

# Street-Level Actors, Migrants, and Gender: Dealing With Divergent Perspectives

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## Abstract

According to the citizen–agent paradigm, the way street-level bureaucrats view their target population shapes their discretionary behavior. Applying this in the context of the so-called “European Migration Crisis,” this article investigates how street-level actors make sense of their migrant clients and how these conceptual understandings of the “Other” shape their discretionary behavior. Focusing on the divisive issue of gender identities and beliefs, or gender perspectives, this research combines ideas from public administration and social psychology. It shows that street-level actors’ discretionary behavior depends on whether they see the Self-Other difference as fixed or changeable, and as hierarchically organized or not.

## Keywords

street-level bureaucracy, gender, discretion, migrants, Germany, Greece

## Introduction

Bureaucrat–client interactions have been at the focus of street-level bureaucracy research and at the center of this discussion has been what motivates

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the decision-making of street-level bureaucrats (e.g., Brockmann, 2017; May & Winter, 2009; Tummers et al., 2012). One prominent view in this stream of literature is the idea that bureaucrats' behavior is largely shaped by normative choices, namely bureaucrats' judgment of their clients' deservingness (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, 2003, 2012; see also Baviskar & Winter, 2017; Jilke & Tummers, 2018; Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018). In short, the more "worthy" the clients seem in the eyes of the bureaucrats, the more likely it is that the bureaucrats will make decisions that favor the clients.

Needless to say, one person's understanding of another person's deservingness is subject to individual biases. Empirical studies have indeed shown how the negative stereotypes bureaucrats hold in relation to major identity categories, such as race, class, or gender, may have negative consequences for their clients. Epp and colleagues (2014) address how racial profiling leads to unfair treatment of Black drivers; Dubois (2010) demonstrates how conceptualizations of "the poor" as less deserving results in the group's unfair treatment, and Alpes and Spire (2014) show how gender stereotyping leads to discriminatory decisions for both male and female visa applicants. In these studies, the views bureaucrats hold of their clients shape the bureaucrats' discretionary behavior toward these clients.

There are cases, of course, when the bureaucrats' understandings of their clients may also lead to positive use of professional discretion, with positive effects for the clients in question (Brockmann, 2017). In the school setting, for example, positive discretion has been observed by teachers both toward minority students (Marvel & Resh, 2015) and toward girls (Keiser et al., 2002), ultimately improving the pupils' performance. In general, when bureaucrats empathize with their clients, either because they belong to the same social group, or for other reasons (e.g., Harber et al., 2012; Slack, 2001), they are more likely to go out of their way to help them. This kind of positive discretionary behavior has also been observed in the field of migration, where at times bureaucrats "go the extra mile" to assist the migrant clients most in need (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017; see also James & Julian, 2020).

A question that arises, then, is what makes bureaucrats use positive or negative discretion. Of the scholars focusing on individual-level dynamics, some emphasize the bureaucrats' unique individual characteristics, such as their personal preferences (Brehm & Gates, 1997), their self-interest (Cohen & Gershgoren, 2016), or their moral dispositions (Zacka, 2017). According to the citizen-agent paradigm, however, bureaucrats' decisions are directly related to their interactions with, and the perceptions of, their clients (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, 2003). In this view, bureaucrats feel a sense of accountability toward their clients, whom they see as fellow citizens,

especially when there is repeated contact over time. It is this line of theorizing that this article draws from and contributes toward.

Focusing on the so-called “European Migration Crisis” and the capital cities of Athens and Berlin, this research looks at how street-level bureaucrats’ and, more generally, street-level actors’ social construction of their migrant clients shapes their discretionary behavior. By investigating these actors’ understandings of their clients through the lens of gender identities and beliefs, this article puts forward the following argument. Street-level actors develop an understanding of their clients, depending on how different they see these clients in relation to themselves, and how malleable they perceive this difference to be over time. This understanding, in turn, plays a critical role in shaping the street-level actors’ discretionary behavior toward their clients.

To illustrate the above, this article infuses the literature of street-level bureaucracy with perspectives from social psychology, namely Identity Theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) and the Interpersonal Perception Method (IPM; Laing et al., 1966). It also accounts for an element that has so far been overlooked: the cases when the clients are not fellow-citizens but migrants, meaning they are members of a social group that is widely seen as “Other” (see also note 2, p. S22, in Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). In terms of methods, it employs a qualitative research approach, drawing from 60 in-depth interviews with street-level actors broadly engaged in care work, with various organizational affiliations, from the two capitals.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. The first section discusses how the incorporation of a social psychological angle can help shed light on bureaucrat–client, or street-level actor–migrant, interactions. The next section elaborates on the sense-making mechanisms street-level actors follow to understand their migrant clients or, more precisely, to understand what seems to separate the clients from themselves. Subsequently, the following section focuses on the discretionary strategies street-level actors follow in practice. This article ends with a short concluding discussion.

## **Dealing With Difference: Incorporating Psychological Perspectives**

One of the citizen–agent paradigm’s key assertions is that the judgments street-level bureaucrats make about their clients shape the bureaucrats’ use of discretion. Therefore, to better understand street-level actors’ discretionary behavior toward their migrant clients, one must first understand these actors’ social construction of their clients. This can be better achieved, I argue here,

by looking more closely at how street-level actors make sense of what seems to separate the two groups.

In the context of what is known as “European Migration Crisis” of 2015–2017, those working directly with migrants were likely to encounter considerable barriers in their daily interactions with them. Whether cultural, religious, or linguistic, these barriers were likely to inhibit the communication between the two groups and, consequently, compromise street-level actors’ effectiveness in meeting their clients’ needs. At the same time, however, repeated and prolonged contact between the two groups would necessitate addressing these barriers. Under these circumstances, the psychological processes behind street-level actors’ understandings of their clients would be likely to play a key role in shaping their discretionary behavior.

Until now, most studies that investigate the behavior of street-level bureaucrats in the context of migration management do not analyze these psychological processes in great depth. Instead, they focus on the practical strategies bureaucrats adopt in the face of particular policy implementation dilemmas or the link between discretionary strategies and policy outcomes (e.g., Belabas & Gerrits, 2017; Eule, 2014; Hagelund, 2009). What is missing, I suggest, is a closer look at how street-level actors’ sense-making mechanisms shape their behavior toward their clients, especially when barriers such as the ones noted above are present. This article thus examines how street-level actors tackle the tensions that emerge from the perceived differences between themselves and their migrant clients, or between Self and Other.

According to Identity Theory (Burke & Stets, 2009), through interacting with others, individuals seek to verify their various identities, be they person-, role-, or group-related. When entering a new social interaction, individuals hold a particular ideal (identity standard) about how they ought to behave in a given situation and behave accordingly. Depending on the feedback they receive from others, or rather their perceived understanding of this feedback, they assess whether identity verification is achieved. If their identity at stake is verified, they feel good about themselves and continue behaving as before. If not, they experience negative emotions and seek ways to correct this discrepancy at the next possible exchange.

When it comes to interactions between street-level actors and migrants, identity verification is likely to be more challenging than usual. As the two groups come from two different societies with distinct social norms, the members of each group are likely to hold considerably different identity standards for the same identities (e.g., woman/man). As such, a member of one group is less likely to receive the expected feedback that would verify their self-view when interacting with a member of the other group. As a response

**Table 1.** Gender Development Index, 2016 Selected Countries.

Country	Value	Group
Norway	0.992	1
Germany	0.969	2
Greece	0.963	2
Iraq	0.794	5
Syria	0.802	5
Afghanistan	0.646	5

Source. United Nations Development Programme (n.d.).

to an uncomfortable exchange, street-level actors may adjust their behavior in their future interactions with migrants, potentially adjusting how friendly and helpful toward migrants they are. Therefore, the extent to which street-level actors use positive or negative discretion toward their migrant clients would be, at least to some degree, contingent upon their success in verifying their identities while interacting with these clients.

Among the identities that seem to matter the most in interpersonal interactions are those pertaining to gender. As Cecilia Ridgeway (2009) argues, gender is a primary frame for organizing social relationships. That is, when we first meet someone, gender is one of the main conceptual categories we use to make sense of who the person is. In accordance, the beliefs we hold in relation to gender are also very important. Gender beliefs correspond to the “widely held cultural beliefs that define the distinguishing characteristics of men and women and how they are expected to behave” (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004, p. 511). Put simply, what we consider to be appropriate roles of men and women in a society are likely to shape our behavioral expectations from those with whom we interact.

Regarding the interactions between street-level actors and migrants, evidence suggests there exists a significant difference in gender norms and practices between members of the two groups and, consequently, a high likelihood of unmet expectations during their interactions. As Table 1 shows, gender inequalities in the primary sending countries of asylum seekers (Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq) of that period are generally considerably more severe than those in most European countries. Based on this, one would expect street-level actors to view their clients’ gender identities and beliefs as overly traditional, conservative, and gender-unequal.

It is worth investigating, then, how these divergent gender perspectives inform the interactions between street-level actors and migrants. To shed light on this, I shall borrow one more conceptual tool from psychology: the

**Table 2.** Three Levels of Perspectives.

Perspectives	Visual Representation
Direct Perspective	
Meta-Perspective	
Meta-meta-perspective	

Source. Table constructed by author, drawing based on Interpersonal Perception Method (see also Gillespie, 2008).

IPM. According to the IPM, there are three levels of perspectives in a dyadic relationship (Table 2). First, the direct perspective refers to what each party thinks about something (e.g., street-level actors' gender identities and beliefs). Second, the meta-perspective is about what each party thinks the other party thinks about the same thing (e.g., street-level actors' view of migrants' gender identities and beliefs). Third, the meta-meta-perspective describes what each party thinks the other party thinks about their own view of this thing (e.g., street-level actors' view of migrants' view of street-level actors' gender identities and beliefs; see also Gillespie, 2008; Gillespie & Cornish, 2010; Moore et al., 2011).

In this line of theorizing, when two direct perspectives are similar, there is an agreement, and when they are different, and if both parties know this, there is a disagreement. For example, if a care worker and a migrant father both think it is okay for girls to play together with boys, there is an agreement between the two direct perspectives. Whereas, if one thinks it is okay but the other does not, and there is an awareness of this difference, there is a disagreement. By contrast, if this difference exists but there is no awareness of this difference, there is a misunderstanding.

Combining Identity Theory and IPM, we may expect the following. During their daily exchanges with their migrant clients, street-level actors in Athens and Berlin would be driven to confirm their gender identities, as they themselves understand them. However, this identity verification process is likely to be challenging due to the differing gender identities and beliefs between themselves and the migrants. As this divergence in gender perspectives constitutes a barrier in the communication between members of the two groups, it may "push" street-level actors to find ways to overcome it. In turn, it would be through these—potentially unsuccessful—identity verification attempts and perspective-bridging efforts that street-level actors would construct their understandings of their migrant clients, shaping their discretionary behavior toward these clients accordingly.

## Terms, Context, and Methods

This research is part of a PhD project which focuses on the implementation of migration policies in Athens and Berlin during 2015–2017, when the demand for service provision for incoming asylum seekers was considerably higher than the services available. In that regard, it was an administrative crisis, which is what the term “crisis” refers to in this article. While the raw number of newcomers was greater in the German than in the Greek capital, the magnitude of the shock in the administrative system was rather analogous in the two cities. Using a *contextualized* comparison (Locke & Thelen, 1995), the cases of Athens and Berlin were selected on the basis of having similar dynamics at work. These dynamics were observed as they were unfolding, without having pre-defined overall expectations of what may follow and while maintaining an open and flexible research stance.

As the respective public agencies were highly overwhelmed in both cities at the time, the civil society played a key role in meeting the needs of asylum seekers (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Rozakou, 2017). The gradual privatization of public services has long been acknowledged (Smith & Lipsky, 1993), of course, but the boundaries between public/private and for-profit/non-profit were especially blurry during this period (Bock, 2018; Kalogeraki, 2020). Not only was there a close collaboration on the ground between members of different organizational affiliations, but there was also frequent movement of individual actors from one type of organization to another (Glyniadaki, 2021/forthcoming). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the views of members of all organizational and group affiliations were examined simultaneously (Table 3). To account for this increased diversity of individuals involved in the delivery of social services for migrants, the term “street-level actors” is being employed here, instead of Lipsky’s (1980) original “street-level bureaucrats.”

To clarify, the term “street-level actors” is used to denote all those delivering services to migrant clients, including public servants, private service employees, employees of non-governmental organization (NGOs) or independent volunteers and activists (see also Glyniadaki, 2021). While the term “street-level workers” has been previously used for similar purposes (Brodkin, 2012), it is not fitting here, as several of this study’s participants were neither paid for helping migrants nor did they see themselves as workers. Instead, they self-identified either as humanitarian volunteers or as political activists, portraying their engagement as participation in a social movement for the promotion of solidarity toward migrants.

In regard to research methods, this study is based on 60 qualitative, semi-structured interviews and, to a lesser extent, direct observations. The data

**Table 3.** Demographics of Participants.

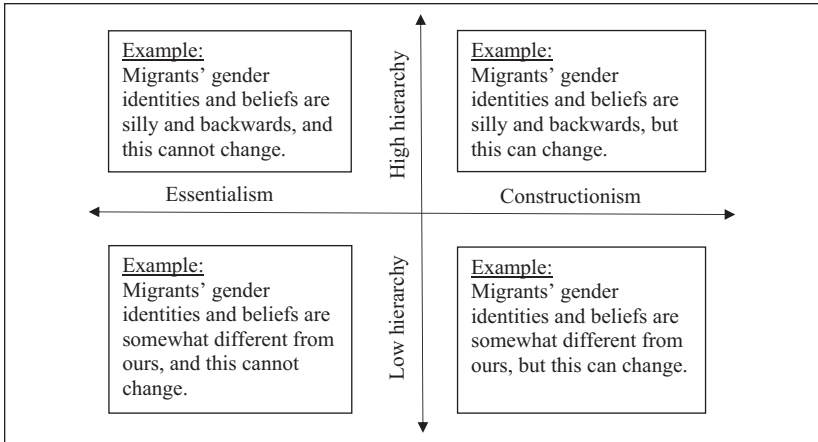
	Paid		Unpaid		Gender	
	Public servants	Non-governmental organization employees	Volunteers	Activists	M	F
Athens	1	10	6	12	14	16
Berlin	3	18	6	3	11	19

were collected across multiple visits to the two cities between May 2017 and April 2018. The interviewees, 30 from each city, were individual actors who performed care work–related tasks and had repeated and prolonged contact with the same migrants over time. Despite having various different organizational and group affiliations (Table 3), their daily routines were rather similar, in that they helped facilitate migrants’ access to key services (accommodation, legal aid, health care, etc.).

As the aim of this study was to identify participants’ individual understandings of and behavior toward their migrant clients, the findings of the two research sites were not analyzed against each other, but in parallel. It is worth noting, nonetheless, that civil society is more institutionalized in Germany than it is in Greece. This practically meant a greater proportion of participants in Berlin worked for registered NGOs, usually contracted by the state (Bock, 2018; Bock & McDonald, 2019), whereas in Athens, a significant amount of the same tasks were performed by independent local or international NGOs, as well as by volunteers and self-organized groups of activists (Glyniadaki, 2021; Kalogeraki, 2020; Rozakou, 2017).

The participants were located through their online professional profiles and contact information, physical visits to their work sites (e.g., migrant shelters, NGO offices, housing squats), or by the snowball technique. Only those with consistent and long-term engagement (daily contact with migrants for several months) were selected. The interviews were conducted in Greek or English, where both the author and the participants were fully fluent. An interview guide with a set of open-ended questions was used, including questions such as “Are there any cultural differences that may make your work more challenging?” “Can you provide an example of a particular incident?” “What helps you overcome such challenges?” The framing and order of questions aimed at allowing participants to narrate their experiences and their reflections on them with as little intervention as possible. Almost all interviews took place at the working environment participants, and each interview lasted for approximately 1 hr.





**Figure 1.** Conceptual understandings and discretionary behavior.

Source. Figure constructed by author.

The recordings of the interviews were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed through the use of the qualitative analysis software NVivo. Following the thematic analysis steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), the first stage involved multiple readings of the transcripts. Then, a set of initial codes was generated, based on the reviewed literature. These were “sense-making mechanisms” and “practical strategies.” After a closer look at the data in relation to these themes, new and more specific codes emerged. The codes “essentialism,” “social constructionism,” “hierarchical view,” and “egalitarian view” were created, followed by the codes “judge,” “soft nudge,” “hard nudge” and “engage” (see also the following).

It is important to highlight here that, while the theoretical section of this paper precedes the empirical findings section, the data analysis and theory development for this research have occurred iteratively. This means that some codes did not derive from the literature but surfaced through the thematic analysis (Tummers & Karsten, 2012). In that sense, the general approach was both deductive and inductive.

### **From Social Construction to Action: Tackling Difference in Practice**

Having established that there is likely a gap in gender identities and beliefs between street-level actors and migrants, or gender perspectives, I now turn to how street-level actors respond to this gap, both in terms of sense-making

mechanisms and in terms of practical discretionary strategies. Drawing from the analysis of this study's interview data, I suggest here that, when it comes to gender perspectives, street-level actors make sense of these differences along two intersecting axes. As shown in Figure 1, on one hand there is the spectrum of essentialism versus social constructionism and, on the other hand, that of low versus high hierarchy.

Regarding the horizontal line of the above figure, at the essentialist end of the spectrum there are those who view all characteristics of another group, including their gender identities and beliefs, as inherent, natural, and unchangeable. For essentialists, identity categories such as race, class, and gender constitute real and verifiable differences among people, independent of social processes (Rosenblum & Travis 2011).<sup>1</sup> As such, when street-level actors assume that the gender identities and beliefs of migrants are innate and fixed, they also assume a gap between Self and Other that cannot be easily bridged. Therefore, those street-level actors who have adopted this way of thinking would be less likely to make an effort to minimize the distance between the two differing perspectives. In the absence of such an effort, the (perceived) gap in gender perspectives is likely to remain intact.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who explain the perceived differences between two social groups by attributing them to the different social processes (e.g., political, religious or economic) as opposed to individual idiosyncrasies. This view reflects a social constructionist approach (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Here, individual gender identities and beliefs are subject to change, depending on the given context and circumstances. Accordingly, the differences between Self and Other are seen as malleable and the gap in perspectives as bridgeable. For street-level actors who align with social constructionism, there is a variety of different potential explanations they may use to make sense of migrants' deferring gender identities and beliefs. Three examples are as follows: (a) the migrants come from a more closed and conservative society and so they need time to adjust; (b) there were very similar practices in the local society not long ago; (c) the local society currently has equally conservative segments.

Although essentialism and social constructionism stand in opposition to each other, the two are not entirely mutually exclusive in people's minds. Indeed, most people do not take a single-sided stance on the long-held debate of nature versus nurture, but believe that humans are products of both. In most cases, then, the disagreement between essentialism and social constructivism lies in the degree to which one factor is prevalent in relation to the other. Accordingly, I frame here these two paradigms as two ends of a single spectrum, instead of two opposing stances that have no connection point between them.

**Table 4.** Conceptual Understandings and Discretionary Behavior.

	Essentialism	Social constructionism
High Hierarchy	Judge	Hard Nudge
Low Hierarchy	Soft Nudge	Engage

Source. Table constructed by author.

Continuing with Figure 1, the vertical axis represents the notion of hierarchy, which broadly speaks to whether or not someone conceptualizes their perceived differences from another group in a flat or top-down manner. In the context of this research, some street-level actors are likely to view their relationship with migrants in more hierarchical terms than others. At one end of this spectrum, there are those who look down on migrants' perspectives and consider themselves as relevant "experts" on most issues, including that of gender identities and beliefs. This stance reflects a perceived position of superiority and a top-down hierarchical view of one's own perspective compared to that of the Other. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who, albeit recognizing a difference in perspectives, do not associate any hierarchy to this difference. In other words, they view the Other as different, but not as worse.

Following from this, there is likely to be a link between how hierarchical one's conceptualization of the Other is and how positive or negative their discretionary behavior toward the Other is. More specifically, those street-level actors who see migrants and their perspectives as hierarchically inferior compared to their own would be more likely to develop a critical or negative stance toward these migrants, whereas those who view them through more egalitarian lenses are likely to adopt a friendlier, more positive stance.

As these two spectrums, or axes, intersect, the different mental positions of street-level actors would correspond to different discretionary strategies. In simple terms, and as the examples in Figure 1 illustrate, street-level actors may see migrants as (a) unchangeable and inferior, (b) changeable and inferior, (c) unchangeable and equal, or (d) changeable and equal.

In accordance with these, and based on empirical evidence (see below), I identify four different discretionary strategies that street-level actors may employ while interacting with migrants (Table 4). I have named them *judge*, *soft nudge*, *hard nudge*, and *engage*. As the terms indicate, and as I shall further show in the following sections, the *judge* approach embodies a critical stance toward migrants, the *engage* approach represents a rather friendly stance, while the *soft nudge* and *hard nudge* strategies are "middle-ground" approaches.

To elaborate further, those street-level actors who adopt an essentialist understanding of migrants and who also view their relationship with them as hierarchical are likely to *judge* and keep a metaphorical and/or physical distance from their migrant clients. In this way, they both establish and reinforce this perceived distance between Self and Other. By contrast, those who hold an essentialist approach and who also view their relationship with migrants as egalitarian are likely to follow a *soft nudge* strategy, making a low-level effort to bridge the gap between themselves and the migrants. Although they do not see the migrants' views as inferior to their own, their level of engagement with their target population is minimal because the expectations for long-term change are very low.

Accordingly, those ascribing to the social constructionist paradigm and who also perceive their relationship with migrants as hierarchical are likely to follow the *hard nudge* strategy. This course of action indicates a perceived position of power as well as an active effort to change the migrants' views so as to align them with one's own standards. Finally, those who follow a social constructionist approach and who view their relationship with migrants as egalitarian are likely to follow the *engage* strategy. This stance shows an effort to bridge the perceived gap between themselves and the migrants in a non-hierarchical fashion.

To recapitulate, the theoretical proposition here is the following. To make sense of a gap in gender perspectives and, through that, to make sense of their clients, street-level actors draw from a range of conceptual tools. Some adopt an essentialist approach, assuming their clients' characteristics are innate and fixed, while others employ a social constructivist stance, viewing these characteristics as learned and malleable. Simultaneously, some attach a hierarchical connotation to the perceived difference in gender identities and beliefs, while others view it from a more egalitarian angle. Through the use of interview data, the empirical sections that follow demonstrate how the different combinations of these conceptual tools lead to different discretionary behaviors in practice.

## Divergent Perspectives and Identity Conflicts

As expected, participants from both Athens and Berlin perceived migrants' social conventions pertaining to gender as overly traditional and conservative compared to their own. Although they generally showed heightened awareness of the relevant public discourse and tried to avoid further stigmatization of migrants when expressing their views, they were often unable to hide their frustration when discussing migrants' gender identities and beliefs, or gender perspectives. The following quote comes from an Athenian activist who has

had a long-term engagement with assisting migrant families. Despite her consistent dedication in helping migrants, she finds it problematic when she observes young girls being treated differently from young boys:

I am a feminist; I see the women in scarves and I go a bit crazy. [. . .] Yesterday, I took a young girl to the doctor. We had an appointment at 3 o'clock at [the square]. It was hot as hell, and she was wearing a scarf and long sleeves [. . .]. And the mom bought crisps and a water bottle to the two little ones but said "[my daughter] is doing Ramadan." To the younger siblings, they don't do it yet. But because she had her period, she had to wear the scarf and do the Ramadan. And, she will probably have 8 children in the next two years. . . . She may not even go to school. While if she was a 15-year-old boy, she would. (Activist, Athens)

In this segment, the participant's frustration is apparent, as her feminist identity is being challenged. The fact that she juxtaposes the sight of women in scarves with being a feminist indicates that the symbolic meanings she attaches to the two are in opposition to each other. If, in this street-level actor's mind, feminism is about the protection and promotion of women's rights and the scarf is a symbol of women's oppression, then interacting with migrant clients means encountering what she aims to fight against. Inevitably, such encounters are likely to bring some discomfort.

Regarding gender perspectives, there is a disagreement here between the participant's direct perspective, meaning her view on how boys and girls ought to be treated in a family, and the meta-perspective, meaning what the participant thinks the migrant families think about this. Although the participant seems to believe that young girls should not be treated any differently from boys when it comes to covering their body, attending school, or starting a family, what she understands that migrant families think and do is contrary to this perspective.

Such differences in perspectives represented a common theme across the participants' accounts. The street-level actors' views on gender norms and dynamics very often contradicted the migrants' views or, more precisely, they contradicted the street-level actors' understandings of the migrants' views. Moreover, the street-level actors' views also contradicted how (the street-level actors thought) migrants viewed the street-level actors' views (see below). Table 5 illustrates a more simplified version of the differences between the three perspectives.

Although a divergence in gender perspectives between street-level actors and migrants was not particularly surprising (Table 1), the effect of this divergence on street-level actors was. Indeed, given the street-level actors' relative

**Table 5.** Examples of Street-Level Actors' Gender Perspectives.

Direct Perspective	Women do not need to wear headscarves in public Women and men should be allowed to shake hands Couples should have few children
Meta-Perspective	Migrants think women need to wear headscarves in public Migrants think men and women should not be allowed to shake hands Migrant couples think having many children is good
Meta-Meta Perspective	Migrants think local women are immoral because they do not wear headscarves in public Migrants think local men and women act inappropriately because they shake hands Migrants think local families are no good because they have few children

Source. Table constructed by the author by paraphrasing extracts of the interview data.

position of power in comparison to their migrant clients, one would not expect the street-level actors' own identities to be contested or even re-considered through their interactions with migrants (Stets & Harrod, 2004). Yet, as the following quotes show, the participants often described incidents where a certain behavior on their part was met with the migrants' disapproval, leaving the former with a sense of unease:

We were at a meeting with the community, where there were mostly men . . . It was an open space and I was allowed to smoke, but I was feeling a bit uncomfortable. I had my hand under the table, hiding, as if I was in my teenage years, when I first started smoking and my father was around. I then thought, "You came here now, to tell me, with your eyes, that [I] can't smoke?!" (Care Worker, Athens)

Often, I tell them I am an unmarried mother, because they ask me, "where is your husband? Has he died?" "No," I say, "I don't have a husband. I just was just pregnant and decided, even though the relationship was problematic, I was 35, [. . .] so I said, I will either be alone from the beginning, or I will be alone at some point. Because no relationship is forever." But, often, when they start telling me things, some who are very religious, I turn around and tell them "we are humans, and only God can judge people." (Care Worker, Berlin)

In the first example, a care worker in Athens encounters migrant men who, through non-verbal cues, express their disapproval of the fact that she is smoking. As she catches herself adjusting her behavior in response to their

gender norms and expectations, she becomes frustrated. Similarly, in the second example, a social worker in Berlin describes how some of her clients look down on her lifestyle as a single mother, putting her in the uncomfortable position of having to explain and defend herself. The implicit message street-level actors received from migrants in both examples was that they fail to “do gender” appropriately (West & Zimmerman, 1987), which was experienced as a challenge to their sense of Self.

Such challenging interactions were more common among female street-level actors than male street-level actors, partly explained by the higher proportion of women among street-level actors and the higher proportion of men among migrants. Yet, male street-level actors also faced similar tensions. A social worker in Berlin, for instance, felt that he failed to meet the expectations of his migrant clients when he did not participate in what he perceived as sexist jokes. In a similar vein, a volunteer in Athens became disappointed when the group of female migrants he was there to assist refused to shake his hand and avoided being in his company. Regardless of the participants’ gender, such examples illustrate the perceived discrepancy between what the street-level actors consider gender-appropriate behavior (their direct perspective) and what they think their clients consider appropriate behavior (meta perspective).

Adding to the above, the next quote also describes divergence in gender perspectives and identity non-verification. It comes from a male volunteer in Berlin who, together with his wife, had spent a considerable amount of time and money helping a migrant family meet their basic needs and ensure access to various social services (housing, asylum application, health care, work, etc.). Despite having built a strong bond with the migrant family’s members, the behavior he expected was not always the behavior he received:

. . . for two years the girls and the wife from that family never ever shook my hand. [. . .] I tried to explain to them it’s a very important thing in our country and in our culture. That it’s considered very impolite, very offensive when you don’t shake hands. But, I could not change their minds. Even though we were so close. Even when their child was born here in January this year, we drove the mother to the hospital, we drove the family to the hospital. We had never been so close to a new-born as this one. So, when he was born and we were all very happy I tried to express my happiness by hugging the mother. But—you know, this felt like a body-check in ice hockey—for her this was so [inappropriate]. [. . .] So, they hug and kiss [my wife] . . . And, when there is a birthday party, traditionally, only women and children are invited. (Volunteer, Berlin)

There are two levels of disagreement in perspectives here. First, there is a divergence between the participant’s direct perspective on how close men and

women can be, and the meta-perspective, which is what he thinks the migrant family thinks about it. While he thinks that men and women can and should shake hands and be in each other's company, he finds that the members of the migrant family do not think so. Moreover, there is a divergence between the direct and the meta-meta perspective. That is, his gender beliefs on the issue of closeness among men and women versus his view on the migrant family's view of his beliefs on the issue ("for them this was so inappropriate").

Moreover, this participant also failed to verify his gender identity, as he understands it. Unlike his wife, he was kept at a distance from all the female members of the migrant family, both physically and metaphorically, not receiving the warmth and friendliness he expected back from them. Not being treated by these migrant women as the amicable and unthreatening man he believed he was, was seen as a rejection, not only of his gender beliefs, but also of his gendered sense of self. In that regard, he did not manage to achieve identity verification.

Overall, this section demonstrates that there was indeed a divergence in gender identities and beliefs between street-level actors and migrants, and that this divergence was challenging for street-level actors, despite their higher relative status in the given context. This observation largely confirms the street-level bureaucracy literature on bureaucrat-client interactions and the idea that bureaucrats' construction of their target population matters. However, it also highlights an overlooked detail: the clients' construction of the bureaucrats, as perceived by the latter, influences the bureaucrat-client interactions as well. It can thus be argued that the bureaucrats' use of discretion is, at least to some degree, also shaped by the clients' construction of the bureaucrats, as the next section will illustrate.

## Discretionary Strategies

After the initial "shock" of encountering gender perspectives that are considerably different from one's own, street-level actors had to develop practical strategies to deal with this Self-Other difference, especially as their role in the context called for repeated interactions with the same migrants over time. The participants of this study adopted one of four discretionary strategies: the *judge* approach, the *soft nudge* approach, the *hard nudge* approach, and the *engage* approach. Each of these approaches assumes different degrees of perceived distance between street-level actors' and migrants' gender perspectives, as well as different degrees of effort to minimize this distance. Moreover, each approach corresponds to different mental positionings on the two conceptual axes discussed above: essentialism-versus-social constructionism and low-versus-high hierarchy.



## The “Judge” Approach

The *judge* approach was most commonly adopted by participants who ascribed to the essentialist paradigm and who viewed their relationship with migrants as highly hierarchical. That is, they viewed migrants’ gender identities and beliefs as innate and fixed, as well as of lower value compared to their own. This represented the street-level actors’ meta-perspective, meaning their view on migrants’ gender identities and beliefs. As the examples in the following indicate, judging and distancing one’s Self from the Other may take various forms in practice:

One day a [migrant] man came and told me *“I don’t want to talk to women, I only accept men.”* I told him: *“You are in the wrong country. Bye bye. You should go to another country. This is Germany. If you want something, you have to talk to women. And, if you don’t want to talk to them, go back. Or, to another country. This is Germany!”* They come here and they have to accept our rules. (Social worker, Berlin)

We won’t go to speak to a man, to tell him *“why are you doing these things?”* Or, to correct him. The everyday reality at the camp is that as I am walking through the camp’s streets, I will say hi to a woman I don’t know a lot more easily than to a man. And, there is especially this thing when we look at each other and then we [purposely] turn our gaze away from each other. (Social worker, Athens)

Both of these quotes describe responses of female social workers to what they see as misogynistic behavior by migrant men. The first refers to migrant men asking to be served by male employees only, while the second comes alongside a discussion on the topic of gender-based violence that occurs in migrant camps. In the former quote, the participant openly disapproves and confronts the migrant’s stance, while in the latter the participant avoids the interaction with migrant men altogether. In effect, both reactions reflect the same discretionary strategy and they bring the same result. The migrant Other is cast as “undeserving” of the street-level actors’ attention and is kept at a distance. As such, as there is no meaningful attempt to bridge the perceived gap in the two perspectives, the direct and the meta-perspective, which means the divergence in perspectives remains.

Judging and maintaining a distance from migrants with whom a street-level actor disagrees can be a preferred strategy as it helps street-level actors maintain a positive sense of Self. By not treating migrants as equal interlocutors, street-level actors avoid situations that may result in receiving feedback that could challenge their views or lead to identity non-verification (see also Kadianaki, 2014). At the same time, however, this strategy is not likely to

have a positive influence on migrant clients, as it reinforces the migrants' Otherness (see also Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017).

### The "Soft Nudge" Approach

The *soft nudge* approach refers here to subtle efforts of street-level actors to change migrants' behavior. This approach is associated with a low perceived hierarchy between Self and Other, as well as an underlined expectation that migrants cannot change much. In practice, it may take the form of suggestions for solving a problem (see also Hand, 2018) or friendly advice about how things are done in the host society. Specific instances discussed by this study's participants included a local volunteer offering unsolicited advice and material support for contraception to migrant women who had already had several children or a local activist advising young migrant men on how flirting is properly done in the local society.

As the examples in the following also illustrate, such discrete interventions have the clear goal of *nudging* migrants toward—what street-level actors see as—the "right" gender norms and practices. The first quote comes from a social worker in Berlin who uses her discretion to make sure migrant women have access to the family's income, while the second describes a polite confrontation between a migrant man and an Athenian social worker, through the use of humor:

The man is [usually] the one who goes to all governmental offices and [the one who] comes to us. I personally always try and, right from the start, I always say: "*Your wife has to sign all the forms. When you apply for child benefit in Germany that goes to the woman. And, you know, if you have a bank account. . .*,"—because, you know, they always have to write down their bank details for all the governmental benefits to go in—I always say: "*She has to join the account*" [ . . . ]. So, it's very important for me always to say: "*This is her money and she should have access to that money!*" (Social worker, Berlin)

I had a case where the man was sarcastic to the woman, the woman got sad, and I took her side, and said to him "*Look, here, we're in Greece, here, the boss is the woman,*" joking with him. You treat it with a bit of humor. But, I see that slowly they become familiar with the fact that we respect women more here. [Women] can be independent and work. Not that you can change the software inside his head all of a sudden, but I think they are slowly becoming familiar. [ . . . ] In the end, they understand that gender roles are a bit different here and they partially adjust to this. (Social Worker, Athens)

In both of these interactions, there is an underlined effort to bridge the perceived gap between Self and Other. In the first segment, this participant

steps out of her official role requirements and uses her informal professional discretion to convey her direct perspective to her clients, namely her belief that there should be gender parity in the access to family finances. In doing so, she does not ask her clients to make a larger change but, through a specific step, she tries to reduce the divergence between the direct perspective (gender parity in family finances) and the meta-perspective (men should control the family's finances).

In a similar fashion, the participant in the second exchange jokingly conveys to the migrant man the idea that treating women as inferior is considered inappropriate in the local society. She therefore makes an effort to address the perceived gap in gender perspectives, meaning the direct perspective (men should treat wives as equals) and the meta-perspective (it is okay to talk down to one's wife). Although she does not think it is possible to "change the software inside his head," she does seem to hope for minor adjustments.

### The "Hard Nudge" Approach

*Hard nudging* is a less discrete version of nudging, which aims to "correct" the migrants' behavior through more direct and explicit interventions. This approach assumes that migrants' views are inferior to those of locals and they can and should change. As the examples in the following show, the participants may follow different strategies to "train" their migrant clients so as to achieve gender perspective-bridging. The first segment comes from a volunteer guardian of an unaccompanied minor boy who sought to "show him" how interactions between men and women should be. The second comes from a local activist who, together with her comrades, came up with internal "house rules" at a housing squat to ensure equality of gender roles:

Before going [to meet the boy] I thought, what would I do if he refused to shake my hand? [. . .] In every other context I would leave [if] somebody is not gonna give me their hand. There is too much feminism inside me. If you want something from me, give me your hand. I am not accepting this. [. . .] It's a constant conflict to be honest. The only way out for me is to have a lot of contact with him. To have some positive impact on him, to show him "*Look! It can be different.*" (Volunteer, Berlin)

What happens at the group level in [this squat], is that during the cleaning shifts, the ones who are cleaning the stairs [and] the common spaces, are men. In order for this thing to be more balanced. Because, if we were to leave this thing for them to arrange, they would definitely make the women do this. Since the first day we opened [. . .] we noticed that men would wander around doing their own things, while the women were doing all the work. And, we said:

“Wait a minute.” . . . From the first moment, this was obvious. So, we had to do something about it, because it shouldn’t be happening like this. (Activist, Athens)

Both of these examples indicate a perceived distance in gender perspectives, as well as an active effort to minimize this distance. In the first case, the street-level actor expresses her lack of appreciation and tolerance regarding the way migrant men often behave toward women, for instance by refusing to shake their hands. Frustrated as she is, she focuses her efforts on counseling the minor boy under her care so as to “show him” how “it can be different.” She therefore attempts to close the perceived gap in perspectives by reinforcing her own and changing the Other’s. Similarly, the second participant, along with her fellow activists, goes as far as to set the rules in the housing squat to ensure the equal participation in housework by migrant men and women. Paradoxically, what they do is create and enforce rules in a hierarchical manner, to make migrant residents behave in an egalitarian way.

In these asymmetrical spaces of negotiation (Eule et al., 2018), changing the migrant Other becomes the preferred route for minimizing the Self-Other discrepancy in gender perspectives. Compared to the *soft nudge* approach, the *hard nudge* approach involves a more “hands-on” effort from street-level actors to redirect the migrants’ behavior by using their position, which is one of relative power, to change the rules of the game according to their own standards. This direct effort to “fix” the Other reflects a top-down hierarchical view of the migrants’ gender identities and beliefs, as well as an assumption that these identities and beliefs are indeed changeable. Nonetheless, this behavior also serves to maintain this hierarchy. Ironically, in their effort to create and promote gender equality among migrants, street-level actors reinforce the existing hierarchical relationship between migrants and themselves.

### The “Engage” Approach

Compared to the three previous discretionary strategies, the *engage* approach suggests a greater effort from the part of street-level actors to listen to and understand the migrants’ gender perspectives, before proceeding to offer advice or attempting to change them. This approach is linked to the social constructionist paradigm only, and it shows low perceived hierarchy. It also reveals the implicit attitude that the divergence in perspectives will be better bridged through mutual effort by members of both groups or, what is also known as, co-production (Verschuere et al., 2012). The segment in the following conveys this stance:

I also have to understand some stuff. [. . .] [To] a Muslim woman without a hijab, they say “hi” usually, and touch, at least give a hand. [To] a woman with a hijab, not. And, I don’t change my way of behaving. And if a man doesn’t want to give me his hand, I respect it as much as I would respect it with a German man. [. . .] It could be that he is saying “hi” to me in a much more respectful way than somebody shaking hands with a “rubber hand.” And, because usually when a man is doing this they put the hand on the heart and they do it like this [places hand on her heart] and they say hello to me, this is a very respectful gesture. And I must say I never had so much respect from other people as in the last two years. I also had to learn a lot . . . (Activist, Berlin)

In this extract, the male migrants’ avoidance of shaking hands with women does not seem to challenge this street-level actor’s own sense of Self. Her view of the migrants’ gender perspective, or the meta-perspective, also does not seem to challenge her own gender identities and beliefs, or the direct-perspective, even though she does recognize that they differ from each other. Accordingly, achieving identity-verification is not a problem in this interaction.

Moreover, unlike the street-level actors who adopt the previous four discretionary strategies, this participant does not make an effort to “correct” the migrants’ behavior. By asserting that she also has to “understand some stuff” and that she has to “also learn also a lot,” she indicates that she sees her relationship with migrant men as egalitarian and the gap-bridging as a two-way process. In this view, there is no need for migrants to fundamentally change their gender norms and practices, because street-level actors could simply adjust to alternative ways of interacting with them. By accepting this greeting custom as she understands it to be defined by the migrants, this participant accepts the meta-perspective, thereby taking a significant step toward bridging the perceived gap between Self and Other.

Similarly, in the following final quote, a young Athenian street-level actor also *engages* with the Other, as he approaches a middle-aged migrant man who just had an angry outburst toward his wife when another man accidentally touched her hand:

First of all, [I] try to understand why the person did it. For me that’s the first question. Like, “*Okay, you were angry. Why were you angry? What actually happened? [. . .] Why was it wrong? Okay, I get it. Respect. No problem. Continue. What would make you feel better? Okay, good. What does she say about that?*” First of all, by talking to the man, you understand, and you respect a certain part of his power. Not the power that you think he has, but the power he thinks he has. (Activist, Athens)

Once again, there is a divergence between the direct perspective (it does not matter if men's and women's hands touch) and the meta-perspective (they are not supposed to touch). Although the reason the migrant man became angry in the first place is not easily explainable by this participant according to his local society's gender norms, he tries to put himself in the migrant's shoes. By acknowledging "the power he thinks he has," this street-level actor also takes on the meta-perspective and verifies this migrant's gender identity. Operating on the assumption that the migrants' gender perspective is different but equal, this participant makes an effort to bridge the perceived gap in the two perspectives. In that sense, he takes the role of a neutral "mediator" between the local and migrant views, as opposed to that of the "ambassador" from the former to the latter.

Based on the discussion above, it follows that the *engage* approach is the discretionary strategy that is potentially most favorable for toward clients. This approach casts migrant clients as "deserving" of the street-level actors' time and effort, despite the perceived divergence in gender perspectives. What also becomes conspicuous here is that the street-level actors who choose to employ this approach are the ones who are least likely to perceive migrants' gender identities and beliefs as threatening to their own. Instead of framing the difference in perspectives as an insurmountable, non-negotiable barrier, they see it as a call to make a step closer to the Other. In this view, the Self-Other distance is a mutual responsibility and does not fall on the shoulders of the migrants alone.

All in all, the four discretionary strategies discussed here echo the central idea that the street-level bureaucrats' construction of their target population shapes their discretionary behavior, leading to a positive or negative use of discretion, as noted above. However, as the target population here consists of migrants and not of citizens, each discretionary approach assumes a different degree of Otherness attached to the street-level actors' constructions of their clients, as well as different level of willingness to bridge the perceived distance between Self and Other. Depending on the sense-making mechanism each street-level actor employs—seeing migrants as changeable or not and as equal or not—they follow a corresponding discretionary strategy. Table 6 summarizes a few indicative examples that illustrate how these four strategies manifest in practice.

In light of the empirical evidence discussed here, it appears that bureaucrats' construction of their clients is largely dependent upon the perceived distance of the client from the bureaucrat, or the Other from the Self. Therefore, although the citizen-agent paradigm remains overall relevant, when the clients belong to a social group widely seen as "Other," there are more complex dynamics at play. Put simply, it is not merely the bureaucrats'

**Table 6.** Judge, Soft Nudge, Hard Nudge, and Engage Approaches: Indicative Quotes.

Approaches	Representative Examples
<i>Judge Approach</i>	“Bye bye. You should go to another country. This is Germany” “We look at each other and then we turn our gaze away from each other”
<i>Soft Nudge Approach</i>	“It’s very important for me always to say: <i>‘This is her money and she should have access to that money’</i> ” “Not that you can change the software inside his head all of a sudden, but I think they are slowly becoming familiar.”
<i>Hard Nudge Approach</i>	“[I want] to have some positive impact on him, to show him, <i>‘Look! It can be different’</i> ” “. . . If we were to leave [cleaning] for them to arrange, they would definitely make the women do this.”
<i>Engage Approach</i>	“I also have to understand some stuff. [. . .] If a man doesn’t want to give me the hand, I respect it as much as I would respect it with a German man” “By talking to the man, you understand, and you respect a certain part of his power. Not the power that you think he has, but the power he thinks he has”

Source. Table constructed by author, based on direct quotes from participants.

construction of their target group that matters, but the construction of their target group’s Otherness in particular. This construction is not fixed and stable over time, of course, but constantly re-negotiated during the repeated interactions between members of the two groups.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This article has looked at how street-level actors in Athens and Berlin make sense of and behave toward their migrant clients, during the so-called European Migration Crisis of 2015–2017. Building on the citizen–agent paradigm and the notion that bureaucrats’ construction of their target population shapes bureaucratic discretion (Baviskar & Winter, 2017; Jilke & Tummers, 2018; Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010), this research has identified an additional dimension to this link. This article has argued that it is not merely about how bureaucrats, or street-level actors, view their clients, but also about how they view their clients in relation to themselves.

To examine the street-level actors’ use of discretion, this research has focused on the concepts of gender identities and beliefs, or gender

perspectives, a topic of major concern among street-level actors who had daily and direct contact with migrant clients in the two capitals. Not surprisingly, the gender perspectives of members of the two groups were largely divergent. In short, street-level actors viewed migrants' gender identities and beliefs as overly traditional and conservative, if not as wrong. Despite the asymmetrical power relationships between street-level actors and migrants (see also Eule et al., 2018), however, this difference was rather frustrating for street-level actors, who often experienced it as a failure to verify one's own self-view (see Burke & Stets, 2009). Confronting this difference was more difficult for some street-level actors than for others, the findings showed, depending on the perceived distance between themselves and the clients they serve, or between Self and Other.

More specifically, at the cognitive level, different street-level actors followed different pathways in constructing their view of their migrant clients. In simple terms, street-level actors' views of migrants' gender identities and beliefs took one of the following variations: (a) inferior and unchangeable, (b) inferior and changeable, (c) equal and unchangeable, and (d) equal and changeable. As these four combinations indicate, the street-level actors' perceptions of their clients were dependent upon where the street-level actors position themselves on the spectrum of essentialism versus social constructionism and on that of high-versus-low hierarchy.

Inevitably, these unique cognitive pathways shaped street-level actors' discretionary strategies in practice. Street-level actors who saw the Self-Other difference as bridgeable and the relationship between the two groups as egalitarian were more likely to *engage* closely with clients, using their discretionary power to the latter's advantage. By contrast, those who saw this difference as both unchangeable and hierarchically organized, were more likely to *judge* their clients and use their discretionary power in a way that would be more negative for the clients. In between these two ends, there were the *soft nudge* and *hard nudge* strategies: street-level actors who viewed the perceived difference as egalitarian and unchangeable tried to "correct" their clients by adopting a *soft nudge* approach, whereas those who viewed it as hierarchical and changeable tried to "fix" their clients by adopting the *hard nudge* approach.

To summarize, this article has infused the literature of street-level bureaucracy—the citizen-agent paradigm in particular—with conceptual tools from Identity Theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) and the IPM (Laing et al., 1966). In doing so, it has argued that the perceived distance between the bureaucrat Self and the client Other is key in determining bureaucratic discretion. While existing studies that examine bureaucrat-client interactions tend to focus either on the characteristics of bureaucrats (e.g., Tummers et al., 2012; Zacka,



2017), or those of clients (e.g., Jilke & Tummers, 2018), this article has shown that the way bureaucrats distinguish themselves from clients is worthy of further attention from researchers. Outside the context of migration management, this idea is more broadly relevant in cases when the clients belong to a social group cast as Other.

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### Note

1. As Rosenblum and Travis (2011, p. 3) put it, “For essentialists, *race*, *sex*, *sexual orientation*, *disability*, and *social class* identify significant, empirically verifiable differences among people. From the essentialist perspective, each of these exists apart from any social processes; they are objective categories of real differences among people.”

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## Author Biography

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