

# GreeSE Papers

## Hellenic Observatory Discussion Papers on Greece and Southeast Europe



**Paper No. 124**

### **Judge, Nudge, or Engage? Gender-related pressures and responses among street-level bureaucrats working with migrants**

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# Judge, Nudge, or Engage? Gender-related pressures and responses among street-level bureaucrats working with migrants

Katerina Glyniadaki\*

## ABSTRACT

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This paper examines the ideology and identity conflicts related to gender, as experienced by street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) working with migrants in the capital cities of Athens and Berlin. More specifically, it examines the causes of these conflicts, how the SLBs make sense of them conceptually, and how they respond to them practically. This work incorporates theoretical perspectives from social psychology, namely identity theory and the concepts of multi-voicedness and dialogicality, in an effort to contribute to the public administration literature of 'street-level bureaucracy' and the 'citizen-agent narrative' in particular. The data used are based on 60 in-depth semi-structured interviews, conducted between December 2015 and December 2017, with SLBs who had frequent and prolonged contact with migrants, especially social workers, administrative employees, volunteers and activists. The research findings suggest that a) differences in gender identities and ideologies indeed constitute a significant source of tensions among members of the two groups; b) the SLBs develop different conceptual strategies to tackle these tensions based on either essentialism or social constructionism, as well as on how hierarchical they perceive their relationship with migrants to be; and c) the SLBs develop three practical strategies to respond to these tensions: they *judge* and maintain a distance from migrants, they *nudge* and try to change migrants' behaviour, or they *engage* with them further in order to reduce the perceived gap between them.

## Keywords:

street-level bureaucrats, migrants, gender

## Acknowledgements:

The author would like to express her gratitude to the HO for their generous support throughout this project. She would also like to thank Anna Kyriazi, Apurv Chauhan and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments in a previous version of this paper. Lastly, she would also like to thank all the interviewees who kindly offered their time and participated in this research.

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## 1. Introduction

Among the most pressing questions in what is known as the ‘European migration crisis’ is that which concerns integration, or how soon and how well the migrants<sup>2</sup> can adjust to and become productive members of their host societies. The gap between the gender roles and ideologies of newcomers and locals, or Muslim and Western cultures (Norris and Inglehart, 2012), appears to be a thorny issue of central concern, and perhaps not without merit. After all, the region of Western Europe would need 61 years to reach gender parity, whereas the region of the Middle East and North Africa would need 157 (World Economic Forum, 2017). Should we expect men and women coming from so different social environments to adapt to their host society’s local norms and practices? And, what would policy practitioners need to take into account when addressing integration? When looking at the implementation of integration policies, examining the social norms and practices of migrants seems rather intuitive. Studies show, for instance, that as migrants tend to maintain more traditional gender roles within the family, certain policies relating to access to work may affect men and women migrants disproportionately, even when they are meant to be gender-blind (Szczepanikova, 2005; Brussig and Knuth, 2013).

What appears to be less intuitive, but could play a crucial role for the integration of migrants, is how the local service providers think and act while implementing relevant policies. That is, how they make sense of and manage the differences in gender identities and ideologies between them and the migrants they work to assist. From the limited existing literature, it appears that the predominant gender ideologies among such workers may indeed affect how they treat their migrant clients<sup>3</sup>, and consequently how they implement the relevant integration policies (Alpes and Spire, 2015; Hugelund, 2010; Brussig and Knuth, 2013). Alpes and Spire’s (2015) ethnographic study of French consulates in Yaoundé and in Tunis, for instance, shows that the predominant narrative

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<sup>2</sup>The word migrant will be used from now on as an umbrella term addressing asylum seekers, recognised refugees, as well as economic immigrants. Not only would it be practically difficult to differentiate between the different categories, but it is also not particularly useful for the purposes of this study.

<sup>3</sup> Although many of the participants in this study do not perceive the migrants as their ‘clients’, nor do they call them as such, this term is used in the public administration literature reviewed here, and for that it will be found sporadically throughout this paper.

describing applicants in one setting was the ‘fraudulent foreign woman marrying a naive French man’, whereas in the other it was the ‘foreign man marrying a naive French woman for the sole purpose of obtaining a residence permit’. Apart from reflecting different gender ideologies among the employees in the two consulates, the two distinct modes of stereotyping led to two distinct uses of professional discretion, disadvantaging women visa applicants in one case and men in the other.

In the context of the current European migration ‘crisis’, those implementing integration policies (e.g. related to housing, education, employment, etc.) at street level often represent the only links between the migrants and the local society. In that sense, their role is indeed crucial for migrants’ integration. The way they construe and address challenges, such as diverging definitions of gender identities or gender ideologies between locals and newcomers matters in how they perform their job tasks. And, in turn, how they do their job matters for the integration of the migrants. So, what kind of ideological and identity pressures do these individuals face in relation to gender? And, how do they use their occupational discretion to respond to them? This paper aims to answer these questions through a qualitative research approach involving over 60 in-depth interviews with street-level service providers in the cities of Athens, Greece, and Berlin, Germany.

This paper does not concern the outcome of policy implementation, but it aims to shed light on the mechanisms of meaning-making and decision-making among street-level service providers working with migrants. The key theoretical point of departure is the concept of ‘street-level bureaucracy’, as coined by Lipsky (1980). According to Lipsky (1980, p.3), street-level bureaucrats (SLBs), are “public service workers who interact directly with citizens and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work”. Although this definition does not adequately cover the modern-day service provision where civil servants often work alongside for-profit employees and civil-society members (Brodkin, 2012), the overall framework remains valuable because it highlights the importance of individual judgment among those providing bureaucratic-like services.

This research accounts for the contemporary service provision with greater accuracy, by using a broader and more encompassing definition of SLBs. More importantly, by

employing theoretical tools from social psychology, specifically identity theory (Burke and Stets, 2009) and the concepts of multivoicedness and dialogicality (Gillespie and Cornish, 2010; Aveling et al., 2014; Markova, 2003), it examines the self-other relationships between SLBs and migrants more closely. It thereby adds further nuance to the public administration literature showing that SLBs' perceptions of their clients matter for policy implementation (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003). Therefore, it responds to the calls for more sociology and psychology in public administration (Grimmelikhuisen et al, 2016; Beland, 2017), while also providing a pragmatic analytical approach to the broader social debate on ideological and identity conflicts between migrants and the local European/Western societies.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, a theoretical section provides a brief background on the literature on street-level bureaucracy and discusses how insights from social psychology may offer a fruitful contribution. The next section describes the research context of the two case studies as well as the methods used. After that, the main findings are presented and discussed in detail. The paper concludes with some reflections on the present contributions and their broader implications.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

As Lipsky (1980) explains, street level bureaucrats (SLBs) are typically civil servants who have face-to-face interactions with clients, and who usually encounter several limitations, pressures, and challenges, such as a lack of adequate material resources, interpersonal and organisational pressures, or vague and contradictory policy frameworks. Therefore, they almost always operate under suboptimal conditions (see also Lipsky, 1971). In response to such conditions, SLBs exercise their professional discretionary power by adopting a particular set of coping strategies or shortcuts that help them overcome any adversities and complete their assigned tasks. In Lipsky's (1980, p.xiii) words, they "develop techniques to salvage service and decision-making values within the limits imposed upon them by the structure of the work".

Classic examples of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) for Lipsky are social workers, police officers and school teachers. A social worker may exercise discretion by deciding

whether to provide social assistance to an unemployed citizen, a policeperson may decide whether or not to give a fine to a speeding driver, and a school teacher whether to suspend a misbehaving student. As these examples indicate, what constitutes bureaucratic behaviour is not merely shaped by policy itself, but also concerns individual, case-by-case decisions on who is worthy of assistance or punishment. As a result, SLBs may determine the extent to which a specific policy will be implemented in practice, on the basis of their decisions and their use of discretion (see also Tummers and Bekkers, 2014).

Scholars building on Lipsky's paradigm, have made attempts over time to test, develop and add nuance to this approach (see Gilson, 2015). While attempting to understand and explain what influences SLBs' behaviour, many scholars have examined the organisational level dynamics, such as the role of managers (Brehm and Gates, 2002; Riccuci, 2005; Evans, 2010) or the effect of organisational culture (DuBois 2014; Eule, 2014; Brodtkin, 2012; Alpes and Spire, 2015). Others have stressed the significance of bureaucrats' own preferences (Brehm and Gates, 2002), or their personal level of agreement with the political message a certain policy aims to promote (May and Soren, 2009). However, others have sought to highlight the relationship between SLBs and their clients, most notably Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000, 2003, 2012).

In their seminal book 'Cops, Teachers, and Counsellors' (2003), Mayard-Moody and Musheno bring to light how perceptions SLBs have of their clients end up shaping policy implementation. This is what they call the 'citizen-agent narrative', which proposes an alternative to the predominant state-agent narrative that emphasises the influence of the state on the behaviour of the SLBS, the agents. The authors find that when making decisions, SLBs rely more on their personal moral judgement, based on their interactions with clients, than on the bureaucratic rules and regulations they are called to implement (see also Mayard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 2012). It is important to note, however, that the term 'citizen-agent' fails to account for the non-citizen clients, such as migrants, which is something the authors have noted themselves (Mayard-Moody and Musheno, 2012). It is this stream of the SLBs literature that this work builds upon, by looking further into the micro-level interactions between modern-day SLBs and migrant service-



receivers, showing how SLBs conceptualise and address their perceived differences from the migrants they work to serve.

Turning to social psychological theorising, there is strong evidence to indicate that people have a tendency to want to confirm what they already believe (Swann and Read, 1981; Plous, 1993) and how they see themselves (Swann, 1983; Stets and Burke, 2000; Burke and Stets, 2009). According to Identity Theory (Burke and Stets, 2009), individuals seek to verify their various identities while interacting with others. They hold a particular ideal (identity standard) about how a person with a certain identity ought to behave, and they behave accordingly. Depending on the feedback they receive from others, or rather their perceived understanding of this feedback (reflected appraisals), they assess whether identity verification is achieved in a given social exchange. If their identity at stake in the particular situation is verified, they feel good about themselves and continue behaving as before. However, if the reflected appraisals do not match their identity standards, they experience negative emotions, and seek to correct this discrepancy at the next possible interaction, either by changing their identity standard, or by changing their behaviour (Stets and Burke, 2000; Burke and Stets, 2009). In the context of street-level bureaucracy, if a civil servant assisting migrants views themselves as a 'dutiful employee', but the (verbal or non-verbal) signals they receive from migrants suggest that they are perceived as 'lazy and unhelpful', the discrepancy between one's perceived identity and their reflected appraisals will lead to a sense of discomfort and a need to change this. Therefore, if or how they choose to achieve identity verification in the future may determine how they use their occupational discretion while assisting migrants.

Identity Theory also maintains that there are three bases for identities: person, role and social identity (Burke and Stets, 2009). Person identities are based on one's self-view as an individual distinct from others; role identities refer to individuals' particular positions in the social structure; and, social identities refer to the individuals' involvement in certain social groups. Although different contexts call for the verification of different types of identities (e.g. the parent identity in the family setting, the worker identity in the work setting etc.), the need for identity verification is present across all situations and individual exchanges (ibid). Hence, as an SLB enters an interaction with a migrant,

there is an underlining expectation to confirm who they believe they are, on one or more identity bases (e.g. a kind person, a dutiful social worker or a Christian group member)<sup>4</sup>.

Nonetheless, with regard to interactions between SLBs and migrants, self-verification may be more challenging than usual. Given that the two parties come from two different societies with somewhat different predominant social norms and values, ideological and identity tensions are more likely to occur, and self-views less likely to be verified. As different meanings are attached to the same identities (e.g. role identities like woman/man, wife/husband, or mother/father), each party is less likely to receive the expected feedback from the other that would confirm their identity as they understand it. Although the existing power-dynamic between migrants and host-society members may translate to greater difficulty for migrants than for SLBs to confirm who they believe they are (see Stets and Harrod, 2004), the tension experienced by SLBs could actually be more important for the migrants' integration. As a response to an uncomfortable exchange, SLBs may shape their behaviour in their future interactions with migrants accordingly, becoming more or less friendly or helpful towards them.

To elaborate further on the interaction between the two parties, it is also conducive to consider another stream of social psychology, which looks closer into how people address the differences between the 'self' and the 'other'. The idea of intersubjectivity<sup>5</sup> (Gillespie and Cornish, 2010) is of high relevance here, as well as the interrelated concepts of multivoicedness<sup>6</sup> (Aveling, Gillespie, and Cornish, 2014) and dialogicality<sup>7</sup> (see Markova, 2003). Put simply, people are aware that there are others with disagreeing views to their own, and they take their understanding of these views into account when expressing their own views. Consequently, others' voices are always parts of one's own voice (Markova, 2003; Gillespie, 2008; Gillespie and Cornish, 2010) and others' perceptions of oneself are parts of one's self-perception (ibid, see also Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). When two parties first meet, there is not an automatic awareness

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<sup>4</sup> For further details on the different bases for identities, see Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> Intersubjectivity is broadly defined here as "the variety of possible relations between people's perspectives" (Gillespie and Cornish, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Multi-voicedness refers to the idea that there are multiple selves within the self, usually in dialogue with each other (see Aveling et al., 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Dialogicality is defined by Markova (2003) as the "capacity of the human mind to conceive, create and communicate about social realities in terms of the Alter".

of the differences between one's own (self-)views and, compared to those of the other. It is through interpersonal interaction that these gaps are filled, and the process may be all but smooth. Micro-level tensions and conflicts are indeed an integral part of human interactions, and the interactions between SLBs and migrants are no exception.

To address and disentangle such differences in perspectives, scholars have created useful conceptual tools, like the Interpersonal Perception Method<sup>8</sup> (IPM), used, for example, in the context of care work to explore diverging perspectives between caregivers and patients (Moore and Gillespie, 2014). According to the IMP, there are three levels of perspectives in a dyadic relationship. First, the *direct* perspective refers to what each party thinks about something. Second, the *meta*-perspective is about what each party thinks the other one thinks about it. And third, the *meta-meta*-perspective describes what each party thinks the other party thinks about their own view of it (see Gillespie and Cornish, 2010; Moore et al., 2011). When two direct perspectives are similar, there is an agreement, and when they are different, and if both parties know this, there is a disagreement. For example, if a social worker and a migrant father both think it is ok for young girls to play together with young boys, there is an agreement between the two direct perspectives, whereas if one thinks it is but the other does not, and there is an awareness of this difference, there is a disagreement. In contrast, when the two direct perspectives differ but there is no awareness of this, there is a misunderstanding (Laing, Phillipson and Lee, 1966; Gillespie, 2008). Accounting for these three perspectives from the point of view of the SLBs, in addition to looking at identity verification, or the lack of, can help us understand how the perceived gap of ideologies and identities shapes SLBs' attitudes and behaviour towards migrants.

To summarise, the public administration literature of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980) is the theoretical basis of this work, while Identity Theory (Burke and Stets, 2009) and the concepts of multivoicedness and dialogicality (Gillespie and Cornish, 2010; Aveling et al., 2014; Markova, 2003), are incorporated to further elaborate the 'citizen-agent narrative' (Mayard-Moody and Musheno, 2003). 'Gender roles', are the main

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<sup>8</sup> IPM, developed by Laing, Phillipson and Lee (1966), was first used in the form of a comparative self-report questionnaire with the intent of being a useful measurement instrument in marriage and family counseling.

point of examination, both in terms of social beliefs/ideologies and in terms of role identities. As for the former, it is expected that SLBs perceive the gender beliefs and practices of migrants as different from their own, affecting not only how they view the migrants as men and women but also how they think that the migrants view them. As most migrants tend to come from more traditional and conservative societies than most of Europe, it is expected that SLBs view migrants' gender roles as more traditional and conservative than their own. How do SLBs make sense of this difference between perspectives? And, how do their understandings of these differences shape their behaviour towards migrants? These are the questions to be answered in the following sections

### **3. Research Context and Methods**

The rationale behind choosing Athens and Berlin as case study-cities for examining ideological and identity conflicts between SLBs and migrants is the following. Greece and Germany were among the EU countries with the largest inflow of migrants during the 2015-2016 'crisis' period, and the implications of the issue were largely common, in the sense that both capital cities had to host and process an unprecedented high number of asylum applicants. Germany was one of the few EU member states to open its doors to refugees, which in the end, meant taking the lion's share of the responsibility. Greece also carried a disproportionate weight. Not only is it a major gateway to Europe for migrants geographically, but it had also been at its deepest economic recession in the post-war era. In addition to facing a common challenge, the two countries also share a common broader legal framework, as they both operate under the Geneva Convention and the Common European Asylum System.

Nonetheless, Berlin and Athens are very dissimilar in several key aspects. Most importantly, they have very different levels of economic capacity, as Germany represents the strongest economy in the EU, and Greece one of the weakest. In practice, this meant that while Berlin was able to double the number of public servants at the local administration office in order to handle the skyrocketing number of asylum applications, Athens could not officially hire public servants due to the country being

under the memoranda<sup>9</sup>. In addition, Germany has been a destination country for migrants for several decades, while Greece was mainly a transit one. This translates into different levels of relevant experience and know-how.

However, not all differences between the two cities are significant for the management of the migration 'crises. For example, Greece lags behind Germany in terms of gender equality<sup>10</sup>, which could potentially reflect a shorter ideological distance from migrants. But, given the large scale of individuals' self-selection in such roles, street-level service providers in both settings are highly likely to subscribe to liberal values as well as to gender egalitarian views. Hence, the ideological distance between Greek and German SLBs is nearly negligible compared to the one between migrants and Greek/German SLBs. Similarly, the German civil society is more formalised than the Greek one. In the context of Berlin, almost all SLBs work for or with an official organisation, as even grassroots groups most often operate as registered NGOs. Conversely, in Athens, apart from the local and international NGOs, there is also a strong presence of independent volunteers and activists who self-organise and run several housing squats for migrants in the centre of the city. Even so, this difference does not correspond to a qualitatively different predisposition towards migrants from the part of individual SLBs in the two cities, but it merely reflects a more systematic and official approach to service-provision in Germany compared to Greece.

Although, in a sense, using the cases of Athens and Berlin could be considered a 'most different' case comparison, the data collected from each of the two sites are not juxtaposed against each other in order to compare and assess the differences in findings. Rather, the findings are considered as complementary to each other, offering empirical data from two distinct research sites, in an effort to 'map' the SLBs' key pressures and responses in the EU migration context. In other words, Athens and Berlin are used as two different 'laboratories' where important assessments are made, based on the

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<sup>9</sup> A solution was eventually found through hiring individuals on temporary contracts, who had previously passed the ASEP state hiring exams, but this was not ideal, since these people were often not adequately trained or qualified for the positions needed (interview with local politician, Athens).

<sup>10</sup> See the 2015 EIGE report <http://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2015/countries-comparison>

observations of day-to-day interactions between local<sup>11</sup> service providers and migrant service receivers.

With regard to methods, this work is part of a larger project which employs a qualitative methodological approach of extensive semi-structured interviews and, to a lesser extent, direct observations. Specifically, interviews with 66 participants were conducted in Athens and 62 in Berlin. The interviewees were SLBs working in the field with migrants and were from various role positions, mainly social workers, lawyers, case workers, low-level administrative officials, volunteers and activists<sup>12</sup>. For the purpose of this paper, only a subset of 60 of these interviews were analysed (about 30 from each setting), accounting only for those participants who had daily and prolonged contact with migrants (mainly social workers, volunteers, and activists), rather than those who have one-off interactions (e.g. judges, case workers, etc). To locate contacts and gain access, a mix of different approaches was used. For participants involved in the refugee housing squats in Athens, contact was made through the author's physical presence and participant observation. By slowly creating trust relationships with various 'solidarity members', the author was later able to locate, build rapport, and interview some corresponding activists in Berlin, too. The rest of the participants, including public and private sector employees from both cities, were located either through their organisations' on-line addresses or through suggestions by other contacts and the snowball technique.

To minimise the researcher's bias, a set of open-ended questions was used, including questions such as, 'Can you say a few things about your current role?', 'What are some of the difficulties or challenges that you face?' 'What helps you overcome such challenges?' etc. The majority of the interviews took place in English or Greek. The duration of the interviews was 30 to 90 minutes, with most of them lasting between 45 to 60 minutes. They were then transcribed and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006), through the use of qualitative analysis software, EnVivo. The entire process was

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<sup>11</sup> Local here means working in the local context, irrespective of ethnic or national background. Indeed, in practice several SLBs had migration background, either from within or outside the EU.

<sup>12</sup> 4 to 5 participants in each sample were not working at the street-level, but were rather top bureaucrats, meaning they held high administrative positions at the ministerial level or at the local government, and thus were able to offer expert opinions on the issue.

in accordance to the London School of Economics research ethics policy and code of conduct.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the key findings which emerged from the interview data analysis, relating to tensions on gender identities and ideologies between SLBs and migrants. It is divided into three main parts, according to the three main themes of this paper. The first part describes the nature of such tensions in greater depth, the second part outlines and analyses the participants' conceptual responses to these tensions, and the third part describes the practical responses the participants use to tackle the above-mentioned tensions.

### 4.1. Ideology and Identity Tensions

As already discussed, one of the key causes of ideological tensions between SLBs and migrants in both cities pertains to differences in social and individual understandings of gender roles and dynamics. Although most participants made sure to point out that migrants constitute a very heterogeneous group in terms of ethnicity, religion and culture, they also mentioned a general tendency towards very traditional and conservative understandings of gender roles and dynamics, often expressing their disagreement with it. In fact, when asked whether, while doing their job, they face any challenges relating to cultural differences, the vast majority provided examples of gender-related micro-tensions and conflicts, without being specifically probed to do so.

At times, SLBs' perceptions of these differences conveyed plain prejudice against migrants, even when they held positions of critical importance. During a visit to a refugee camp in Athens, a member of the Greek military, who runs that particular camp, shared his assessment on the issues of domestic and physical violence among migrants in the camp with me: "This is how these people are: violent and aggressive. That's their culture and their DNA". Although this person later admitted to not having expert training

for working with migrants<sup>13</sup>, such essentialist statements were also conveyed by some of his counterparts in both cities.

Understandably, similar viewpoints were less common among participants who tend to self-select into their roles, especially volunteers and activists. Moreover, SLBs with social sciences-related educational backgrounds were particularly careful when addressing the migrants' social norms and their differences from the local culture. They showed a heightened awareness of the relevant public debate, and they deliberately aimed to avoid further stigmatisation and marginalisation of the already vulnerable groups they worked to assist. More frequently, a deeper ideological struggle was expressed between modern vs. traditional understandings of gender roles and dynamics. The quote below comes from a local activist<sup>14</sup> with long-term engagement with migrant families in Athens. Despite her dedication towards helping migrants, she finds it very problematic that young girls are treated differently than young boys:

“I am a feminist, and I see the women in scarfs and I go a bit crazy. [...] Yesterday I took the little girl to the doctor, and we had an appointment at 3:00pm in Omonia. It was hot as hell, but she was wearing a scarf, and long sleeves. [...] The mum bought chips and a water bottle for the two little ones but said ‘[Aisha] is doing Ramadan’. Because she had had her period, she had to wear a scarf, and do Ramadan... And she will probably have 8 children in the next two years! She may not even go to school, but if she was a 15-year-old boy she would.”

-Activist 1, Athens

Here, there are two levels of internal conflicts. On the one hand, there is a divergence between the participant's *direct* perspective on how boys and girls ought to be treated in a family, and the *meta-meta* perspective, meaning what the participant thinks the migrant mother thinks about it. Although the participant presumably believes that young girls should have the same freedoms and access to education as boys, the practices she observes in the migrant family she assists, are contradictory to these

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<sup>13</sup> Following this statement, I asked him whether he had received any training for doing this job. His spontaneous response was, “my training is for fighting wars, not doing this”.

<sup>14</sup> Given the major role of the civil society in the management of the migration situation in the two cities, this research treats volunteers and activists in this context as SLBs, in the sense that their effort often fulfils bureaucratic tasks.



beliefs. In addition to that, there is also a lack of verification of the participant's 'feminist' role identity. As the 'activist' group identity showing solidarity to migrants is more salient in this interaction, the 'feminist' identity, albeit triggered, is being pushed aside and silenced. Not having the opportunity to express this identity leads to identity non-verification, and thus to a sense of frustration from the part of the participant (see also Stets and Harrod, 2004).

Elaborating on the lack of identity verification, tensions may also occur when participants do express themselves, but not in way that corresponds to the migrants' expectations. Indeed, SLBs often told stories of events when certain behaviour from their part was met with a sense of disapproval from the migrants they work to serve. For instance, an NGO employee in Athens described a scene when her migrant clients saw her smoking and, through non-verbal cues, they conveyed to her their view that this habit is unfeminine, and therefore inappropriate for her. In a similar vein, a social worker in Berlin said that her migrant clients looked down on her lifestyle as a single mother, putting her in the uncomfortable position of having to explain and defend herself. Such uneasy interactions were more common among women than among men SLBs, also given the higher proportion of women among SLBs and the higher proportion of men among migrants. Nonetheless, men SLBs also faced similar tensions. A NGO employee in Berlin, for example, felt pressured as he was expected to partake in what he perceived as sexist jokes among his male migrant clients, while a volunteer in Athens described discomfort when the group of female migrants he was there to assist avoided shaking his hand or being in his company.

What these examples illustrate is a perceived discrepancy of gender *identity standards*, or what the SLBs consider gender-appropriate behaviour (their *direct* perspective) and what they think their clients consider appropriate (*meta*-perspective). Apart from this ideological disconnect, the differences in gender identity standards also lead to a lack of gender identity verification among SLBs. As the above examples show, the implicit message the SLBs often receive through their interactions with clients is that their clients disapprove of them as men or women, meaning they fail to meet their expectations of 'doing gender' correctly (West and Zimmerman, 1987). In that sense, they fail to verify

their gender identity, as the perceived feedback they receive does not correspond to their own *identity standards* (see Burke and Stets, 2009).

Although some ideological tensions between SLBs and migrants were expected, the identity confirmation challenges for SLBs seem rather surprising, especially given the power dynamic between the two groups. Although most participants expressed an understanding of the conflicting gender ideologies and identities as being a direct result of the differing cultural norms between the migrants' home and host societies, they still confessed some level of frustration when narrating specific events that exemplified these differences. The quote below comes from a male volunteer who, together with his wife, had spent a considerable amount of time and money helping a migrant family with their paperwork and their various integration steps in Germany (housing, welfare support, medical access, etc). Despite building a personal bond with this family over time, here he explains that due to his gender he was being excluded from some of their important family events, unlike his wife.

“So, when [their baby] was born and we were all very happy I had tried to express my happiness by hugging the mother. But—you know, this felt like a body-check in ice hockey—for her this was so inadequate! [...] It's a different story among women. So they do hug and kiss [my wife]. And, when there is a birthday party, traditionally, only women and children are invited...”

-Volunteer, Berlin

Although at various points throughout our discussion this participant insisted that he was happy for this family of migrants to maintain their traditions and way of life, at the same time he seemed to struggle a lot with some of their practices. As shown in this quote, the fact that he was kept at a distance, both physically and metaphorically, from all the female members of the family, unlike his wife, was a major source of disappointment for him. In a way, not being seen as the friendly and unthreatening man he believed he was shook his self-understanding of who he is as a man. Although one would expect that SLBs, as members of the local society, would be more likely to 'set the tone' when it comes to what is appropriate and what is not (see Stets and Harrod, 2004), these findings show that the relationship between members of the two groups is

actually more reciprocal. That is, SLBs, too, experience conflicting ideologies as an unsettling event, and, at times, experience disapproval as a form of identity threat.

#### 4.2 Conceptual Responses to Tensions

So, how do SLBs make sense of these ideological and identity challenges? At a conceptual level, SLBs seem to position themselves on two different axes: that of essentialism vs. social construction, and that of low vs. high hierarchy. First, some saw gender roles as something that is innate within a social group, while others as something that is shaped over time. On the one hand, there was an essentialist approach, where the gender-related roles and practices observed among the migrants by SLBs were seen as inherent, natural, and hence unchangeable characteristics of the migrants. This was the “that’s how these people are” approach to the issue, which was usually followed by conceptually distancing the ‘self’ from the ‘other’, implying that this gap cannot possibly be bridged. This attitude was illustrated in the example of the military person mentioned above, and it was found among administrative officials in both cities, but less so among social workers, volunteers or activists.

More frequently than not, there was an effort to explain the perceived gap in gender-related understandings by attributing them to the differences in social and cultural influences, thereby adopting a more social constructionist point of view. In this approach, there was an attempt to explain why these differences are there, as well as an effort to minimise the perceived ideological distance between the migrants and the members of the host society. Three kinds of explanations were predominant in this view: (a) ‘they come from a more closed and conservative society, they need time to adjust’; (b) ‘we had very similar practices here just a few decades ago’; and (c) ‘we have very conservative segments of the society here, too’. The first explanation suggests that people are mere products of their environment, and that an alignment of gender ideologies is a matter of time now that they are in our environment. The second considers the effect of change over time, suggesting that modern liberal gender ideologies are meant to go along with modern liberal states, and as certain countries develop, their gender ideologies will too. Finally, the third explanation uses the argument that we live in a diverse world, both globally and locally, and so the gaps in

the gender ideologies between liberal SLBs and conservative migrants are analogous to the gaps between liberal SLBs and conservative local citizens.

With regard to the issue of hierarchy, some viewed themselves as ideological ‘experts’ of such matters, reflecting a perceived hierarchical relationship between SLBs and migrants, while others talked about differences without conveying an implied hierarchical value attached to these differences. As it will be shown below, most participants’ accounts reflected a view of themselves as more knowledgeable and insightful in terms of how gender dynamics ought to be. They therefore presented themselves as the ideological ‘experts’ from whom the migrants shall learn. Given that, practically, the migrants are the ones who are expected to adopt to the host culture’s norms, this may be largely accurate. But it may also be morally questionable if a higher value is consistently attached to one’s own views, compared to those of others. More importantly, in practical terms, it may be problematic if the SLBs hold unrealistic expectations regarding whether or how fast migrants should change. Of course, this all depends on how such views are expressed in practice, which will be discussed next in further detail.

#### *4.3 Practical Responses to Tensions:*

##### *1) The ‘Judge and Keep Away’ approach*

First, the ‘judge and keep away’ approach was the one most commonly adopted by those ascribing to the essentialist paradigm. As the name implies, it presupposes a critical view of the predominant gender ideologies and identities among migrants from the part of the SLBs. This then leads to situations where this ideological gap becomes apparent being avoided, and thereby steering clear of any further tensions or conflicts with them. It may cause SLBs to refrain from conversations with migrants on gender-related issues, or generally avoiding building any personal relationships with migrants, beyond what the strict rules of each SLB’s occupational role dictates. Of course, although an impersonal interaction is what is largely expected by some professionals, this is usually not the case for SLBs like social workers, or volunteers and activists with similar responsibilities. Indeed, for social workers at shelters for minors, for instance, some level of friendly and personal engagement is exactly what is expected from them. Even among such SLBs, though, some had still adopted a more distant and formalistic

approach, indicating their association with the essentialist conceptual response. In the quote below, a social worker at a shelter for minors in Berlin describes such a colleague.

“When you maintain a professional profile, but so professional that you seem like this dry German, that Arian German who has their job, their money, their girlfriend, and their house, and ‘I am the poor [refugee], who is also dark skinned, and who doesn’t know the language, and so on...’ A very clear hierarchy is being created. Yes, you do provide the help, but through a very impersonal manner [...] When you know that one of the kids [is in serious trouble], I don’t know how you can remain strict with your working hours, and say ‘I cannot come today because I finished my shift’.”

- Social Worker 1, Berlin

Although this quote may not describe the said colleague entirely accurately as it comes from third person, descriptions of the ‘disengaged colleague’ profile were not uncommon among interviewees’ accounts. Less obvious practical examples of this type of response may include women SLBs wearing very modest clothing to protect themselves from the perceived unwelcome or critical gaze of male migrants, or men SLBs avoid speaking with women migrants altogether in order to eliminate any chances of coming across a very religious woman and unwillingly violating their code of conduct. Such copying strategies, of course, may not necessarily signify motivation to maintain an ideological distance, as much as a lack of awareness on how to bridge it. In any case, through a consistent lack of engagement with migrants, the gap remains unaddressed.

An additional factor that plays a critical role in this type of response is that SLBs may not view this ideological gap merely as a difference, but as a hierarchically organised set of differing ideologies. In other words, they place greater value to their own beliefs, compared to those of their clients. Consequently, when this is done systematically, the SLBs’ relationship with their clients becomes automatically hierarchical. In a sense, this stance serves SLBs, in that it helps them maintain a positive self-view, though discounting any negative feedback they might receive from the migrants (see Kadianaki, 2014). By discrediting the migrants from being credible feedback providers in one’s social environment (considering them non-experts or amateurs in terms of local social

norms), their perceived views are ignored, and thus the risk of failing to verify one's identity is avoided (ibid).

More generally, by maintaining an ideological and physical distance and by refraining from situations that could potentially threaten the stability of their social beliefs and self-views, SLBs achieve three things. First, they keep the perceived ideological difference from migrants intact, as they make no effort to address it. Second, they maintain a positive self-view, by treating the migrants as non-expert social partners and dismissing any potentially negative feedback from them. And, third, they reinforce the hierarchical dynamic between SLBs and migrants by ideologically positioning themselves above them, as well as by maintaining a view of their own identity standard as superior to that of the migrants.

#### 1) *The 'Nudge<sup>15</sup> and Show the Way' approach*

Second, the '*nudge and show the way*' approach was used both by those who held essentialist views and by those ascribing to the social constructionism paradigm. At its most discrete version, this approach may take the form of kind suggestions on how to proceed regarding a particular problem migrant clients might be facing, or friendly advice on how things are done in the host society. Specific examples offered by participants include a volunteer offering unsolicited advice and material support for contraception to couples that already had several kids, an activist advising young migrant men on how 'flirting' is properly done in the local society, or a social worker informally suggesting to a migrant husband to create a shared bank account with his wife, so she has access to the family money, too. The latter example is illustrated in the following quote.

"The man is the one who goes to all governmental offices and [who] comes to us. I personally always try and, right from the start, I always say: 'Your wife has to sign all the forms when you apply for child benefit in Germany, that goes to the woman and you know if you have a bank account [...] she has to join the

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<sup>15</sup> The term 'nudge' here, is used for the literal meaning of the word, and does not relate to the 'Nudge Theory', as used in behavioural economics.

account' [...] So it's very important for me always to say: this is her money and she should have access to that money!"

-Social Worker 2, Berlin

In this segment, this SLB steps out of what is professionally expected from her, in order to address the ideological gap between her belief that there should be gender parity regarding access to family finances, versus that of the migrant men who believe family finances are a man's responsibility. Although her own gender identity may be less directly relevant in this context, her role identity as a social worker is used as means for conveying her ideological beliefs on gender equality and for persuading the other party to come closer to her own view. This stance reveals the belief that the migrants' gender ideologies *can* change, but it also reveals that they *should* change. As with the previous approach, when SLBs use the *nudge* response they position themselves as ideological experts. Here, though, they are also those who 'show others the way'. Although this is an effort to bridge the ideological distance, at the same time it implies discounting the others' views, and thus avoiding challenging their own.

At its least discrete version, *nudging* may take the form of provocation, in a more direct effort to 'correct' the migrants' behaviour and establish the SLBs' own gender identity standards as the dominant ones. From the participants' accounts, this practically meant a woman SLB wearing purposely revealing clothes 'so they get used to it', or a group of activists coming up with internal 'house rules' to ensure equality. A specific example of the latter is the following:

"What happens [in this squat] is that, with the cleaning shifts, the ones who are cleaning the stairs and the common spaces are men. So it is more balanced. Because if we were to leave it for them to arrange, they would definitely make the women do it. Since the first day we opened [...] we noticed that men would wonder around doing their own things, while all the women were doing all the work. And we said, 'wait a minute'..."

-Activist 2, Athens

As with the earlier example, this quote indicates not only a distance in terms of gender role understandings, but also an effort to minimise this distance. Compared to the

previous example though, here we observe a more immediate and direct effort from SLBs to redirect the gender understandings of the migrants, by using their position in this unequal power dynamic to 'make the rules of the game' according to their own views. Once again, changing the other becomes the preferred route for minimising the self-other ideological discrepancy. On the one hand, this effort reflects how the SLBs perceive the differing ideologies in a hierarchically organised way. The harder the nudging, the higher the hierarchical distance assumed. On the other hand, this behaviour also serves to maintain this hierarchy. Ironically enough, in their effort to create gender equality among migrants, SLBs reinforce even more bluntly the existing hierarchical relationship between them and migrants.

## 2) *The 'Engage midway' approach*

Compared to the previous two practical approaches, the *engage midway* approach suggest a greater effort to listen carefully and to understand the members of the other group before proceeding to offer advice or attempting to change their behaviour. It is also connected with the social constructivism paradigm, and it shows the implicit attitude that the ideological gap will be better bridged through a mutual effort by both parties, without suggesting there is a significant hierarchical relationship. This approach was more common among SLBs with extended experience in intercultural contact and communication, but it was also affected by gender and age dynamics between SLBs and migrants. In the following and final segment, a young male activist from Athens describes how he tried to approach a middle-aged migrant man who had had an angry outburst at his wife when another man accidentally touched her hand.

"...First of all, [I] try to understand why the person did [this]. For me that's the first question. Like 'okay, you were angry. Why were you angry? What actually happened? [...]' By talking to the man, you understand and you respect a certain part of his power. Not the power that you think he has, but the power he thinks he has!"

-Activist 3, Athens

The reason this man became angry in the first place is not easily understandable by this SLB, as accidentally touching the hand of one's wife is seen as negligible by most in his



local society. Nonetheless, as this quote shows, in order to hold a meaningful conversation with this migrant, he tries to comprehend where the other is ‘coming from’. As a first step, he goes along with what seems to be extremely important for him, the idea that being the man in the family carries a sense of authority that is worthy of respect. By acknowledging “the power he thinks he has”, the SLB takes on the meta-perspective and verifies the migrant’s perceived gender identity as a man. By doing so, as well as by actively listening without expressing a hierarchically superior stance, he makes a substantial effort to bridge the ideological gap that seems to separate them. At face-value, this example indicates a response based on pragmatism. Without a doubt, men who have been socialised for three or more decades in very patriarchal communities cannot adjust their worldview and habits overnight, nor will they necessarily be keen on changing purely because they suddenly—and most probably unwillingly—found themselves in a Western society with more liberal gender roles and dynamics. In that sense, making a step closer to where the other stands may be the most realistically attainable approach for tackling this difference.

An additional parameter this quote brings to light is that SLBs who adopt the *engage* approach are more open to negotiate their own ideological beliefs and identity standards. By taking the time to actively listen and by making a conscious effort to understand how migrants think, and why they think the way they do, SLBs take the role of a neutral mediator between the local and migrant views, rather than that of the ambassador from the former to the latter. Even if not openly stated, their own gender beliefs and identity standards are also questioned and negotiated in the process of this dialogue. This, of course, does not mean that convergence must be achieved, nor does it mean that SLBs must necessarily change their ideals or self-views. On the contrary, they could potentially be further reinforced after thorough examination. What it does mean, though, is that there is a readiness to accept the consequences of non-confirmation and non-verification of one’s own gender ideologies and identities.

This discussion shows that the practical responses are highly contingent upon the conceptual ones. As Table 1 below illustrates, those SLBs who hold an essentialist approach and who view their relationship with migrants as hierarchical tend to follow the *judge* response. Those with an essentialist approach who view their relationship

with migrants as more egalitarian tend to follow either the *judge* or the *nudge* response. Those with a social constructivist approach who view their relationship with migrants as hierarchical tend to follow the *nudge* response. And, those with a social constructivist approach who view their relationship with migrants as more egalitarian tend to follow either the *nudge* or the *engage* approach.

Table 1. Relationship between Conceptual and Practical Responses

	Essentialist Approach	Social Constructivist Approach
High Perceived Hierarchy	Judge	Nudge
Low Perceived Hierarchy	Judge or Nudge	Nudge or Engage

## 5. Concluding Remarks and Future Research

To summarise the findings of this research, SLBs who work in the field with migrants in Athens and Berlin face, among others, significant ideological pressures relating to differences in gender ideologies and identities. As expected, SLBs in both settings tend to view the gender dynamics among migrants as more traditional and conservative from their own, a discrepancy which at times puts them in a position of unease. On the one hand, they work to support and assist this social group, and, on the other, they need to find ways to tackle potentially fundamental ideological differences that may divide them. Less expected was the finding that SLBs are often called to put their own beliefs and self-views into question during their interactions with migrants. Although close and prolonged encounters with individuals who hold considerably diverging views from our own is not something which has been traditionally ubiquitous, increasing population flows make it increasingly commonplace. Even from a socially advantageous point of view, this can be challenging. And, in practical terms, how the SLBs respond to relevant challenging situations depends on how they make sense of them conceptually.

As this research shows, SLBs may adopt one of two different conceptual responses to such tensions, one suggesting an essentialist approach ('this is how these people are'), and one suggesting a social-constructivist approach ('this gap is bridgeable'). In turn, these two conceptual directions lead to a spectrum of behavioural responses. On the

one end of the spectrum, the judge and keep away response implies the belief that it is pointless to try to address the existing differences, and stems from the essentialist conceptual approach. On the other end, there is the engage midway response, where SLBs make a great effort to come closer to migrants and assist them in getting closer to them as well. This response is clearly linked with the social constructivist approach. In between the two ends of the spectrum, there is also the nudge and show the way response, which may include 'softer' or 'harder' nudging, meaning more discrete or more direct efforts to shape the migrants' thinking and habits in order to make them like one's own.

These observations add to the SLB literature and citizen-agent narrative (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003) in the following ways. First, by using additional categories of service providers, beyond the traditional street-level bureaucrats. Second, by including migrant clients, who are not citizens in the legal sense of the term. Third, and most importantly, by pointing that it is not only how service providers view clients that matters, but also how the service providers view the difference between themselves and their clients (see Gillespie, 2008). In other words, their perceptions on the depth and the bridgeability of the gap between them appear to be the most important factors in determining how much and what kind of discretionary behaviour they will exhibit.

Albeit, beyond the main scope of this paper, it is worth considering how these findings may affect policy implementation. Despite the diversity of conceptual approaches and practical responses among SLBs, some general tendencies could be the following. The more essentialist the SLBs' conceptual approach, the more closely the rules are likely to be followed, and the less likely that they would 'go the extra mile' (see Belabas and Gerrits, 2017) to provide assistance or advice to migrant clients. That is, the less likely they would be to exercise discretion when applying a particular rule, leading to closer policy implementation, at least in the official sense of the term. On the contrary, the more the SLBs believe the migrants' ideas and habits to be malleable, the more the personal interactions they will have with them in order to minimise this distance. In turn, as personal relationships are formed, the more likely they will be to 'bend the rules' for them. This would be an example of 'positive discretionary behaviour', which is likely to

enhance the ultimate goal of integration, although, obviously, this can be very much case-dependent.

Some limitations of this work would perhaps be similar to those of other small N qualitative studies, mainly concerning the issue of generalisability. In this respect, the pressures SLBs face while working with migrants in the contexts of Athens and Berlin may be different from those of SLBs doing different work in the same cities, or from those of SLBs doing the same work in different state capitals. In any case, identifying the kinds of specific gender-related pressures, as well as how these shape SLBs' discretionary behaviour may still be informative. Future research could use additional methodological approaches to address the same research question, both to tackle the generalisability issue and to expand on the meaningful nuances of the day-to-day interactions between SLBs and clients. A quantitative approach based on survey data could provide the opportunity to test these findings on a larger sample of SLBs, while ethnographic studies at specific settings (e.g. a state camp, or a shelter for minor migrants) could also be useful in providing additional details on how the interactions between SLBs and migrants may form and change over time.

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