attempt to empirically typologize case workers stems from the 1970s, when most of these street-level bureaucrats were semi-skilled and trained on the job (Cramer, 1979). Cramer could identify three situational attitudes of case workers: First, a *business-oriented* approach aims to supply labor to companies rapidly. Second, a *client-centered* approach emphasizes individual counseling, and third, an *indifferent* approach, where bureaucratic rule obedience dominates (Cramer, 1979). Regarding coping strategies, the author differentiates between case workers meditating, counseling, controling, or sanctioning. Already in this early study, the tension between mediation/counseling and controling/sanctioning activities became evident. Although on an organizational level, both core tasks – service-producing and regulatory (Jensen, 2018) – are complementary functions, this poses, from the point of view of the caseworkers, a dilemma on the individual level.

In the late 1980s, after a profound professionalization – i.e., via the introduction of a three-year degree program offered by in-house universities of applied sciences, which is still the standard education for placement officers today – a typology was developed (Eberwein & Tholen, 1987; 1988) that was since then repeatedly utilized in empirical studies (Sell, 1999; Osiander & Steinke, 2011). Eberwein and Tholen's typology (1987; 1988) differentiate the following professional identities representing four strategies of action:

1. The *salesperson* (also labor market broker) sees the main task as supplying workers to companies selecting the "best candidates" for vacant job postings. The labor market broker prioritizes unemployed persons with good placement

prospects due to their educational, professional, and personal biography, applying creaming (or cherry picking) (Lipsky, 2010: 107).

2. The *social worker*, in contrast, emphasizes the support and care for the unemployed by helping them to solve individual problems rather than the direct placement activity and service provision for companies.

3. The social law *clerk* relies on formality, presenting its own room for maneuver as largely determined by others like the law or organizational policies and, thus, unchangeable, which can even lead to the use of less discretionary power than formally granted.

4. The *service provider* sees him-/herself as support for unemployment counseling in work and career matters, combining a more flexible application of the law with the encouragement of the individual client and active labor market policy measures. The service provider utilizes the granted discretionary power and tries to balance both the interests of (potential) employers and employees alike.

While the salesperson rather reflects the professional agency narrative on "what works" and the clerk clearly acts as a state agent, the social worker emphasizes the citizen agent narrative, and the service provider combines the citizen and professional agency narrative.

2.2 Administrative reform paradigms

Public employment services provide both administrative and human services (Evans, 2020), encompassing regulation-oriented tasks that enforce actions and deliver obligations and service-oriented tasks that privilege caring and tailor-made decisions (Jensen, 2018). In addition, considering the dominant administrative reform paradigms (Bogumil & Jann, 2020, pp. 35 et seq.), the concept of the "democratic state" emphasizing the rule of law, democracy, bureaucracy and hierarchy was the ideal-type of the early Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s, replaced by the "active state" with a focus on the expansion of the welfare state and the "planning-programming-budgeting-system" in the mid-1960s and then the "lean state" aiming to de-bureaucratize, outsource or privatize public services according to New Public Management (NPM) principles from the late 1970s onwards. Since the mid-1990s, the "activating state" became the bureaucratic ideal-type, shifting the state's role from "producing" welfare to guaranteeing it, emphasizing the role of citizens and the civil

society in co-production of public services. Another layer is the "digital state", that occurred in the mid-2000s, and stresses networks and transparency, digital service delivery and one-stop-shops.

In Germany, major public employment services reform took place in the early 2000s. In contrast to other European countries setting up single gateways or one-stop shops, Germany created a two- or even three-tier system: public employment agencies for short-term unemployed and public employment agencies providing basic income support for long-term unemployed and social assistance recipients (Konle-Seidl, 2008). The reforms included, on the one hand, a differentiation between an insurance logic, focussing on the individual client and agreeing on an individual action program based on profiling and segmentation of jobseekers (for short-term unemployed) and a welfare logic aiming for activation (for long-term unemployed) and, on the other hand, an internal reorganisation according to NPM principles.

How these ideal-typical differentiations of administrative systems or organizations play out in depends on the practice of the action at the individual level that is shaped by street-level bureaucrats' professional identities, among other factors.

To conclude, the different conceptualizations of professional identities stress various aspects guiding the actions and decision-making of street-level bureaucrats. Although the same street-level bureaucrat may change the identity based on the situation and the citizen-client at hand (Osiander & Steinke, 2011, p. 165; Sell, 1999, p. 457-459), an underlying identity, which serves as a predisposition for decision-making, prevails. This can, in turn, lead to severe strains in practice if required policy changes are diametrically opposed to the reasoning of front-line workers. Thus, understanding the self-conceptualization of the professional identities of street-level bureaucrats and the associated challenges and dilemmas of their world is crucial in selecting appropriate strategies and instruments for organizational change. Suppose the professional identity is incongruent with the policy and organisational requirements for their work. In that case, street-level bureaucrats cannot (or willing) to implement the intended policy effects in practice.

3   METHOD

3.1 Multiple Correspondence Analysis

To describe the relationship between respondents' self-assignment to a professional identity and the attributions of meaning to this identity as reflected on a set of open response questions, we use Multiple Correspondence Analysis (henceforth MCA, Blasius, 2001). MCA belongs to a group of linear scaling methods used to visualize the similarity or dissimilarity of categorical variables. Hence, it can be seen as a type of multiple correlation analysis suited for analyzing large contingency tables (Clausen, 1998; Blasius & Greenacre, 2006). The core concept involves reducing a complex data matrix to a few dimensions while preserving essential information.

In statistical terms, MCA is based on three fundamental concepts (Blasius 2001: 81): First, the raw data of the contingency table are set in relation to the marginal totals, resulting in the column and row profiles. The interpretation of row and column characteristics is always relative because they are based on the profiles, not the absolute values. The second basic concept, masses, ensures that the rows and columns are considered according to their empirical frequency of occurrence. Chi-square distances, the third basic concept, are used to describe the relationships between rows and columns in a contingency table. The chi-square test can be used to indicate whether there is a correlation between row and column characteristics. The greater the distances between the individual and average profiles, the greater the deviations from the axis cross in the two-dimensional representation.

Consequently, MCA captures the association between two or more categorical variables by representing their categories as points in a two- or higher-dimensional space (Clausen, 1998: 2). Categories with similar distributions are depicted as closely positioned points, whereas those with different distributions are placed further apart (Clausen, 1998: 10). The derived dimensions are assessed based on their contribution to explaining the total variance. The interpretation of these dimensions and the positioning of points is left to the researcher to do meaningfully. Another valuable feature MCA is the ability to differentiate between active and passive variables. The active variables or their characteristics span the projection space. Passive variables are subsequently projected into this space but do not influence its geometric orientation. For the MCA presented in this study, respondents self-assigned professional identity is the passive variable. The qualitative coding of the text obtained through two open-

response questions will serve as active variables. In the survey, respondents were asked to describe in their own words why they assigned themselves to a particular professional identity. Second, they were asked what they consider the main challenges in their professional work.

3.2 Sample

Case managers perform a central function in public employment services, deciding upon individualized active labor market services such as further training (e.g., Rice, 2017). They assess jobseekers' qualification profiles, make job offers, help them find training that enhances their skills, develop search strategies, and provide tailor-made assistance to improve their employment opportunities.[5] When we drew our sample, approximately 7,500 case workers were employed at the German FEA according to its internal IT systems. This number excludes case managers who specialize in advising employers or those who work exclusively with jobseekers under the age of 25. From the 7,500 case managers, a random gross sample of 5,000 case workers was drawn for this study. All case managers from the gross sample received an invitation to participate in the online survey via email. The e-mail also contained a short description of the topic, a reference to the voluntary nature of the study, and a link to the relevant information concerning data protection regulations. The field phase took place in March and April 2023. After data cleansing (item nonresponse), we used a net sample of 393 individuals for further analysis.

Respondents were asked how they see their role as case workers and pick a description out of five roles: *How do you see your own role most likely? Please tick only the answer option that applies most to you: salesperson/labor market broker, social worker, social law clerk, service provider, and a residual category ("other role")*. For the distribution of the self-assigned professional identities see Appendix Figure 1. The five roles are a slightly adapted version of the typology suggested by Sell (1999). This question was followed by two open-response questions asking respondents (1) to briefly describe in their own words why they chose a particular role and (2) what

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[5] Case workers also play a central role in other areas of social legislation (e.g., German Social Code Book II, SGB II), which is not considered here (the use case is located in German Social Code Book III, SGB III). For example, they are responsible for designing and implementing cooperation plans *(Kooperationspläne)* and determining sanctions in case clients breach the agreement.

they think are the main challenges in fulfilling this role. The minimum length of each response was set to 10 letters.

3.3 Qualitative coding of open-response questions

The inductive coding approach, as outlined by Mayring (2014; 2022), was employed to identify rationales and challenges associated with professional identities among case workers in German public employment services. Inductive coding is a qualitative data analysis technique that permits researchers to analyze data without a predefined theoretical framework (Mayring, 2022, pp. 84ff.). The inductive coding approach was selected because our research question is exploratory in nature (Mayring, 2022, p. 104). Firstly, we present the inductive codes for the reasons why case workers selected a certain professional identity. Secondly, we present the inductive codes describing the challenges associated with certain professional identities. The complete set of codes is presented, regardless of the role that the case workers have chosen.

The responses to the open-ended question regarding the reasons for respondents' self-assignment to a professional identity *(Please briefly describe why you have chosen this role description)* were translated into eight inductive codes (for a detailed overview of the coding scheme, please refer to Appendix Table 1):

1. One potential reason for caseworkers to assume a particular professional identity could be the inherent *complexity of their tasks*. As the scope of caseworker responsibilities has expanded, the need to address other placement issues of clients has become increasingly important. These issues can include psychological problems, lack of language skills, family problems, and many others. A representative quote illustrating this point is:

   > *"Consulting clients is becoming more extensive, there are usually complex problems, so that referral advice and prioritization must take place first. Clients bases are changing, many clients who have left the service, mental health problems that have not yet been successfully dealt with, language barriers, clients who require intensive counseling - systemic training is almost required...."*

2. Another rationale for case workers assuming a particular professional identity could be the necessity of *interacting with clients*. The client interaction process encompasses a comprehensive, individualized, and holistic consultation

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conducted by case workers. Case workers view themselves as the primary point of contact and advisor for all matters. Their interaction with clients is conducted at eye level. A representative quote illustrating this rationale is: "It's about comprehensive customer service, which is not just about job placement."

3. The goal of *integrating clients into the labour* could be another factor that contributes to the establishment of a professional identity among case workers. The case worker's role is to serve as a contact person and supporter for the job search. This aspect is illustrated by a case worker emphasizing, "I find jobs, connect clients to suitable jobs with appropriate support (educational institutions, employers, language schools, aid organizations, etc...)."

4. Having *multiple roles* may also be a factor in case workers' selection of a particular professional identity. Some respondents perceive their role as a combination of salesperson, social worker, clerk, and service provider. One respondent states, "It's perhaps the best mix of salesperson, social worker, and clerk. Somehow you're a bit of everything, but none of it quite right."

5. Another factor that could contribute to the formation of a professional identity is *helping clients*. One of the respondents indicated that their service had a social character: "I provide a service that has a social character. I support customers on their journey and intervene to guide them if necessary. […]".

6. *Providing services* could also be a reason for case workers assuming a particular professional identity. Case workers want to provide the best possible service. The caseworkers see themselves and the Federal Employment Agency as the largest service provider in terms of work and training. The clients are seen as costumers, as one respondent states: "[…] For me, the service concept plays a major role in our customer satisfaction".

7. Some case workers perceive themselves as *mediators*, which could also constitute a professional identity. In order to fulfill their duties, case workers must balance the interests, including those of the clients, the legislature (legal framework), and the labor market. A representative quote illustrating this point is: "[I have the task of] reconciling the client's wishes with the legal framework and requirements of the labor market."

8. The *implementation of law* could also serve as a driver for case workers to select a professional identity. Some case workers see it as their main task to

implement social law, as one respondent describes: "My tasks are specified in social law."

9. The coding also includes a *residual category*.

For the distribution of reasons for self-assignment to a particular professional identity see Appendix Figure 2.

The responses to the open-ended question regarding the primary obstacles to fulfilling their self-selected roles *(Please briefly describe what you consider to be the greatest challenges in fulfilling this role)* were translated into six inductive codes (for a detailed overview of the coding scheme, please refer to Appendix Table 2):

1. One aspect of case workers' roles that they could perceive as a challenge is the *time pressure* they experience. Case workers perceive a lack of sufficient counselling time, an excessively high workload, an inadequate support ratio, and a shortage of personnel as significant challenges. One respondent states: "The number of customers I have to look after is too large for me to fulfill my role as I would like to or expect of myself."

2. Another challenge that case workers report facing is summarized in the code *goal rationality*. It can be difficult to satisfy various stakeholders, including the preferences of clients, the requirements of the labor market or employers, the requirements of the legislator and of the Federal Employment Agency. Furthermore, case workers aim to align their personal work ethic and motivation with their professional conduct. This is exemplified by their desire to assist individuals in need or to maintain professionalism with 'difficult' clients. A representative quote illustrating this point is:

   "The biggest challenge for me is to meet all expectations, e.g. the expectations of the insured community, the expectations of the customer, the expectations of the BA (i.e. team leader, divisional management, regional management, Federal Employment Agency, etc.) and still provide the customer with good advice."

3. Due to the diverse nature of customers, *consulting clients* may present another challenge in fulfilling a certain professional role. Identifying suitable offers (jobs and training measures) can be difficult, particularly when considering the individual circumstances of each client. Therefore, advice must be comprehensive and needs-oriented. One respondent states, "Recognize and name needs, identify suitable qualifications. Find the right offer from a wide range of options […]".

4. The increased *complexity* could present another challenge for case workers in fulfilling their role. Some clients find themselves in complex life situations, which are further compounded by the multiple problems they face, including language barriers, experiences of flight, and anti-democratic ideas. This makes the work of case workers even more complex and challenging. One of the respondents emphasizes "The diversity of challenges (financial, health, family, mobility...) among the current customer base."

5. Another aspect that could present a challenge in fulfilling a certain role is *client interaction*. The relationship between case workers and clients is based on trust, which must first be established. To do this, case workers must constantly re-engage with the clients. Additionally, clients' attitudes towards the Federal Employment Agency, including expectations, rejection, and priorities (financial benefits), also make the work more difficult. Case workers must motivate clients to co-produce. Empathy is a prerequisite for effective case management, as one case worker describes: "Remaining patient. Overcoming individual fears and uncertainties. Increasing customers' own initiative and motivation. Making it clear to customers that their knowledge may not be sufficient. To gain their trust.

6. Furthermore, case workers highlight the challenge of maintaining *expertise* as a means of fulfilling a certain professional identity. This entails ensuring that advisory skills and knowledge (e.g., information on the job market, professions) remain up-to-date. As one respondent describes, "To keep up to date with the latest developments in the labor market […]. To support customers with their skills and opportunities in relation to the changing labor market in the long term."

7. This coding also includes a *residual category*.

For the distribution of challenges considered to be prevalent to a particular professional identity see Appendix Figure 3.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Self-conceptualization of professional identities

Table 1. Distribution of self-assignment to professional identities

	Time of data collection	1999	1999	2009	2023
	Source	Sell 1999	Sell 1999	Osiander & Steinke 2011	Our sample
	Type of data collection	Self-reported	Observed	Self-reported	Self-reported
Identity					
Salesperson		23 %	24 %	8 %	3 %
Social worker		21 %	15 %	12 %	12 %
Clerk		15 %	30 %	13 %	2 %
Service provider		41 %	31 %	64 %	68 %
Others/prefer not to say		-		3 %/1 %	15 %
N		158		182	393

Table 1 presents the distribution of self-assigned professional identities among case workers in Germany. In 1999, before the public employment service reform took place, the majority of placement officers understood themselves as service providers (41%), while nearly a quarter saw themselves as either salesperson (23%) or social worker (21%). Only a minority identifies as clerks (15%) (Sell, 1999). An empirical re-analysis of Osiander and Steinke (2011) in 2009 (time of data collection), after the welfare-to-work policies were implemented, showed that the self-image of the placement officers was reshaped. The share of service providers clearly increased (by 9 percent, it was 50%, and for short-term unemployed, it was even 64%). The share of social workers has risen, too (by 6 percent points to 27% in total), but only for those working with long-term unemployed (37%), while it became less dominant for short-term unemployed (12%). In contrast, the number of clerks was nearly stable (a reduction of 2 percent points, now 13%), and salespersons became less critical (a decrease of 17 percent points to 6%).

The data in our study was collected in 2023. Only 3% of our sample describe themselves as salespersons. They justify their role description with the fact that they function as a mediator between the legal constraints. The following quote was drawn from the reasons given by salespersons for choosing this attribution: *"[I have the] [t]ask of reconciling the customer's wishes with the legal framework and requirements of the labor market"*. To fulfill this task, caseworkers who describe themselves as salespersons state that a significant obstacle to overcome to fulfill this task is *that*

"Sometimes [there is a] large difference between customers' wishes or willingness and reality".

12% of the case managers describe themselves as social workers. Those in these roles justify their perception by emphasizing the human aspects of their work: *"Because we are dealing with people! I see myself as a counselor and not exclusively as a mediator. Holistic advice is at the forefront of what I do."* One of the main obstacles they face in fulfilling this role is controlling: *"Individual holistic advice requires space and time. Fulfilling quotas is rather out of place here and offers no room to mentally adjust to the person being advised"*.

The clerks represent the smallest proportion of the sample, comprising 10 individuals (2%). They justify their role description by stating that *"[our] [a]ctivity takes place on the basis of the SGB [Social Code]"*. For them, it is challenging *"To do everything legally correct and still somehow consider the needs of the client"*.

The biggest group in our sample describe themselves as service providers (68%). That this is *"[b]ecause the focus should be on the customers and their situation"*. The most significant obstacle that they have is selecting suitable labor market measures for individuals: *"Recognizing and naming needs, identifying suitable qualifications. Finding the right offer from a wealth of possibilities"*.

For the frequencies of the self-assigned professional identities also see Appendix Figure 1.

As illustrated in Table 1, there are notable discrepancies in the distribution of individual professional identities. For instance, in Sell (1999), 23% of respondents identified as salespeople, while in Osiander and Steinke (2011), this figure was 8% in 2009 and 3% in our sample in 2023. In 1999, 15% of respondents described themselves as clerks (Sell, 1999). In 2009, this figure had fallen to 13% (Osiander & Steinke, 2011), and in 2023, it had declined further to 2% (our sample).

In general, the values reported by Osiander and Steinke (2011) and those observed in our sample differ from those presented by Sell (1999). What are the explanations for these discrepancies? One possible explanation is the composition of the sample. Sell (1999) surveyed 158 students enrolled in the practical phase of the program, which prepares students for future careers in bureaucratic roles. Osiander and Steinke (2011) surveyed a total of 182 professionals engaged in the applicant-oriented placement of individuals over the age of 25, as well as the immediate superiors of the

placement agents (team leaders) (ibid., p. 13). The present sample (2023) comprises 393 professionals who, as in Osiander and Steinke (2011), are engaged in the applicant-oriented placement of over 25-year-olds.

There appears to be a degree of similarity, if not an overlap, between the sample of Osiander and Steinke (2011) and the present study. For this reason, we intend to conduct a more thorough examination of the discrepancies between the two sets of data. It is evident that the most pronounced discrepancy can be observed among the clerks. In contrast to the 13% of Osiander and Steinke (2011) who described themselves as clerks in 2009, only 2% did so in our sample in 2023. What factors might explain this shift? The implementation of various reforms, in particular the "Hartz" reforms (2003-2005) (Konle-Seidl, 2008), has reinforced the notion of service among case workers. This becomes particularly evident when comparing the findings of Osiander and Steinke (2011) with those of Sell (1999). While 41% of Sell (1991) described themselves as service providers, the figure for Osiander and Steinke (2011) is 64% higher (+23%). In our sample, service providers increased by a further 2% to 68%. In light of the organizational changes that have occurred as a result of policy change in Germany, it seems evident that the number of case workers who identify as clerks is declining. Conversely, there has been a notable increase in the number of case workers who view themselves as service providers and the primary point of contact for unemployed individuals seeking employment.

As with Sell (1999), in order to ascertain the professional identities of case workers with greater precision, it would be necessary to conduct an observation or an experiment in addition to the self-reported roles. This would help to eliminate the influence of social desirability among other factors.

4.2 Self-reported professional identities and associated challenges

Figure 1. Results of the MCA
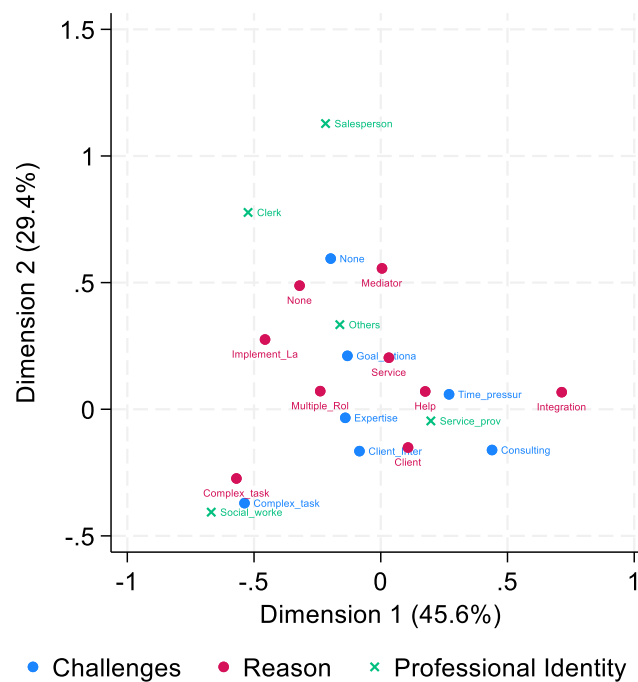
The results of the MCA are displayed in a two-dimensional coordinate diagram (Figure 1). Each variable characteristic is localized as a point in this coordinate system. The more dissimilar the characteristics are, the greater the distance between the points. Suppose the points of different categories are relatively close to each other. In that case, they can be interpreted as feature clusters, provided that the axes allow a meaningful interpretation and the relative position is maintained with different dimensions. Together, the two axes of the two-dimensional representation explain 75 percent of the total variance. The third dimension only explains a further 14.9 percent and is therefore not considered further below. As most variables vary on two axes, it is difficult to designate the axes clearly. The first dimension is most likely to reflect the variance in the importance assigned to labor market integration. In contrast, the second dimension is more likely to reflect the type of interaction. In this logic, professional identity would be based on two elements: How strongly the individual life situations and needs of clients are addressed or whether the focus is more on uniform, rule-guided decisions (dimension 2). On the other hand, the first dimension reflects the importance of successful integration into the labor market, i.e., whether more or less attention is paid

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to achieving goals. Due to the mixed empirical picture, however, this is a provisional interpretation.

Three key observations can be made when looking at the grouping of the characteristics of the two active variables in relation to self-assessed occupational identity. Firstly, we start with the largest group, i.e., the respondents assigned to the *Service* type. In terms of reasons, this type is relatively close to the *Client*, *Helping clients* and labor market *Integration*. In terms of challenges, this type is relatively close to the difficulties *Time pressure*, *Customer interaction,* and *Consulting*. Secondly, a narrower cluster forms around the *Social worker* type. This self-assigned to a type of professional identity corresponds with the reason and challenge *Complex task*. This role type seems to correspond with the desire for individual, case-related customer care, which is perceived as both a goal and the most significant challenge. Thirdly, the *Clerk* and *Salesperson* types are relatively far from the points reflecting for *Reasons* and *Challenges*. The closest points represent the category *None* for *Reason* and *Challenge*, i.e., the open answers could not be clearly assigned in the coding scheme. This result reveals some consistency; both types (*Clerk* and *Salesperson*) belong to an empirical minority, i.e., they are outliers, so to speak, in the measurement of professional identity. This pattern also remains when looking at their *Reasons* and *Challenges*. They provide heterogeneous answers that cannot be clearly assigned to any of the major categories for *Reasons* and *Challenges*. In conclusion, it should be noted that the *Other* type is at the center of the coordinate system. The remaining characteristics of the two active variables are grouped around this type.

5   DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explored the perceptions and experiences of street-level bureaucrats within German public employment services, specifically focusing on how these reflect broader administrative reform trends. Using a mixed-methods approach, data was gathered from 393 placement officers through both closed and open-ended survey questions. The analysis, employing Multiple Correspondence Analysis and qualitative techniques, revealed patterns in role identities such as salesperson, social worker, clerk, and service provider.

Our first step was to analyze self-assigned professional identities among German case workers from 1999 to 2023, revealing significant shifts influenced by

administrative reforms. Initially, in 1999, the majority identified as service providers (41%), with substantial proportions also seeing themselves as salespersons (23%) and social workers (21%) (Sell, 1999). Following welfare-to-work reforms, by 2009, the share of service providers rose to 50%, and social workers to 27%, particularly among those working with the long-term unemployed, while salespersons decreased to 6% (Osiander & Steinke, 2011). In 2023 (our study), service providers constituted 68%, social workers 12%, clerks 2%, and salespersons 3%, underscoring a continued trend towards service-oriented roles. This trend reflects the impact of the "Hartz" reforms (2003-2005), which emphasized customer-focused service delivery. The significant decline in clerks and salespersons, alongside the rise in service providers, suggests that policy changes have reshaped professional identities within public employment services. To further validate these findings and reduce potential biases, the study recommends combining self-reported roles with observational or experimental methods.

In a second step, we used a Multiple Correspondence Analysis to describe association between case managers' role identity and the underlying rationales, as well as the most significant challenges the case managers face in their interactions with clients. Our analysis identified three key observations regarding the self-assessed professional identities of case workers. Firstly, the largest group, identified as the service providers, is closely associated with reasons such as helping clients and labor market integration, and faces challenges like time pressure, customer interaction, and consulting. Secondly, the social worker type forms a narrower cluster around the reason and challenge of complex tasks, indicating a focus on individual, case-related customer care. Thirdly, the clerk and salesperson types are outliers with reasons and challenges not aligning clearly with major categories, reflecting their minority status and heterogeneous responses.

Following the provisional results and interpretation of our MCA, case workers' professional identity could be based on the following elements: How strongly the individual life situations and needs of clients are addressed or whether the focus is more on uniform, rule-guided decisions and how important the successful integration into the labor market is.

A major limitation of our study is that we rely on the placement officers' self-assessment and self-reporting. As Sell (1999: 457–59) has shown with his observation

of the actions of placement officers during citizen encounters, their actual behavior strongly deviates from their self-reporting. The professional identity of a clerk (state agent) was more dominant than the study participants themselves acknowledged (Sell, 1999). This response bias points to the overall validity problems of our findings. Future research should employ ethnographic approaches and longitudinal research designs to revisit the same group of street-level bureaucrats at several points in time to evaluate changes in their professional identities and the underlying causes for these changes.

Nevertheless, the findings suggest that street-level bureaucrats' understanding of their roles and their professional identities significantly influence their interactions with clients. These insights contribute to a deeper comprehension of the dynamics within bureaucratic systems and the evolving relationship between citizens and the state amidst ongoing administrative reforms.

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Online Appendix

Appendix Table 1. Coding scheme of the reasons for self-assignment to a particular professional identity

| Codes	Description	Anchor Examples
complex tasks	The work of the caseworkers is becoming more comprehensive because other placement issues of the clients often have to be taken into consideration before the core activity of job counseling. Placement issues include psychological problems, lack of language skills, family problems and much more.	*Consulting clients is becoming more extensive, there are usually complex problems, so that referral advice and prioritization must take place first. Clients bases are changing, many clients who have left the service, mental health problems that have not yet been successfully dealt with, language barriers, clients who require intensive counseling - systemic training is almost required....*
client interaction	Client interaction describes a comprehensive, individual, needs-based/individualized and holistic consultation by the caseworkers. Caseworkers see themselves as individual contact persons and advisors for all matters. Their interaction with clients is at eye level.	*It's about comprehensive customer service, which is not just about job placement.*
integration into the labor market	The aim of labor market integration is to place clients in jobs. The caseworker sees him-/herself as a contact person and supporter for the job search.	*I find jobs, connect clients to suitable jobs with appropriate support (educational institutions, employers, language schools, aid organizations, etc...)*
multiple roles	Caseworkers see their role as a mix of salesperson, social worker, clerk, and service provider.	*It's perhaps the best mix of salesperson, social worker, and clerk. Somehow you're a bit of everything, but none of it quite right.*
helping clients	The focus is on helping clints to help themselves. Caseworkers emphasize the social nature of their work.	*I provide a service that has a social character. I support customers on their journey and intervene to guide them if necessary. I submit offers.*
providing services	The focus is on offering products such as further training. Caseworkers want to provide the best possible service. The caseworkers see themselves and the Federal Employment Agency as the largest service provider in terms of work and training. The clients are seen as costumers.	*In my role as an employment agency, it is important to me to support my clients in their integration into work and to offer them all the resources and assistance available to me. For me, the service concept plays a major role in our customer satisfaction.*
mediator	Caseworkers see themselves as mediators between the interests of clients, the legal framework and the requirements of the labor market.	*[I have the task of] reconciling the client's wishes with the legal framework and requirements of the labor market.*
implementation of labor law	Caseworkers see it as their main task to implement social law.	*My tasks are specified in social law.*
non-classified	N.A.	*Because this description best fits my daily work.*

**Appendix Table 2.** Coding scheme of the perceived challenges associated with a particular professional identity

Codes	Description	Anchor Examples
time pressure	Caseworkers see too little counseling time, too high a workload, too small a support ratio and staff shortages as a challenge.	*The number of customers I have to look after is too large for me to fulfill my role as I would like to or expect of myself. I can't take enough time to fully help the customer and have to make a strong appeal to or hope for personal responsibility...*
goal rationality	The challenge is to satisfy various stakeholders: the wishes of the customers, the requirements of the labor market or employers, the requirements of the legislator, the requirements of the BA (controlling), the requirements of managers. In addition, caseworkers also want to do justice to their personal work ethic and their own motivation, which is expressed, for example, in wanting to help people or maintaining professionalism with "difficult" clients (reconciling professionalism and humanity).	*The biggest challenge for me is to meet all expectations, e.g. the expectations of the insured community, the expectations of the customer, the expectations of the BA (i.e. team leader, divisional management, regional management, Federal Employment Agency, etc.) and still provide the customer with good advice.*
consulting clients	The consultation itself is challenging. This is due to the diversity of customers, the individuality of their needs and the variety of offers. For example, the search for suitable offers (jobs and training measures) is sometimes difficult. The situation of the individual must be taken into account. Advice must be comprehensive and needs-oriented.	*Recognize and name needs, identify suitable qualifications. Find the right offer from a wide range of options. Cumbersome bureaucratic documentation ties up valuable capacities.*

complex tasks	The complexity of cases and circumstances is increasing. Some customers find themselves in complex life situations. The multiple problems faced by customers are increasing (language barriers, experience of flight, anti-democratic ideas).	*The diversity of challenges (financial, health, family, mobility...) among the current customer base.*
client interaction	The interaction between caseworker and client is based on trust, which must first be established. To do this, the caseworker must constantly re-engage with the client. Clients' attitudes towards BA (too high expectations, rejection, priorities (financial benefits)) also make the work more difficult. Caseworkers must motivate clients to co-produce. Empathy is a necessary prerequisite.	*Remaining patient. Overcoming individual fears and uncertainties. Increasing customers' own initiative and motivation. Making it clear to customers that their knowledge may not be sufficient. To gain their trust.*
expertise	Keeping advisory skills and knowledge (e.g., information on the job market, professions) up to date. Build up experiential knowledge. There is a lack of expertise in the social field (socio-pedagogical and psychological skills).	*To keep up to date with the latest developments in the labor market and its development. To support customers with their skills and opportunities in relation to the changing labor market in the long term.*
non-classified	N.A.	*There are no challenges.*

Appendix Figure 1. Distribution of self-assignment to professional identities

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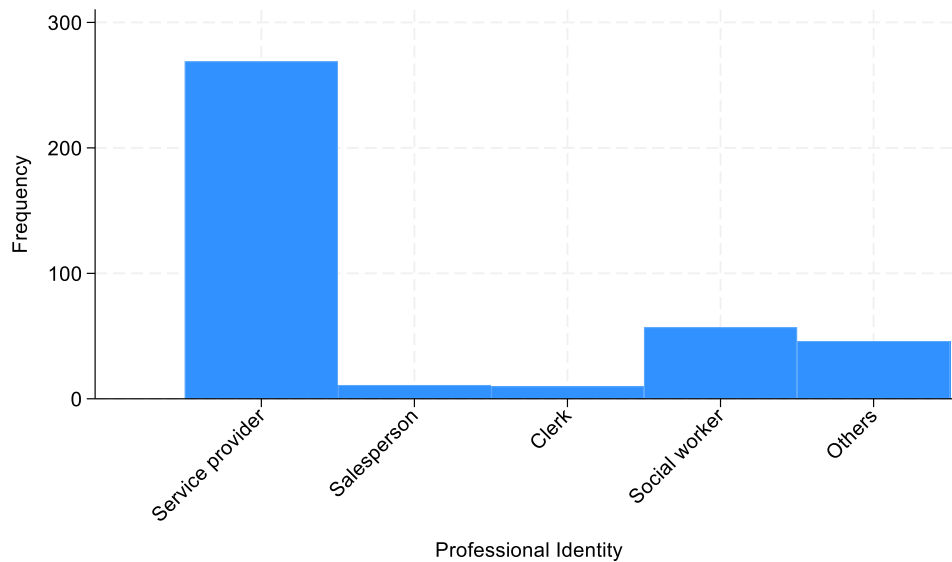
Appendix Figure 2. Reasons for self-assignment to a particular professional identity
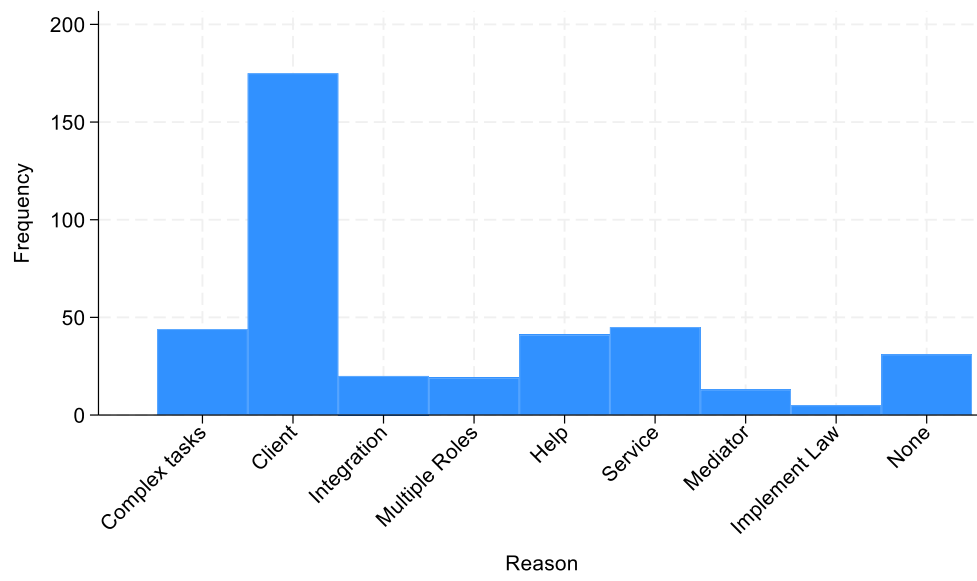
Appendix Figure 3. Challenges considered to be prevalent to a particular professional identity