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"I don't know what to do—Could it be cultural?" The operationalization of cultural sensitivity among street-level workers in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration

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Abstract

Faced with increased global migration and a more ethnically diverse clientele, several studies stress the need for more culturally sensitive welfare services. Others warn that the focus on culture might lead to the culturalization and othering of clients from ethnic minority or migrant backgrounds. In the Norwegian context, cultural sensitivity is implemented in policy documents of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) to improve services for immigrant clients. However, the operationalization of cultural sensitivity into service delivery remains unscrutinized. Based on ethnographic fieldwork at a frontline NAV-office, this article unpacks the *practical work* embedded in being culturally aware, by exploring the circumstances in which street-level workers factor culture into their comprehension and consideration of a case. The article employs a process-oriented approach to its analysis of caseworkers' discussion of cases. Findings show that caseworkers explicitly consider culture mainly when cases appear diffuse and intangible. The caseworkers discuss plausible explanations to make sense of these cases, only one of which is culture. Thus, the caseworkers distinguish culture from the client's ethnicity or migrant background. These findings refine the perception of street-level workers' inability to respond to questions of

ethnicity and culture, by describing the dynamic processes of implicit categorization and sensemaking embedded in being aware of culture. The study also highlights the importance of empirical, ethnographic accounts to unpack the operationalization of such theoretical and ambiguous concepts into practice.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Several studies focus on how immigration has changed the clientele in welfare services. They conclude that caseworkers need more training in and knowledge of culture and ethnicity (Boyle & Springer, 2001; Jani, Osteen, & Shipe, 2016). The main arguments are that street-level workers either overemphasize or underestimate the relevance of culture and ethnicity in their work. These understandings influence research, professional education, street-level practice, codes of ethics and organizational policy, constituting a multicultural discourse, especially in the field of social work (Nadan, 2017). Several concepts have been formulated in response to the perceived inadequacy of welfare services to manage the multicultural reality. The most frequently used are cultural sensitivity (Fernández-Borrero, Vázquez-Aguado, & Álvarez-Pérez, 2016), cultural awareness (Jackson & Samuels, 2011), and cultural competence (Jani et al., 2016). Although the terms overlap, all entail an *awareness of culture, one's own and/or that of others*. The operationalization of this awareness of cultural preferences in service delivery has received limited attention. Hence, being culturally aware, culturally sensitive and culturally competent, appears as abstract and mere theoretical concepts (Harrison & Turner, 2011). Likewise, "culture" in these concepts and what you are supposed to be aware of, have competence on, and be sensitive to is unclear. This article will unpack the *practical work* embedded in being culturally aware, by exploring the circumstances under which street-level workers factor culture into their comprehension of a case.

Most of the empirical research in this field is based on what caseworkers say they would do (Williams & Soydan, 2005), or their perceptions and understandings of culture (Harrison & Turner, 2011). Valuable as these studies are, they can only tell us so much. This article combines fieldwork methods with a process-oriented approach, to explore *when and how caseworkers consider culture relevant to a case*. Case discussions amongst caseworkers in The Norwegian Labour and Welfare administration (NAV) serve as the empirical entry point. These discussions are an essential part of caseworkers' daily routine, where they deliberate relevant measures in specific cases. The frontline NAV offices have a dual mission: They administer benefits to people who are out of work and help them enter or re-enter the labour force. About 30% of NAV's unemployed clients have immigrant background (NAV, 2019). NAV is a bureaucratic system, with extensive regulations, specialized and standardized work processes. However, there is generous room for discretion (Volckmar-Eeg, 2015). It is a decentralized and complex system with autonomous frontline offices that answer to the Directorate of Labour and Welfare. The offices are organized within a partnership model between state and municipal welfare administrations (Fimreite & Lægreid, 2009). Services are constructed to encourage participation in the labour force, together with generous economic benefits (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2011).

To consolidate and improve the services for immigrant clients, NAV has introduced intercultural counselling as part of their counselling policy. Intercultural counselling addresses challenges in communication, culture and

understanding of Norwegian society, and recommends cultural sensitivity and awareness. Hence, cultural sensitivity is reflected in policy documents to provide equal services between frontline offices, and to enhance service delivery and goal attainment with immigrant clients. This makes NAV a good entry point for the investigation of the operationalization of cultural sensitivity. Therefore, I rely on notions of cultural sensitivity and awareness and direct attention to caseworkers' work with clients from an immigrant background. This article does not define *culture* or *cultural sensitivity* but explores how welfare caseworkers operationalize cultural awareness in their work. Operationalization implies a mental definition of culture, along with how and when to be aware of it. The article answers a call from Jani et al. (2016) to investigate the way caseworkers "define cultural competence and translate it into discrete practice behaviours", providing valuable perspectives into the workings of welfare bureaucracies. After a discussion of research on cultural diversity and welfare services and the theoretical underpinning of the article, I describe the methodological framework and data, then present and discuss the findings.

2 | CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND WELFARE SERVICES

A growing body of research conceptualizes the work with culture in welfare services (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016; Green, Bennett, & Betteridge, 2016), especially in social work. *Cultural competence* refers to professionals gaining competence and knowledge of other cultures, values and perceptions, in order to make correct judgements of the kind of measures needed in a case (Jani et al., 2016). Cultural competence has been criticized for its static understanding of culture, as something one *has* and that is shared among people of similar ethnicity. In response to this criticism, the concepts of *cultural awareness* and *cultural sensitivity* have become more frequent. Here, culture is something that becomes relevant in the interaction between people of different cultural backgrounds, and an awareness of culture is proposed. However, within research and policy, the three concepts are used differently, making it hard to separate them from each other and to present a definitive definition of them.

The conceptualization of cultural awareness, competence and sensitivity seems to depart from a perception that street-level workers inadequately manage the multicultural and multi-ethnic reality. Ethnicity and culture are presented as intertwined and as constitutive categories (Jenkins, 1994), where culture is relevant in interethnic encounters. Saunders, Haskins, and Vasquez (2015) argue that professionals and street-level workers must be trained in cultural competence and cultural sensitivity in order to provide better services. According to Fernández-Borrero et al. (2016), training in cultural diversity and cultural knowledge brings a greater degree of cultural awareness and responsiveness to services. An awareness of culture thus ensures the recognition of differences and acknowledges "the other" (Ploesser & Mecheril, 2012). However, Patil and Ennis (2018) assert that through the connection of ethnicity and culture, cultural competence is presented as relevant only to non-Western immigrants. Diedrich, Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre (2011, p. 273) state that categories in welfare services often fail to incorporate more complex information, "separating (...) individuals into discrete either/or categories". These processes might result in the simplification of complex cases (Magnussen & Svendsen, 2018; Rugkåsa & Ylvisaker, 2019), where clients' migrant or ethnic background is overemphasized (Elrick & Schwartzman, 2015). Elrick and Schwartzman (2015) describe how statistical categories might be turned into homogenized social categories. The focus on culture might therefore result in othering clients of ethnic minorities and a culturalization of social problems (Anis, 2005; Rugkåsa & Ylvisaker, 2019). In sum, researchers imply that street-level workers either overstate or understate culture.

However, few studies explore the operationalization of the concepts of cultural awareness, competence, or sensitivity into professional practice. Harrison and Turner (2011) demonstrate how social workers struggle to employ cultural competence. The participants in their study spent a considerable amount of time discussing the substance of "culture," concluding that it can evoke a multitude of understandings (Harrison & Turner, 2011, p. 341). The social workers also discussed the content of cultural competence. However, operationalizing the concept was problematic. Harrison and Turner (2011) therefore question the applicability and relevance of cultural competence in practice. Similarly, in their study of how social work educators and students conceive cultural competence (training), Jani

et al. (2016) show how the respondents find the concept of cultural competence to provide some prescriptions for practice, but that its conceptual ambiguity complicates the transfer into action. One respondent stated, "I understand the concept, but what does it tell me to *do*?" (Jani et al., 2016, p. 317). In Williams and Soydan's (2005) vignette study, caseworkers explained their considerations and measures in two cases of potential domestic child abuse—one of which was a family from an ethnic minority background. The caseworkers reportedly adopted similar measures in the two cases but considered culture relevant only to the ethnic minority family (Williams & Soydan, 2005, p. 910). However, the *practice behaviours* of a culturally competent person remain unscrutinized (Jani et al., 2016, p. 312). Caseworkers' ambivalence regarding questions of ethnicity and culture, stress the importance of investigating the practical operationalization of such concepts and caseworkers' decisions on how and when to emphasize culture in a case, and when not to.

Considering the unclear conceptualization of cultural awareness, the operationalization of when and how to be aware of culture, depends on the decisions and discretionary considerations of the professionals. Caseworkers have to categorize and position themselves and their case within a framework of diversity (Cedersund, 2013). Researchers emphasize that these processes might be influenced by frontline workers' attitudes towards clients (Keiser, 2010), referring to the professionals' perceived worthiness of a client group (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017; Jenkins, 1994; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). Heuristics and client typologies also shape the professionals' images and judgements of clients (Eikenaar, de Rijk, & Meershoek, 2016; Magnussen & Svendsen, 2018; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). Workers might search for information based on their expectations (Lipsky, 2010, p. 122), constituting an institutional bias. Although these studies provide valuable insights into the workings of street-level bureaucracies, other studies highlight street-level workers' categorizations as more dynamic and interchanging processes (Raaphorst & Van de Walle, 2018). Talleraas (2019, p. 15) shows how welfare bureaucrats use a multitude of categories, but also signal "incertitude about how to label, or even think about, people leading transnational lives". Moreover, Øversveen and Forseth (2018) and Lundberg (2009) show how the institutional categories influence the work and considerations of caseworkers and structure the identification of a person as a client.

3 | CATEGORIZATION WORK, CUES, AND INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS

Social policies "permit and require considerable discretion for their implementation and street-level delivery" (Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018, p. 301). Lipsky (2010, p. 61) emphasizes two aspects of discretionary considerations. The first points to the definition of the problem as a problem; "classifying the behaviour or background of the client" (ibid.). The frontline workers have to assess the client's situation and place the problem into a category. The second aspect is that the categories themselves are fluid and open to interpretation (ibid.), where the actions of street-level workers actively construct and reconstruct the categories (Diedrich et al., 2011, p. 286). The categorization of a case makes it manageable in terms of bureaucratic criteria.

Street-level discretion and categorization might be considered a "black box," that comprise which cases are placed in which categories. I take a process-oriented approach, understanding the discretionary considerations of caseworkers in their operationalization of cultural awareness as a kind of *categorization work*. Taking inspiration from Smith's (1999, 2005) institutional ethnography, *work* does not refer to formal processes or tasks, but directs analytical attention to how and why people do what they do. This work is done within an institutional complex, where some understandings and categories are accessible, and others are not. The categorization work connects both to discursive understandings of culture, as well as to the institutional apparatus and its established categories. Categories thus also function as coordinating mechanisms, where the institutional manifests itself in actors' experiences as ruling relations (Smith, 1999). The notion of work helps unpack the process of categorization, where street-level workers have to make sense of the case and the categories into which it may be placed.

Making sense of a case is a collective process in which plausible scenarios and understandings are taken into account so that the pieces can be put together into a story that "holds disparate elements together long enough to

energize and guide action" (Weick, 1995, p. 61). One way of recognizing and categorizing a case is to look for cues (Weick, 1995), "familiar structures (...) from which people develop a larger sense of what might be occurring" (Weick, 1995, p. 50). Cues are attributes that help identify a case. They are usually constituted of client characteristics (Raaphorst & Van de Walle, 2018), and might be either verbal or non-verbal (Jenkins, 1994, p. 211). The search for and interpretations of such cues are allocated to interpretative frameworks that street-level workers use to give characteristics of a case or client a "signalling status" to become meaningful signals (Raaphorst & Van de Walle, 2018). The placement within such frameworks allows for perceiving, identifying, and labelling a case, and presents *guided doings* (Goffman, 1974). The ideologies or paradigms embedded in frameworks influence what people notice, which cues are considered relevant and how they connect to the situation (Weick, 1995, p. 133). Such beliefs might refer to different understandings of a client's status, such as discourses of culture, race, ethnicity or citizenship (for a more comprehensive discussion, see Vassenden, 2010). Sensemaking comprises a collective and local coordination of what serves as legitimate knowledge upon which to base the interpretative framework and assessment of cues (Raaphorst & Van de Walle, 2018; Smith, 2005).

The notion of work, combined with theory of sensemaking and signalling, thus facilitate exploration of "the knowledge, skills, and experiences involved, (....) the difficulties to be overcome as well as the tension absorbed as part of doing the work" (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 72) of operationalizing cultural sensitivity into discretionary practice. This provides an understanding of caseworkers' practice as related to the broader institutional setting, to power and ruling, and not just an outcome of their personal beliefs or biases. The objective is to describe some institutional processes that may have generalizing effects. Hence, the implications are on the institutional and policy level.

4 | METHODS AND DATA

The article is based on 5 months of ethnographic fieldwork (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Mannay & Morgan, 2015) conducted in the fall of 2017 at a frontline office in NAV. The office is on the west coast of Norway. I gained access through the Directorate of Labour and Welfare. The office serves an urban area with a large proportion of immigrant residents and the caseworkers regularly manage cases where the client has immigrant background. The average caseworker manages about 100 cases. The office is medium-sized. The five teams in the office work with clients on different welfare benefits, such as health benefits, social security benefits, or unemployment benefits, but they all assist clients with entering or re-entering the labour force. Most of the employees are women. To protect the anonymity of the few male employees, I refer to all caseworkers as female. A few of the caseworkers also have migrant backgrounds. Names of all informants in the article are pseudonyms.

Before starting the fieldwork, I held an information meeting at the office. I informed the caseworkers about my presence in the office and described the project concerning their work with immigrant clients and the relevance of culture in their work. I distributed an information letter with my contact information to the caseworkers, in case of questions or concerns. The caseworkers gave written or verbal consent to participate. The Directorate of Labour and Welfare also exempted the caseworkers from their duty of confidentiality, so that they could discuss cases with me. No identifying information about clients is in the data. The research complies with ethical guidelines of the Norwegian Ethical Committee of Social Science research. The project has been reviewed and approved by the Data Protection Official for Research (NSD).

The team meetings functioned as a key situation for the fieldwork. I came to know the different teams and their work. Each team met once a week to discuss cases, get information about and deliberate on the routines, procedures and the organization of their work. Most of the meeting time was dedicated to the discussion of cases. In these discussions, the caseworkers have to explicate their understanding of the case, constituting a good entry point into the caseworkers' work—what they emphasize, their arguments and disagreements. I was an observer in these meetings and did not suggest cases for discussion. However, the caseworkers sometimes mentioned me when they discussed

cases they considered relevant to the project. There might also be things that are left out of the discussions because of my presence, or because it is taken for granted among the caseworkers. During the fieldwork, I therefore wanted to be in situations that would open for different roles and relations, to get a range of perspectives and understandings. I had access to a workspace in the office, usually in one of the shared offices. In addition to the long duration of the fieldwork, this encouraged a more natural relationship with the caseworkers. It was easy to talk to them about their work and get to know their workdays. In the shared offices, the caseworkers also tended to engage in informal case discussions as there were several caseworkers present.

The ethnographic approach made it possible for me to ask for explanation, clarification, or elaboration of practices or cases mentioned in meetings or discussions I attended. I engaged in field conversations with the caseworkers in their offices, in the kitchen over coffee, or walking to or from meetings. The caseworkers also stopped me in the hallway or dropped by my workspace, to ask about the project or tell me about cases or meetings they thought might be of interest to me. At the same time, I took care not to intrude on their work or take unfair advantage of their willingness to participate. I excluded a couple of the caseworkers from the data production and analysis because they seemed uncomfortable with my presence or reluctant to speak with me. As I could not attend every discussion or meeting, the descriptions are not an exhaustive representation of every case the caseworkers manage. Rather, they illustrate the caseworkers' categorization work. The data consist of thick descriptions of 78 situations, comprising 30 team meetings and 48 informal case discussions described in fieldnotes.

Ethnographic fieldwork requires the researcher's intense involvement in data production (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I constantly negotiated my role and relationships in the field, which influenced what was noticed, asked about and written down. I am a young, ethnic Norwegian woman with an academic background. Most of the caseworkers usually called me "the researcher" and seemed eager to share their knowledge. Others seemed sceptical of my presence. Typically, this was when the caseworkers expressed understandings that would elsewhere be perceived as prejudicial. The extent of the fieldwork, however, allowed them to explain or elaborate on such statements. A year prior to the fieldwork, I worked as a caseworker in a different NAV office for 1 year, learning about the organization, work processes, and institutionalized language from within. This positioned me as a "halfie," being both an insider and an outsider to the field simultaneously (Abu-Lughod, 1991). In my experience, this facilitates more intimate knowledge and makes it easier to identify situations worth exploring. It might also simplify the social context, freeing cognitive capacity and attention. However, the halfie position comes with blind spots, which possibly makes it difficult to ask naïve questions. It might influence the caseworkers' approach to me, emphasizing elements of their work or specific clients. Moreover, some caseworkers used me as a sounding board for their struggles with managers and policy makers. As the fieldwork continued, my knowledge of the field and relationship with the caseworkers became more natural, making such situations less frequent. To distance myself from my tacit knowledge, I summarized the fieldnotes in English rather than my native language, Norwegian. This exercise appeared to help me use a less institutionalized language and go beyond my immediate understanding of the field.

Institutional ethnography (Smith, 1999, 2005) informed my analytical approach. The understanding of work directed attention to the practices, experiences, and reflections of the caseworkers. The case discussions take on very different forms, depending on the case. The content of the discussion, as well as time spent on the discussions varied. The caseworkers would mention culture on some occasions but not on others, seemingly considering culture both as relevant and irrelevant under different circumstances. This finding does not support claims that the caseworker in general place too much or too little emphasis on culture, hence constituting an anomaly to previous research (Abbott, 2004; Vassenden, 2018). I asked the caseworkers about these situations during the fieldwork to elicit their reflections. This anomaly thus informed the further data production and later analysis. After finishing the fieldwork, I sorted the data based on team affiliation, and then based on the content of the discussions at case level. I subsequently identified common and divergent themes through constant comparison of the caseworkers' emphasis in the descriptions and discussions. The analytical focus has been on unpacking the work inherent in their discussions. Not considering whether culture is emphasized, but how and when it is emphasized as part of the categorization work. Like Williams and Soydan (2005, p. 910), I have focused on the caseworkers' explicit references to a

(collective) culture and to the client's ethnic or immigrant background in the analysis, in addition to implicit remarks on perceived differences in practices, values, beliefs, or expressions.

5 | FINDINGS

In their discussion of cases, the caseworkers categorized each case based on how they perceived it, what the problem might be, and how they could work with the case as it proceeds. This categorization made each case manageable in institutional terms. In this work, they reviewed several cues to categorize the case. The consideration of culture as relevant in a case only happened in some situations, where the case was categorized as an immigrant, non-sensible case. Hence, the operationalization of caseworkers' cultural awareness was connected to their understanding and categorization of the case. In the following, I will present the interpretive framework the caseworkers made use of in this work, before describing how different cues were acknowledged within this framework resulting in some cases being considered as *cultural immigrant clients*.

5.1 | Placing the case: Sensible or non-sensible, immigrant or non-immigrant

In the case discussions, the caseworkers drew distinctions between categories of cases. Regarding immigrants and culture, these distinctions happened along two dimensions in particular. First, they distinguished immigrant from non-immigrant cases. This distinction was not, however, simply dependent on the client having formal immigrant background. One day I shared an office with Nora and two of her colleagues. When I asked them if they had any cases that might be interesting for me to hear about, Nora replied:

> I have one case with a German client and one involving a Swede. Are they immigrant enough for you? I also have a case with a British man, but I do not know if that will be so interesting for you. I think it's quite an easy case. He has a good resume, good education and work experience from several places and sectors. I will try to get him into this course [showing me a pamphlet].

Nora's statement indicates that she did not necessarily see her clients as immigrants, even if they originated from another country. When discussing cases that they conceived as straightforward, caseworkers did not stress the client's immigrant background or culture. When describing these cases, the caseworkers did not necessarily mention clients' names, appearance, or country of origin. These factors were consequently not known in the discussion and hence not considered in the review of the case.

I attended a meeting with the team working with social security benefits. The caseworkers ended the meeting by telling me that it was a shame that none of the cases they discussed were relevant to me, since they did not concern immigrant clients. However, that was only half the truth. One of the caseworkers replied:

> All my cases pertained to clients with immigrant background, but I did not find it relevant to mention it in the discussion, because it did not have anything to do with their challenges and the case.

Most of the cases that this team discussed pertained to their clients' financial situation, and whether they were eligible for social security benefits. As one caseworker put it:

> It's about math. We add and subtract and see what we end up with. If the result is that they [the clients] have less money than they are supposed to, we give them more money.

In these discussions, the caseworkers did not have to explain or make sense of the case. All they had to do was to determine a client's eligibility for benefits. In this work, the client's immigrant background was not considered relevant.

The second dimension the caseworkers activated in the placement of cases was that of sensible and non-sensible cases. The caseworkers used specific phrases when talking about cases where they did not easily recognize the problem at hand:

> *"There is something I can't really grasp."*
> *"It is not a standard case." "This is not an ordinary." [Referring to institutionalized levels of*
> *need: ordinary/standard, situational, special, long-term]*
> *"There is something more here."*

In the case discussions, these phrases seemed to ascribe the case as non-sensible, suggesting to the other caseworkers the need to engage in a more comprehensive search for problems and interpretations. These statements also describe how these non-sensible cases did not seem to fit the established institutional categories. In a meeting with the team working with unemployment benefits, Erica described an unemployed male client with an immigrant background:

> *I do not know what to do! He only wants courses, no work practice or language training, but qualification*
> *courses. The biggest problem is the communication… One thing is that he lacks proficiency in Norwegian,*
> *but it is also his personality and his expectations of me. It will be difficult to transfer the case to another*
> *team, because I should be able to handle it and get something done—considering his résumé. I want to help*
> *him, but it is just so hard… There is something about the communication, but there is also something more.*
> *Something that I cannot really grasp.*

Seemingly, Erica struggled to identify the problem of the case. She mentioned several potential challenges that she faced in helping this client find a job, the biggest of which was "something" related to communication. The lack of a recognizable problem instigated a comprehensive deliberation of what made this case so complicated. The discussion of Erica's case covered several topics. The caseworkers deliberated a variety of courses that could be relevant for the client, his financial aid, more of his case history, and the possibility of transferring the case to another team. The discussion ended without identifying the central problem:

> *Christine: He would never get in a position to get into the labour market on his own, but he still has to be*
> *able to make use of the things we can offer.*
> *Elisabeth: Could it be cultural?*
> *Erica: He just does not want anything [sigh].*

The combination of the comprehension of the case as a non-sensible case and the client being perceived as "immigrant" set in motion a process whereby the caseworkers searched for and (re)defined the problem. The caseworkers tested different hypotheses and plausible explanations for the status and development in the case. The client's immigrant background and the possible relevance of culture were addressed, as were other potentially relevant aspects of the case.

These findings show that during the case discussions, the caseworkers implicitly categorized each case by positioning it along two dimensions (Figure 1). One dimension is the understanding of the client as "immigrant" or "non-immigrant." In the non-immigrant cases, the caseworkers did not consider the client's immigrant background as relevant, and so it was not the same as the client not having an immigrant background. In other words, there was far from a clear correspondence between formal immigrant status and being categorized as an "immigrant case." The second dimension is the caseworkers' definition of the case as sensible or non-sensible. These categories depended
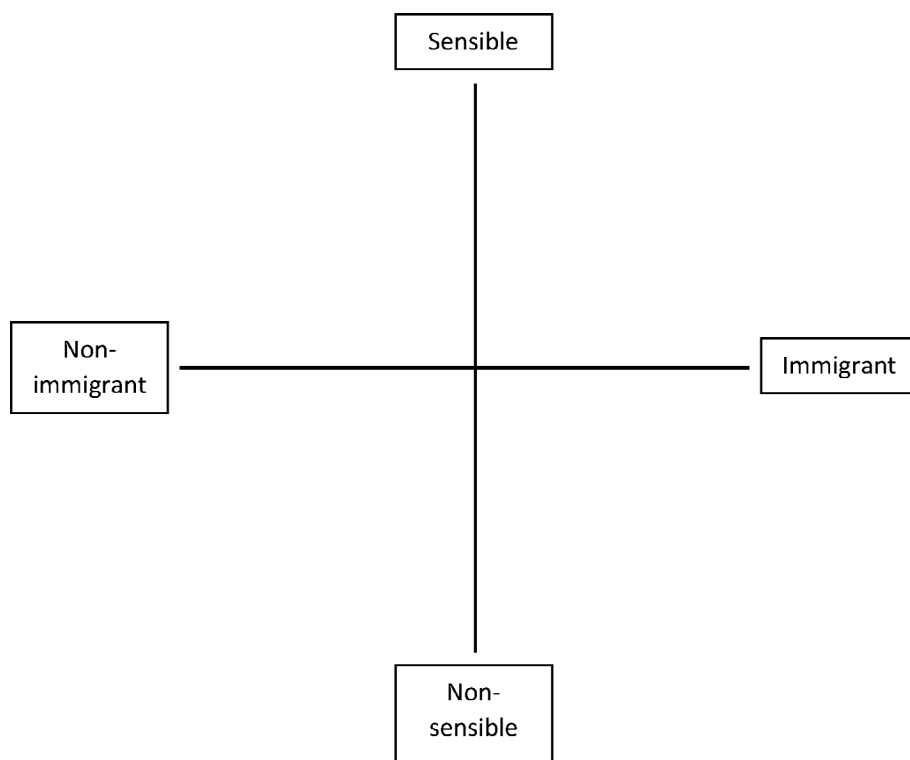
FIGURE 1 The two dimensions of the interpretive framework for placing a case

on whether the caseworkers easily recognized the problem in the case, or if they saw it as diffuse and intangible. The two dimensions constitute the interpretive framework the caseworkers relied upon when considering a case. When the caseworkers tried to make sense of the case, they activated this framework as part of their categorization work. The two dimensions can be seen as continuums where the boundaries among the four categories; immigrant or non-immigrant, sensible or non-sensible are continually negotiated by the caseworkers in the case discussions.

5.2 | Cues of culture: Ethnicity, "language," and motivation

In their categorization of a case as immigrant or non-immigrant and as sensible or non-sensible, the caseworkers searched for cues. Some cues in particular seemed to evoke the caseworkers' awareness of and attention to culture: Ethnicity, "language," or motivation. One example is a discussion within the team working with sickness benefits. The case centred on a taxi driver with a bad back; the taxi driver's Turkish background was presented upfront. The caseworkers found that the taxi driver had occasionally worked full time, so they tried to figure out how his health situation had changed the times he was able to work. They discussed the matter at length:

> Are there any "objective" medical findings? Could there be other things that might explain the pain? And is he actually in that much pain? Pain is a subjective perception.

In the discussion, the caseworkers treated eligibility to health benefits as dependent on objective findings, not diffuse illnesses or subjective pain descriptions. The institutional categorization of health thus influenced the case-workers' comprehension of the case. The suggestion of the problem consisting of "other things" initiated the

caseworkers' attempt to (re)define the problem of the case: Was it possible for his employer to accommodate his bad back? Could he change jobs? Why was he working as a taxi driver? Was he motivated to work? What was his home life like? How was his wife? Was she working? Should they talk to his doctor to get him some kind of treatment? Did he really have a bad back, or did he simply not want to work? Or was this a cultural problem? As one caseworker stated:

> In some cultures, people just sit down if it hurts; they just do not use the part of the body that hurts and wait until the pain passes. Maybe he lacks motivation to work?

In the discussion, the caseworkers looked for cues that could help them make sense of a non-sensible case. The caseworkers cited their previous experiences with other Turkish taxi drivers, whom they saw as a particularly difficult group characterized by subjective symptoms and apparent lack of motivation. The caseworkers therefore rejected the initial definition of the problem as a simple matter of whether the client was disabled enough to be eligible for benefits. Combined with the client's Turkish background, the impression of there being something more to the case, especially a question of motivation, triggered an understanding of the case that could be explained by culture. The client's ethnicity and perceived lack of motivation to work seemed to function as cues that mobilized the caseworkers' cultural awareness. Nonetheless, this was not uncontested in the discussion as the caseworkers also considered several other aspects of the case before getting to culture.

In both the Turkish taxi driver's case and Erica's case, the connection between the different characteristics of the case and culture was made explicit. However, the caseworkers also implicitly referred to culture. In a conversation with a caseworker working with sickness benefits, I asked how culture is relevant in her work. She responded by telling me about difficulties with language, suggesting a link between notions of language and culture. Likewise, Ida told me about a report she had received from a collaborating institution about one of her clients:

> This report says that the client has a difficult time following work hours because of praying times. He also does not respond well to having female supervisors. This is not unusual, however, and is something we can work on. The good thing about this specific report is that it also emphasizes difficulties in communication. [Reading from the report]: "The client is not attentive or responsive and is headstrong and stubborn." This is cultural, wouldn't you say? In order to get this information, we have to dare to put it into words. But it is not easy to put these things into words, especially things that fall somewhere between culture and religion, but these elements are important information.

The report stated that it was not the client's proficiency in Norwegian that was problematic, but the way he communicated with people. Ida deliberated on communication and culture in making sense of the case. I asked Ida what she saw as the problem with the case. She replied:

> The client has health problems, but language and motivation are the main reasons why he is out of work.

Ida initially talked about difficulties in communication, culture, personality, and religion, later summing it up as challenges related to "language and motivation." This suggests that the caseworkers' consideration of culture might be implicit in their notions of language and motivation. Thus, the caseworkers' notion of language does not necessarily refer to the client's proficiency in Norwegian, their vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation, but to culture. However, Ida asking "this is cultural, wouldn't you say?" also suggests a test of her conception of culture by negotiating its substance.

These findings demonstrate how the implicit categorization of a case as a non-sensible and immigrant case instigated a search for cues that could help clarify the kind of case and client at hand. Ethnicity, "language" and motivation served as cues for culture, and as implicit references to culture. The caseworkers introduced and
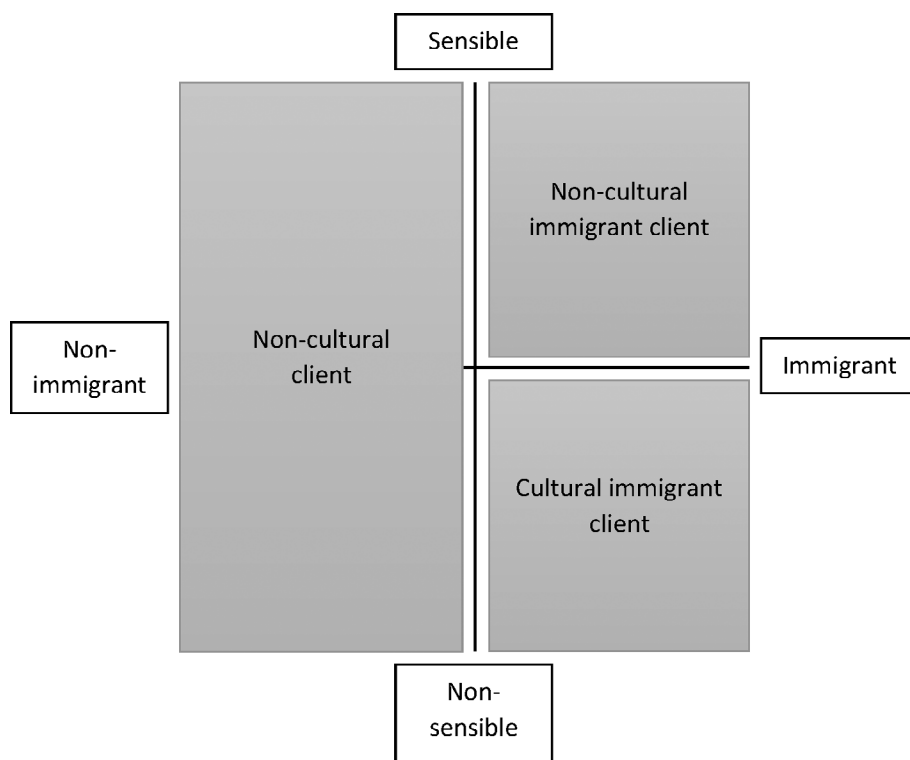
FIGURE 2 The circumstances in which caseworkers considered culture relevant—the non-sensible, immigrant cases

addressed culture relatively late in the process of (re)defining the problem of the case, as in the situation with the Turkish taxi driver and with Erica's case. The caseworkers reviewed several other aspects of the case and the client before considering culture. They engaged in a process of elimination, where culture might also be ruled out as irrelevant. Hence, there was not a causal relationship between the presence of the cues and the definition of a case as pertaining to a cultural immigrant client. The case also had to be categorized as non-sensible and immigrant (Figure 2).

A discussion between two caseworkers on how to proceed in a case illustrate how there may be a lack of consensus on the interpretation of the different cues. Prior to a meeting with a single mother from an African country, Cathrine told me how she needed to explain a few things to the client because the client lacked proficiency in Norwegian. When she returned to the office, Cathrine summarized their conversation:

> *I experience her as active and well informed. She requested work practice and wanted to get into an activity in addition to school [the client was finishing upper-secondary school in Norway].*

Cathrine started to discuss the case with the two other caseworkers with whom she shares an office. One of the caseworkers asked if the client might be a candidate for a program to which they often assigned non-sensible cases:

> *Anna: She is a single mom, does not have any formal education, and has children who need a bit more attention.*
> *Cathrine: Well, she is resourceful and manages by herself even with her children. She can handle her*

schooling in addition to being the sole provider for her children. We might look into the program later, but at this point we will start with work practice and see how it goes.

Cathrine and her colleague had very different ways of making sense of this case. The discussion illustrates how the different cues, "language" and ethnicity did not necessarily elicit the same understanding. Moreover, in her description of the case prior to the meeting, Cathrine did not use the term "language," but "proficiency in Norwegian." She described the client as motivated and with specific goals and emphasized that the client seemed quite enthusiastic about making progress in her own case, wanting work practice. Although describing the client as African, Cathrine seemed to categorize the case as a sensible one. This illustrates how the caseworkers' consideration of culture depended on the implicit categorization of a case as *both* non-sensible and regarding an "immigrant client." In these instances, the caseworkers categorized the case as a *cultural immigrant case*, where they mobilized their cultural awareness and regarded culture as relevant to the case.

6 | THE CULTURAL IMMIGRANT CLIENT

In the operationalization of cultural sensitivity, the caseworkers have to decide when and how to be aware of culture. The findings suggest that the caseworkers are capable of recognizing the complexities of the cases during their discussions. The caseworkers negotiate the substance of the categories and how different cases fit the categories at hand, while actively constructing and reconstructing those categories (Diedrich et al., 2011; Lipsky, 2010). The categories of immigrant or non-immigrant, and sensible or non-sensible fall along continuums, rather than as binary categories (Diedrich et al., 2011). Hence, a clear typology of client characteristics or professional preferences regarding an awareness of culture seems unsuitable. On the one hand, these findings show that the caseworkers are mindful of possible diversity factors and circumstances, other than culture, distinguishing culture from ethnicity (Barth, 1998). In their comprehensive discussions, the caseworkers deconstruct their clients' position (Ploesser & Mecheril, 2012), acknowledging that the clients' status include structural factors, such as class positions. The notions of cultural awareness or sensitivity thus seem inadequate to capture the challenges of the migrant clients, and hence are not appropriate to ensure the recognition of clients. The caseworkers' distinction between immigrants and non-immigrants is not based on statistical categories and objective criteria, as indicated by Elrick and Schwartzman (2015), but on the consideration of the client's immigrant background as potentially relevant to the case. Hence, ethnic disadvantages in social policy and welfare as argued by Vickers, Craig, and Atkin (2013) might not be absolute but influenced by such work processes described in this study. These findings thus expand notions of institutional and ethnic biases in welfare services. On the other hand, these findings might support the claim that the caseworkers *under-recognize* the cultural dimension by addressing culture only when they experience the case as difficult and unclear. The clients placed in the other sections of Figure 1 might still be "cultural" in the sense that they inherit cultural attributes. However, in the discussion of the case, the caseworkers do not treat culture as relevant to their understanding of the case and its challenges. Moreover, in non-sensible non-immigrant cases, the caseworkers also speak of motivation, for instance, but they explain the client's lack of motivation as a personal challenge or based on the absence of relevant measures in NAV, not as pertaining to a collective culture. Hence, cultural aspects of sensible or non-immigrant cases might not be adequately discussed. These findings suggest that after a case has been assigned a category, the categories become dichotomous and based on simplifications (Magnussen & Svendsen, 2018), particularly in the way the caseworkers discuss culture. In this process, the caseworkers have reviewed "all" other possible explanations and understandings of the case. The explicit consideration of culture and the client's immigrant background thus is a last resort for the caseworkers in the process of making sense of the non-sensible case. The perception of a case as non-sensible also implies a reference to the inadequacy of the institutional categories to capture the challenge and complexity of the case (Diedrich et al., 2011). It is not possible to make the case institutionally manageable. The institutional categories thus have a ruling function in that some categories

are accessible to the caseworkers in their categorization work. Hence, some cases are considered sensible and easily fit the institutional categories, and others fall outside these categories and become non-sensible.

Another aspect of operationalizing the concept of cultural sensitivity entails making sense of culture. The findings of this study support the claim of Williams and Soydan (2005) and Harrison and Turner (2011), in that the caseworkers experience ambiguities regarding the relevance of culture in their work. The conceptual ambiguity of culture is reflected in the caseworkers' practice in this study. The caseworkers might be attentive to culture all along, although not addressing it explicitly until a case stands out as not making sense—not fitting into the institution's labels such as challenges of health or with education. The caseworkers may interpret language, motivation, and ethnicity as related to or even comprising culture. The caseworkers also place information on some things that may be difficult, such as personality traits or communication in the "culture" category, all of which are features that do not fit into other categories of the institution. The caseworkers' categorization practices thus reinforce the ambiguity of culture, as something that might be "anything and everything" (Harrison & Turner, 2011, p. 341). This understanding of culture might promote othering, as demonstrated by Patil and Ennis (2018). Not of all migrant clients, but of the non-sensible, "immigrant" cases—the cultural immigrant clients.

This conceptual ambiguity of culture also promotes the perception of the cultural immigrant cases as intangible. The caseworkers lack an institutional language that can describe the complexities of cases in terms that make sense within the institutional bureaucratic categories. The caseworkers' categorization of the case has practical implications for the clients in that it determines the measures to be taken in response to the perceived problem, functioning as a guide for action (Goffman, 1974; Weick, 1995). In this sense, the interpretive framework depicted in Figure 1 might contribute to caseworkers' expectations of and approach to different groups of clients, as a schema (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012), as presented in Figure 2. Hence, the caseworkers' operationalization of cultural sensitivity may encourage an identification of the "members of the category in question as socially deficient or lacking in some fashion and serve to label them further as 'undeserving' or 'troublesome'" (Jenkins, 1994, p. 214). The consideration of a case as "something more," different and non-sensible also implies a reference to the caseworkers' own cultural background even if it's seldom explicitly addressed by the caseworkers. Future research should explore how caseworkers' social position, cultural, and ethnic background might influence such processes.

7 | CONCLUSION

The findings presented here show how the caseworkers' cultural awareness is operationalized through the implicit categorization that caseworkers engage in when discussing cases. The caseworkers seem to categorize the cases as sensible or non-sensible and as concerning immigrant or non-immigrant clients. In a non-sensible, immigrant case, the caseworkers engage in a search for, and interpretation of cues that might help make sense of it. In particular, the cues of ethnicity, "language," or motivation seem to evoke the caseworkers' awareness of and attention to culture. Although one might argue that the caseworkers' focus on these client characteristics might promote the othering of clients, or constitute a type of institutional bias, the findings suggest a more complex process as the cues in themselves are not enough to mobilize the caseworkers' cultural awareness. The cues have to be interpreted within the framework of the case being *both* non-sensible and regarding an "immigrant" client in order to be understood as cues for the case concerning a *cultural immigrant client*. The interpretive framework gives these client characteristics a signalling status (Raaphorst & Van de Walle, 2018). The application of such a framework, however, is a dynamic and collective process of discretion and categorization practices.

This study makes a novel contribution to the literature on social work and social policy. It adds nuance to the perception of street-level workers' inadequate response to questions of ethnicity and culture by describing the circumstances in which caseworkers factor culture into their consideration and comprehension of a case. Through dynamic processes of implicit categorization and sensemaking, the caseworkers' awareness of culture is rendered explicit and has practical consequences.

I argue that these processes are under-recognized parts of the practical work of being aware of culture in service delivery. The use of ethnographic fieldwork and data on "doing" adds new insights to the operationalization of cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity in practice. The complexity of culture combined with the normative aspects of cultural awareness make it difficult to talk about these topics in ways that are illustrative of these practices. Moreover, the fact that the caseworkers do not rely on culture when making sense of a case, does not preclude the expression of stereotypical reasoning in other settings, such as an interview. These findings thus demonstrate the value of ethnographic fieldwork to explore its meaning in practice. Process-oriented perspectives provide a useful framework for studying the abstract, ambiguous and theoretical concept of cultural sensitivity by making visible the practical work that goes into this operationalization. Although the processes described here, and the way cultural awareness is operationalized, are relevant for many people-processing organizations, the caseworkers in this study operate within a highly bureaucratic and specialized context comprising extensive regulations, standardized work processes and work focus. Additional research is therefore needed to explore the impact of such organizational structures on the consideration and emphasis of different elements in a case, and to test the robustness of the findings presented in this article within different social policy contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Maria Gussgard Volckmar-Eeg declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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