Check for updates

Received: 1 July 2020 | Accepted: 5 August 2021

DOI: 10.1111/ijsw.12510

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WELFARE

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Emotional creaming: Street-level bureaucrats' prioritisation of migrant clients 'likely to succeed' in labour market integration

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Funding information
This research was supported by the University of Stavanger.

Abstract

Achieving equity in welfare provision depends on accurate understandings of the work of street-level bureaucrats. We explore the role of emotions when caseworkers prioritise cases. While *creaming* of clients whom street-level bureaucrats consider 'likely to succeed' is acknowledged as a way of rationing scarce resources, research tends to reject emotional involvement as bias, or neglect emotions in creaming-practices. This may produce inaccurate portrayals of *how* street-level bureaucrats prioritise cases. We challenge existing perspectives by bridging the literature on creaming and the sociology of emotions. We did ethnography and interviews with Norwegian caseworkers tasked with integrating migrant clients into the labour market. These caseworkers cream cases according to institutional/discursive understandings of 'star candidates' and rely on their emotions as embodied knowledge. We conceptualise such processes as *emotional creaming*, which unpacks a central, yet overlooked part of how street-level bureaucrats prioritise cases. This modifies the depiction of emotions as mainly personal bias.

KEYWORDS

creaming, emotions, integration, migration, NAV, street-level bureaucracy

INTRODUCTION

Based on an ethnographic study of Norwegian frontline caseworkers tasked with work integration of migrant clients, this article explores the *emotional* part of how street-level bureaucrats prioritise cases. It is widely acknowledged and accepted within the context of street-level welfare bureaucracies that caseworkers must ration scarce resources by selecting some cases to work with more actively (Lipsky, [1980] 2010; Tummers et al., 2015). In research on prioritising, emotions have a somewhat ambiguous position. There are two main and contrasting perspectives:

1. One line of research considers emotional involvement a *personal* and *illegitimate bias* that potentially violates principles of equity (Eggebø, 2013; Magnussen & Svendsen, 2018; Moseley & Thomann, 2021; Taylor 2012; Zacka, 2019). Studies show that street-level bureaucrats tend to prioritise clients they get emotionally affected by (Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015), whom they deem particularly 'worthy' (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012) or

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[1]The research context is NAV, The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration.

Abbreviation: NAV, The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration.

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with which they experience a personal connection (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017). In this perspective, emotions have also been connected to discriminatory treatment of migrant clients (Barrass & Shields, 2017; Schütze & Johansson, 2020).

2. Another body of literature explores the *creaming* practices of street-level bureaucrats (Hjörne et al., 2010; Lipsky, [1980] 2010; Tummers et al., 2015; Vedung, 2015), where the prioritisation of cases is a *rational* outcome of bureaucratic criteria, institutional policy and management. Creaming is when caseworkers prioritise 'those who seem most likely to succeed in terms of bureaucratic success criteria' (Lipsky, [1980] 2010, p. 107). In this latter line of research emotions are largely overlooked.

In sum—and put bluntly—in research on case prioritisation, emotions tend to be either *rejected* as illegitimate grounds for decisions or *neglected* in the empirical analysis. These perspectives on emotions, we argue, contribute to inaccurate portrayals of how street-level bureaucrats decide to prioritise cases and of how to subsequently achieve equity in welfare provision. We challenge each of these two lines of research, and ask: What role do emotions play in caseworkers' decisions to prioritise cases and (how) do these emotions relate to the institutional context? We bridge the literature on street-level prioritisation and the sociology of emotions and take inspiration from concepts like 'work feelings' (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Two interrelated dimensions structure our analysis and exposition: (a) the relationship between the individual (caseworker) and the institutional (bureaucratic organisation) level, and (b) the rationality–emotions interface.

Our study provides a novel perspective on the role of emotions in street-level bureaucrats' prioritisation of cases through two important contributions. First, in modifying Lipsky's ([1980] 2010) notion of creaming, we introduce '*emotional creaming*', which conceptualises emotions as *embodied expressions of a rational logic in institutional demands*. This provides new insights into *how* creaming is done and improves our analytical understanding of emotions in street-level prioritisation and offers a way out of 'rejects or neglects' in research. Second, our findings challenge the tacit view that presence of emotions in caseworkers' decisions to prioritise cases pertains only to personal bias and that these emotions will in themselves result in discriminatory treatment of clients, migrant clients in particular.

Our paper is structured as follows. After a short description of the context of our study, we review the literature on creaming and emotional bias. Next, we introduce a sociological perspective on emotions in organisations. We then describe methods and data before presenting our findings. In the discussion, we address the boundaries between emotional creaming and personal bias in light of research on (ethnic) discrimination and prejudicial treatment in welfare services.

NAV AS A STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY

Our study is situated within the largest welfare organisation in Norway, NAV. Norway is a social democratic welfare state characterised by generous and universal welfare schemes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Vike, 2018), and services are constructed to encourage participation in the labour force (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2011). NAV administers one third of Norway's national budget (NAV, 2020), and their main responsibility is to provide economic security for citizens and assist unemployed people in getting back to paid employment. NAV is a decentralised and highly bureaucratic system, with extensive regulations, specialised and standardised work processes, albeit with generous room for caseworker discretion (Volckmar-Eeg, 2015). NAV differentiates between client groups and eligibility for services through client categorisation (Gjersøe, 2020). The caseworkers at the frontline NAV-offices assess whether a person is eligible for benefits and have responsibility to determine appropriate measures in a case after they get assigned benefits. The frontline workers manage different services and benefits, but they all assist (migrant) clients in (re)entering the labour market. There is no standard background among the frontline workers, but the majority have higher academic education, some of which in social work, and they have all undergone NAV's internal training (NAV, 2019; Sadeghi & Fekjær, 2019; Terum & Sadeghi, 2019). What the frontline workers in this study have in common is that they all work directly with cases, and we, therefore, refer to them as *caseworkers*.

About 45% of NAV's clients have migrant backgrounds (NAV, 2021). Because of this disproportionately high number of immigrants among NAV clients, they are a prioritised group. The share of migrant clients who become employed nevertheless remains low (Aamodt, 2018; Tønseth & Grebstad, 2019). The decision of whether to prioritise a (migrant) client among NAV caseworkers, therefore, makes a good case for exploring street-level bureaucrats' creaming practices.

CREAMING AND EMOTIONAL BIAS TOWARDS MIGRANT CLIENTS

Street-level bureaucracies play an active and crucial role in determining 'who gets what, when and how' (Lasswell, 1936). Street-level bureaucracies are characterised as service-intensive, with conflicting goals and limited resources (Lipsky, [1980] 2010). To manage the challenges in their work, street-level bureaucrats must ration their resources by prioritising some cases over others (Lipsky, [1980] 2010; Tummers et al., 2015). Although such client differentiation is necessary, it is also problematic (Vedung, 2015), as it may lead to exclusion of clients from services (Brodkin, 2011). In this paper, we focus on caseworkers' decisions to *prioritise* cases. Both Kaufman (2020) and Lipsky ([1980] 2010) attribute these decisions to caseworker discretion and as situations of uncertainty. As the basis of the decision to prioritise a client, researchers have emphasised either caseworkers' *rational creaming* of clients based on organisational performance incentives, or to the subjective preferences and *emotional bias* of caseworkers.

Several researchers have explored the impact of organizational measures on caseworkers' decision-making and coping (Andreassen, 2018; Brodkin, 2008; Evans & Harris, 2004; Lipsky, [1980] 2010). Lipsky ([1980] 2010) emphasised *bureaucratic success criteria* as the fundamental principle by which caseworkers decide to prioritise a client. In his definition of creaming, Lipsky ([1980] 2010) further emphasised caseworkers' rational considerations when they determine which clients are 'most likely to succeed'. Creaming has typically been considered a rational frontline response to new public management instruments such as caseworker accountability and service conditionality (Kaufman, 2020). Organizational performance measures may contribute to 'steer' caseworkers towards creaming of clients (Brodkin, 2011). In their study of which clients that get prioritised in welfare services, researchers have treated organisational measures as the foundation of street-level workers' rational coping strategies. Hence, they have also established a division between these legitimate decisions, and the emotional and subjective bias of caseworkers.

Emotional or affective labour are essential parts of frontline work (Hochschild, 1979, 2012, 2019; Penz & Sauer, 2019). To achieve client success, street-level workers must motivate their clients by being empathic and understanding (Penz et al., 2017). The workers manage their affects or emotions to achieve institutional goals (Penz et al., 2017). Emotions are thus recognised as an important part of street-level workers' interaction with clients, and as something that are informed by institutional frames. However, the presence of emotions in *decision-making processes*, and in caseworkers' decision to prioritise cases in particular, is typically considered a personal and illegitimate bias. Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen (2015) described how social workers may become so emotionally involved in some cases, that their emotions may influence how they decide to manage the case. This may point to an affinity bias or affect heuristics in welfare bureaucracies, where street-level workers favour and prioritise clients that resemble themselves, that they connect with and *like* (Moseley & Thomann, 2021). Emotions thus potentially undermine bureaucratic principles of equal treatment (Eggebø, 2013; Fineman, 1996) and are a source to arbitrariness in service provision, not the least regarding migrant clients (Schütze & Johansson, 2020). Thomann and Rapp (2018) found that Swiss welfare workers perceive migrant clients as less deserving than Swiss applicants. Schütze (2020) similarly described how caseworkers that have personal contact with migrant clients have more positive attitudes towards them. Belabas and Gerrits (2017) also showed that the personal connection caseworkers experience with a migrant client influences their assessment of the client and how they subsequently respond to client needs. Although researchers also show that there exist 'ideal' migrant clients (Roberts, 2019), migrant clients seem particularly vulnerable to biased treatment in welfare services based on caseworkers' (negative) feelings towards them.

Helpful as they are in their own respect, the perspectives outlined above leave certain gaps in how we conceive of how street-level bureaucrats prioritise clients, regarding the connection between caseworkers' emotions and the institutional context. As shown above, caseworkers' affects, attitudes and emotions in their decisions to prioritise a case are typically considered the result of personal and subjective judgements.

A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON EMOTIONS

Taking inspiration from the sociology of emotions, we understand emotions as deeply social (Ahmed, 2013; Hochschild, 1979), and as an integral part of institutional and organisational practices (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). As argued above, the attention to emotions in research on discretionary decision-making has been limited, except from the consideration of such emotional involvement as something that may affect one's judgement (Ahmed, 2013), that is, as personal bias. The notion of affective labour or affective governmentality (Penz et al., 2017) suggest that the emotions of caseworkers may reflect institutional objectives. However, the focus is mainly on caseworkers' interaction with clients, and less on how the relation between emotions and the institutional frames may influence caseworker decision-making and prioritisation. We build on these insights and further explore what caseworkers' emotions *do* in these situations of decision-making (Ahmed, 2013). Ahmed (2013) argues that emotions are performative in that they affect our orientations towards objects and others. Emotions arise in social situations, in the encounters with and relations to others, where social factors function as a kind of interpretive scheme for labelling and managing emotions (Hochschild, 1979). In other words, emotions are experienced, framed and reproduced in social interactions (Sieben & Wettergren, 2010) and can be understood as embodied reactions of cultural bearings (Bourdieu, 2006). These sociological perspectives on emotions help us overcome the neglect/reject pitfalls because they allow us to study caseworkers' emotional expressions not as mere personal, affective, and passive responses to situations (Barbalet, 2001), but as based on individuals' evaluation or recognition of the situation (Thoits, 1989), an identification of the 'aboutness' of the contact (Ahmed, 2013).

In our attempt to bridge the literature on street-level prioritisation and sociology of emotions, we employ the concept of *work feelings* (Mumby & Putnam, 1992) in our analysis. Understanding emotions as products of interpretive schemes, Mumby and Putnam (1992) define emotional experience as 'the feelings, sensations, and affective responses to organizational situations' (p. 471). Hence, we can examine emotions both as an outcome of an organisational situation and as providing a script that frames actions and orientations (Ahmed, 2013). This conceptualisation allows us to explore emotions as constitutive of forms of knowledge that 'ground legitimate rational responses to organizational behaviour' (Mumby & Putnam, 1992, p. 480). This knowledge may be implicitly or explicitly coordinated with the work of others through the social coordination, or objectified ruling relations, of the institution (Smith, 2005), such as regimes of written rules, administrative practices, evaluation tools and measurements. We use the understandings outlined above as analytical tools to explore emotions in caseworkers' decisions to prioritise a case and how their emotions may relate to the social organisation of their work.

METHODS

The data consist of Volckmar-Eeg's five-month ethnographic fieldwork in a frontline NAV-office in addition to 11 in-depth interviews with caseworkers who participated in NAV's internal courses in cross-cultural counselling. The combination of interviews and fieldwork provides insights into both 'sayings' and 'doings' of caseworkers. The differences and nuances in the data provided rich descriptions of the context in which these experiences and emotions were formed. The Directorate of Labour and Welfare exempted the caseworkers from their duty of confidentiality regarding the project so that they could address specific cases. No identifying information about clients is included in the data. For confidentiality reasons, as most caseworkers were women, we refer to all caseworkers as female. For the same reason, all participants in this paper are given Norwegian pseudonyms, regardless of ethnic/national backgrounds.

Sample and data

The caseworkers Volckmar-Eeg interviewed represent a range of work experiences and professional backgrounds. The interviews took place in their offices, all of which are located near Norway's capital, Oslo. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted shortly after the courses. Volckmar-Eeg asked about the content of the course, their experiences of counselling clients with immigrant backgrounds, and asked them to reflect on culture and cultural sensitivity in NAV. The interviews lasted 1–2 h, were audio-recorded and transcribed. In addition, Volckmar-Eeg took notes of the interview and of caseworkers' gestures and emotional expressions. By facilitating a space for the caseworkers to reflect upon their experiences with different cases, the interviews provide data on the caseworkers' perceptions of clients and their work.

The fieldwork office is located on Norway's west coast. 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. On average, caseworkers manage about 100–150 concurrent cases and are measured on their success in helping people gain paid employment. During the fieldwork, Volckmar-Eeg had access to a workspace at the field office. 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. The fieldwork consisted of observations of team and client meetings as well as informal case discussions, lunch talk and general observations. The ethnographic approach made it possible to ask for explanations, clarifications or elaborations of practices or cases. The ethnographic data consist of thick descriptions of 115 situations described in fieldnotes, comprising 35 team meetings, 59 informal conversations, 15 client meetings, 3 external meetings and 3 days in the office reception. Ethnography enabled us to capture emotions in process, insights into the conditions and consequences of the emotions, and the complex connections of reasons and feelings that comprise the caseworkers' work (cf. Albrow, 1997, in Sturdy, 2003, p. 88).

Analysis

Based on careful readings of interview transcripts and fieldnotes, we first sorted the caseworkers' descriptions into cases they prefer working and cases they avoid. Second, we looked for emotional expressions in their descriptions by identifying verbal expressions, such as likings ('I like that'), adjectives ('a great candidate') or judgements ('it's easier') and emotional displays, such as sighs, excited or raised voice and body language (gesticulations). Caseworkers' emotional expressions might illustrate positive or negative discrepancies in their work (Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006). In the third step in our analysis, we identified caseworkers' references to the larger institutional settings, discourses and work processes that shape their everyday work (Devault & McCoy, 2006; Lundberg & Sataøen, 2020; Smith, 2005). Informed by an abductive approach (Vassenden, 2018; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014), we were intrigued about *puzzles*, understood as observations not commented on in previous research or at odds with its assumptions (anomalies), such as how emotional the caseworkers appeared to be about formal and bureaucratic decision-making. We alternated between the three analytical steps, and between data and theory in subsequent, but interrelated operations to arrive at new, reconstructed or improved theoretical accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. In abductive analysis, theory is, hence, pivotal in the research throughout (Vassenden, 2018). This is unlike in, for example, classical grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Limitations

Our study has some limitations. First, we conducted our study within a highly bureaucratic people-processing organisation (NAV) that measures each caseworker on their individual success in getting clients into (permanent) paid employment. Our data are associated with the specific bureaucratic context in which they are produced, and future studies are needed to test the validity of the concept of emotional creaming in different contexts, investigating whether similar mechanisms are present in less bureaucratised systems with less emphasis on caseworker accountability. Second, as our study explores the potential link between caseworkers' emotional involvement and the institutional setting, we have not examined in detail how the caseworkers' personal or professional background may influence their decisions to prioritise a client. Finally, our data consist of *expressed* emotions in context, and do not cover all potential emotions that the caseworkers may feel during their work. Thus, we cannot disregard the possibility that some feelings may be object of self-censoring, vis-à-vis researchers and/or colleagues, that is, that there is a social desirability bias at play.

FINDINGS

In this section, we first describe the institutional setting of casework and how this setting consists of inadequate resources and rationing practices. Second, we illustrate the emotional component of casework, in particular the emotions that accompany caseworkers' decisions to prioritise cases. Finally, we outline how caseworkers' emotions relate to identifying *star candidates*, candidates considered likely to succeed in labour market integration. This suggests that caseworkers' emotional involvement in a case is intimately linked to the institutional setting as an interpretive scheme. This is *emotional creaming*.

The ad-hoc institutional setting

The caseworkers are situated in a highly bureaucratised organisation with high caseloads. Although the high caseloads put pressure on the caseworkers, the ad-hoc nature of the institutional setting in which they work adds to their stress. A typical day for the caseworkers consists of a meeting with the team or department, and several meetings with clients or collaborators. They also manage incoming requests from clients that they must answer within 48 h. There is no check-in system in the office-reception, and several clients do not show up for their scheduled appointments. During the fieldwork, Volckmar-Eeg often witnessed the caseworkers running up and down the stairs between the reception and their office to check whether the client was present. Apparently, this took quite a lot of their time. The caseworkers must also coordinate their efforts with colleagues, as some of them share responsibility for clients. Therefore, the caseworkers often dropped by each other's offices with ad-hoc requests and questions. Interaction with clients, collaborators and colleagues generated additional work for the caseworkers, as they had to comprehensively document their actions in a case, process incoming applications and consider eligibilities, and register clients for courses or activities.

Each caseworker is evaluated monthly regarding their number of clients, how many clients they have registered to courses or other activities and how many they have helped secure paid employment. In this context, the caseworkers develop certain strategies to comply with overwhelming and immediate demands. Elisabeth (fieldwork) described how she had to differentiate between her clients:

> It's at the expense of other clients. We must make clear priorities and stop with all the Somalian women we don't believe in.

The ad-hoc nature of the caseworkers' everyday work seems to bring about practices where the caseworkers prioritise some cases over others and 'downgrade' those they 'don't believe in'. The caseworkers (fieldwork) regularly discussed how they could distinguish between the clients they should prioritise and those they could give up:

> How can we know what kind of candidate it is?

Emotional casework

During fieldwork, Volckmar-Eeg witnessed several instances when caseworkers sat together, and one spoke of how she wanted to give up a case or felt angry with a client. There were also several instances of the opposite, like when a caseworker would scream with joy in front of her computer when she realised that one of her clients got a job. Additionally, when they described clients they wanted to prioritise, caseworkErs demonstrated many emotions. During a team meeting, Anna (fieldwork) talked about a client:

> I *really* hope this will be a story with a happy ending. He can't get a job on his own, even though he really tries. He has a good resume, and even though I just got a 'no' from one employer, I'm going to keep trying to help him.

There was a cheerful tone in Anna's voice when she spoke of this client. Smiling, she emphasised that he seemed to make genuine efforts. Although neither the client's nor Anna's efforts so far had resulted in him getting a job, Anna saw this case as a potential success and someone she wanted to help.

Similarly, Eva (interview) expressed eagerness towards some clients:

> He's from Afghanistan, but he was goal-oriented, so then I helped him a bit more. (...) It doesn't matter where they're from. If they show that they're motivated—'Yes, I'm learning the language; I want to do something with my life'—THEN I'm IN! If I can see that motivation, then I bother more with the client, so to speak. Then, I will help them move forward.

In describing her eagerness, Eva raised her voice. 'THEN I'm IN!' was spoken with excitement. Eva said she tends to go the extra mile with clients who signal motivation to enter paid employment. In such instances, the caseworkers reported becoming motivated, excited, and joyful.

In contrast, in a team meeting, Christine (fieldwork) described a client who annoyed and angered her. Using negative terms, she kept sighing and expressed disappointment with him going against their agreement: doing paid labour without informing her and flunking out of the course she had provided for him. She said she avoided working this case, but she was obligated to act on it now, as he was entitled to follow-up:

> He's so indecisive and only gives short answers when I ask him what we should do. (...) I'm considering telling him about all the work I've done in his case and telling him how disappointed I am. There's such a difference between the clients that really try (...), and those who are more careless, like him. (....) I just can't get through to him. He really drains me, and I avoid working his case.

This may seem like a small paradox: a client who has been working discourages the caseworker. Although his work might have suggested initiative on his part, he did not show motivation for what Christine had provided, and the work he had been doing did not result in a permanent job. Also, his initiative did not result in the kind of success that is measured in the system. Christine's troubles in understanding and relating to the client made it hard for her to see how she could help him.

The examples above illustrate the emotional aspects of caseworkers' efforts to assist their clients; they preferred to work with clients who invoked sympathetic feelings. Seemingly, the decision to prioritise a case was associated with their emotional involvement in that case.

'Star candidates' likely to succeed

Although their emotions towards clients seemed to be one of the resources that helped caseworkers reduce complexity in their decision to prioritise a client, positive experiences and sympathetic emotions alone did not necessarily result in the caseworker prioritising the client. Returning from a client meeting, Trude (fieldwork) spoke warmly of the client:

> 'He's so delightful. He just wants a job, and I understand that. But I have nothing to offer him. It's difficult when he doesn't know the language. He will not get into an ordinary position when he doesn't speak Norwegian'.

Trude then said she understood his difficult situation and that she liked him. However, she did not intend to prioritise his case but mentioned his case to illustrate the difficulties with clients who did not speak Norwegian. Thus, liking a client and positive emotions do not necessarily drive a caseworker to prioritise a client. Only so much latitude is given to emotions, and only some types of emotions direct further actions.

Marie (fieldwork) explained how she relies on one of her co-workers to 'check' her emotions towards clients to avoid personal bias:

> So, if I have strong feelings towards a client, I usually talk to [co-worker] about the case

> to check if my feelings are legitimate and not something hindering the client getting my help.

The use of legitimate feelings here suggests that these differ from illegitimate feelings towards clients, those that might hinder the client getting her help. Marie was very much aware of and tried to counteract the possible influence of emotional bias in her decision-making. Seemingly, caseworkers distinguish between illegitimate bias and instances where they rely on their emotions as a type of knowledge in their decisions to prioritise a case. These legitimate feelings arise especially with clients whom caseworkers identify as star candidates. Encountering clients who meet the requirements of a 'star candidate' spurs enthusiasm with caseworkers.

Elsa (interview) explained how she became enthusiastic in some cases by simply stating:

> Sometimes I just think, "THIS is a star candidate. THIS will be good!"

She spoke passionately of such star candidates as individuals she could and would help succeed. As they are identified by caseworkers, star candidates have two main features, which both relate to the institutional setting.

(1) Star candidates are motivated and/or easy for caseworkers to identify with. Caseworkers considered clients easy to help if they showed motivation (the right way). While speaking fondly of a client to one of her co-workers, Caroline (fieldwork) explained why she was enthusiastic to work the case:

> She's eager. She wants a job and is motivated.

Caroline related her own enthusiasm to the client's apparent motivation to enter courses and to advance her own case. Caseworkers' perception of a client as easy to help might also connect to their ability to relate to the client on a personal level. Tina (interview) explained how she found it easier to work with clients when she experienced a mutual understanding:

> It's easier when we speak the same "language". When they understand you and you understand them.

That is, when the caseworker identifies with the client, the interaction requires less effort. The feeling of ease relates not only to the personal resources of client and caseworker but also to the institutional setting of casework. As previously shown, time and resources are institutional factors that influence casework. Moreover, the system surrounding casework centres on quantifiable measures and success criteria. Once every month, all caseworkers receive feedback on how many clients they have on their list, how many are in an activity, a course, etc., and how many they have helped enter paid employment. Therefore, when a client takes initiative and shows motivation for specific courses or jobs, or when the caseworker experiences a mutual understanding with the client, it eases the caseworker's workload and helps them potentially provide good numbers for their evaluation.

(2) Star candidates meet the formal requirements within the institutional setting. The fact that a client shows motivation does not necessarily lead them to be prioritised. Caseworkers need something to offer the clients: courses or activities. Mathilde (fieldwork) returned from a client meeting and enthusiastically told her office mates that this client was

> such a resourceful woman. This is a great candidate because there are so many possibilities—she will make use of anything I offer her. (....) She's easy to help, and she just lit up when she asked me what she could do to help herself. She will be a dream to follow up.

Clearly, Mathilde's positive feelings were grounded in this client meeting the requirements for courses and in Mathilde seeing her as able to 'make use of' courses. Most courses that NAV offers clients require both Norwegian language skills and access to the labour market. To be deemed likely to succeed, a client's proficiency in Norwegian is an important factor, as in Trude's case. As Eva expressed above, if a client learns Norwegian, she becomes excited and willing to prioritise their case.

The term *star candidate* pertains to the institutional frames and the two features of star candidates are interrelated. To be prioritised, a client must fulfil both. Elise (fieldwork) returned from a meeting with a client, and stated:

> I really want to help this client.

She had been pessimistic about this client, as they had previously had several misunderstandings stemming from language issues. During the meeting, Elise's perception of the client somehow changed from someone unlikely to succeed to someone she really wanted to help succeed. Elise explained by saying:

> It could have been me.

She said she saw herself in the client and referred to her own experiences of being a mom, having higher education and being a newcomer in a city. A few days later, Elise said she had gone to great lengths to help this client change her children's kindergarten to one closer to home so to spend less time commuting, freeing up time for work. Elise's case might be interpreted as bias. However, when elaborating on why she wanted to help the client, she kept referring to the client as:

> A nice candidate who could make use of so much.

Seemingly, Elise saw potential in the case, based on a combination of the client being motivated and that Elise related to and understood the client, in addition to the fact that there were resources available within the institutional frames to offer the client that she could make use of. In short, Elise's positive emotions towards the client were intimately related to the client's potential for bureaucratic success.

The caseworkers search for information that can help them distinguish between clients to cream and clients to whom they should give less priority. In this situation, the caseworkers' emotions play a key role. These emotions also connect to previous experiences regarding star candidates. Linda (interview) elaborated on how she considers other caseworkers' experiences in her work:

> Maybe others have something to tell about things they have done that have been a success, where they have gotten the client into employment.

She explained how her own and others' experiences with what has worked in the past aid her in identifying which clients might succeed in the future. Although the star candidate scheme reflects bureaucratic criteria, caseworkers also produce it from below by evoking previous experiences.

The caseworkers' consideration of which clients are likely to succeed connect to institutional and discursive understandings of star candidates—clients they consider easy to help and who can use what the caseworkers have to offer. These clients evoke positive emotions from the caseworkers, and they are creamed. The caseworkers' emotions thus help them distinguish between clients likely to succeed (the star candidates) and clients not to cream.

EMOTIONAL CREAMING

Our analyses provide two novel contributions to our conception of the work of street-level bureaucrats: (a) We outline one important aspect of *how* creaming is done and, by so doing, (b) modify prevailing depictions of emotions in street-level discretionary decision-making as personal bias. We suggest that practices like those presented in this paper be termed *emotional creaming*. Caseworkers' emotions constitute *embodied expressions of rational logic in institutional demands*. The clients whom the caseworkers hold positive emotions towards and become enthusiastic about, who 'are motivated' and 'can make use of anything', are the same clients whom they consider 'likely to succeed'; they meet the institutional requirements to qualify for activities and for later employment. Through ethnography, we have shown how bureaucratic success criteria manifest themselves through caseworkers' embodied experiences of star candidates. These findings have important implications for how we understand street-level bureaucracies and, finally, how to achieve equity in welfare provision. Emotions constitute embodied knowledge that the caseworkers employ in their decision-making, which often relates to the social organisation of their work. Although emotions, by their very nature, are seated in the hearts and minds of individuals (caseworkers), their role in caseworkers' decisions to prioritise a case depends on organisational conditions. Our findings suggest that caseworkers' positive feelings about clients reflect instances where they feel *able* to fulfil their institutional obligations. Their emotions seem thus to be structured by the institutional frames.

The connection between caseworkers' emotions and the institutional context does not preclude the existence of prejudice. On an individual level, caseworkers favour the 'easy clients' who resemble themselves. Some clients will appear less promising than others and, therefore, spur less enthusiasm from the caseworkers. The emotions of caseworkers may contribute to reproduce systematic differences in frontline policy implementation. The implications for (migrant) clients may not be any different than if decisions were made from bias. Nevertheless, our findings suggests that these mechanisms do not merely derive from caseworkers' negative attitudes or implicit prejudice towards migrants, as suggested by Schütze and Johansson (2020). Rather, they mirror how institutional measurements and objectives construct the 'ideal client'. Management tools, such as caseworker accountability and performance incentives (Brodkin, 2011), contribute to produce caseworkers' emotions. The ad-hoc institutional context, in addition to which resources that are available to the caseworkers (courses and measures) construct an ideal client, a star candidate. There seems to be some parallel between star candidates and what Barrass and Shields (2017, p. 14) describe as an 'invisible model of the ideal migrant'. The ideal migrant has the ability to 'enter the labour market with minimal state-funded supports' (Roberts, 2019) and work to make themselves hireable (Magnussen, 2020). This resembles what Penz et al. (2017) describe as the 'good customers' in job activation welfare organizations: the pro-active jobseekers that typically are well-educated and have good chances in the labour market. Hence, caseworkers' emotional creaming of 'star candidates' suggests that the differentiating dimension is not a client's ethnic background or migrant status, but rather whether the client is considered 'far away' from success in the labour market in terms of personal resources. Caseworkers' emotional creaming may therefore contribute to reproduce class differences. Resourceful clients will eventually show up in the metric evaluation of the caseworkers' performance. Lower-class clients who are far from meeting the bureaucratic requirements for courses and jobs will more seldom spur enthusiasm with their caseworkers, probably irrespective of ethnic backgrounds. Conducting similar studies with other target groups than migrants, preferably through ethnographic methods, should be a task for future research.

If caseworkers are aware of the phenomenon of emotional creaming, this may assist them differentiating between their different *types* of emotions. Such awareness may help individual caseworkers and welfare institutions make sense of and adequately respond to emotional reactions in casework and provide tools to navigate emotional responses. Welfare institutions typically emphasise and attend to the individual caseworker's reflectivity and cultural sensitivity as means to prevent bias and achieve equity in services. This presupposes that the emotions of caseworkers are merely an outcome of personal preferences, even prejudice. Our analyses suggest that bureaucratic criteria structure caseworkers' experiences with their clients through clear measures of success and caseworker accountability. Caseworkers' emotional involvement in the decision to cream a case, as described in this paper, cannot simply be governed through institutional management. Quite the contrary, institutional management is intrinsic to how caseworkers feel about their clients. Although the caseworkers may have genuine wishes to help their clients, their emotions for clients seem to be strongly influenced by institutional frames. The caseworkers get emotionally involved in clients with whom there are *institutional* resources to do a good job. Hence, caseworkers' frustration with clients, such as with Christine, may mirror institutional pressure and frustration with the system. Caseworkers' feelings about interacting with clients who are positive, cooperative and whom they like might reflect instances of relief from a stressful workday. We believe these insights hold much promise for caseworkers' professional self-reflections, in helping to demystify somewhat what 'welfare work feelings' *are*; they are neither always 'dangerous' nor 'illegitimate' (notwithstanding that they can be). Rather, emotions are part and parcel of welfare casework. Some researchers argue that caseworkers with a professional social work training may be less affected by personal emotions (Rajan-Rankin, 2014). Others emphasize how they may get more emotionally involved in their work (Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015) or be influenced by professional feeling rules (Nguyen & Velayutham, 2018). Future research should further explore how individual traits such as professional background, gender or ethnic background may influence caseworkers' emotional creaming—their emotional involvement in clients and engagement in coping practices.

The concept of emotional creaming has theoretical implications through the tight interconnection of emotional involvement and institutional demands in caseworkers' decisions to cream. Ethnography has been crucial to 'explore the relationship between rationality and emotionality in situ' (Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006, p. 235) and to provide context to the caseworkers' considerations and emotional expressions. The findings presented here give reason to question the classical Weberian view of strictly rational and 'dehumanised' bureaucratic decision-making (Du Gay, 2000; Weber, 1971). By outlining one aspect of how creaming is done, we add nuance to the division between rationality and emotions in street-level discretion and suggest a connection between caseworkers' emotions and the institutional level. Our findings suggest that caseworkers' emotions may constitute an embodied knowledge that function as signals to reduce ambiguity (Barbalet, 2001; Imdorf, 2010) and inform caseworkers' decisions regarding whether to prioritise a client. The caseworker 'feels' that the client is going to be a (bureaucratic) success. Employing a sociological perspective on emotions also encourages researchers to explore not only how street-level bureaucrats manage their emotions but also how emotions are intimately linked to the institutional setting as an interpretive scheme. The concept of emotional creaming improves our theoretical understanding of emotions in casework and street-level discretion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the editor and the two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments on earlier drafts. We also thank Elisabeth Enoksen, Tanja Dall, and Ann Christin E. Nilsen for helpful input, and NAV and the field-office for participating in the study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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How to cite this article: Volckmar-Eeg, M. G., & Vassenden, A. (2021). Emotional creaming: Street-level bureaucrats' prioritisation of migrant clients 'likely to succeed' in labour market integration. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 00, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12510