Received: 6 May 2022 | Revised: 21 March 2024 | Accepted: 25 March 2024

DOI: 10.1111/puar.13816

RESEARCH ARTICLE

PAR Public Administration Review ASPA

It takes (at least) two to tango: Investigating interactional dynamics between clients and caseworkers in public encounters

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Abstract

Public encounters are an essential element in citizen–state interactions. Yet, we know very little about the interactional dynamics between clients and street-level bureaucrats. By analyzing data from interviews and participatory observations of public encounters in a social security administration context, we propose a typology of public encounters based on clients' and employees' preparedness that affects the dynamics and outcomes of services. Encounters can either be characterized by "Conflict and Obstruction," "Advocacy," "Case Processing," or "Agreement and Collaboration." We conceptualize the relation between these types and how both clients and caseworkers transition between them. Additionally, the article's findings suggest that public encounters should not be observed as singular events. Rather, spillover effects between encounters and long-term multi-episode interactions with clients prove to be essential in understanding behavior on both sides through mutual learning.

Evidence for practice

- Interactions between caseworkers and clients are socially complex interactions in which both parties affect the process and outcome of these encounters.
- Encounters will be more efficient and mutually accepted if both parties achieve high levels of preparedness.
- In order to facilitate encounters, it is vital to enable both clients and caseworkers to achieve these levels of preparedness.

INTRODUCTION

The nexus between state and citizens has received increased attention in recent years (Jakobsen et al., 2019). The renewed interest in this pivotal level of analysis in public administration research has put the focus on crucial aspects such as administrative burden (Baekgaard et al., 2023; Herd & Moynihan, 2019; Nisar, 2018; Thomsen et al., 2020), biases (Battaglio et al., 2018; Marvel, 2016; Moseley & Thomann, 2021), citizens' agency and motivation (Alford, 2002; Nielsen et al., 2021), citizens' trust and distrust in the public systems (Danneris & Herup Nielsen, 2018), and discrimination (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Jilke et al., 2018). Still, little attention has been directed to the most basic, yet fundamental part of citizen–state interactions: the public encounter (Bartels, 2013; Goodsell, 1981). Public encounters refer to direct and personal interactions between state representatives and their clients. Thus, they encompass a variety of interaction episodes in almost all types of public administration, for example, caseworkers advising unemployed clients, traffic offenders interacting with a police patrol, or citizens asking for advice on their tax return. Despite being one of the most essential episodes of citizen–state interactions, research on the interactional processes at the micro-level remains relatively limited, especially when trying to incorporate both main parties of these interactions: clients and public employees. In order to understand the nature and results of such encounters, it is vital to understand the communicative and interactive interrelationships between public employees and their clients, or—as Bartels (2013) puts it—"the in-between" of public encounters.

However, research on the micro-level foundations of these interactions remains scarce. Traditionally, research has theoretically conceptualized citizens and welfare recipients as passive actors that only respond to state action (Wright, 2016). Even the seminal work by Lipsky (2010) draws a rather static or passive picture of clients' behavior, as administrative burdens, procedures, and rules are imposed on clients who must comply within these settings. Clients, in this sense, are processed in the administrative system in which public encounters are merely an interface for information exchange. This deliberation to some extent frames public employees in a classic Weberian perspective, where the accuracy of rules and regulations ensures impartiality, considered a core virtue for public employees. This study assumes the perspective that clients are much rather resourceful and actively engaging with the state (Hoggett, 2001; Le Grand, 2006) influencing caseworkers and being influenced by them. While studies stress that clients' socio-demographic aspects such as gender (Bisgaard, 2020; Guul, 2018; Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006) and race (Andersen, 2017; Andersen & Guul, 2019) affect the use of street-level bureaucrats' discretion, research on interactional and social aspects is needed to draw a comprehensive picture.

Specifically, this study investigates how clients' preparedness based on their competences and knowledge about the administrative procedure (Dean, 2003; Djuve & Kavli, 2015; Döring, 2021) meets with employees' preparedness for processing the case. We conceptualize *preparedness* in this context as the cognitive and affective ability to process a respective interaction and contribute to the case. Based on the clients' and caseworkers' preparedness, we develop a dynamic typology which differentiates between different encounter types and their impact on potential outcomes. Furthermore, we show how both actors of these encounters can attempt to shift the encounter into a more mature type and elaborate on barriers of that process. Finally, we emphasize the importance of analyzing public encounters as a series of multiple episodes rather than singular events—the episodicity of public encounters.

Public encounters are social phenomena and, thus, embedded in societal and institutional norms and values. Simultaneously, they are characterized by (at least) two human beings *interacting* with one another. Hence, social dynamics, heuristics, and judgments will play an essential role in both directions: how citizens are affected by these dynamics, but also how caseworkers are affected by them. Research so far has often taken a rather static perspective in that regard. Ethnographic methods may therefore contribute to overcoming the shortcomings of other methods by including data from real-life interactions (Cecchini & Harrits, 2022, p. 5). Thus, this study heeds the call for ethnographic approaches to assess public encounters (Hand & Catlaw, 2019) by analyzing encounter episodes between clients and caseworkers.

The article contributes to the field of research on citizen–state interactions at the micro-level, as it addresses the research question: *How do citizens' and street-level bureaucrats' behavior interact with each other during public encounters?*

The manuscript continues by providing a short literature overview of the impact of both parties, street-level bureaucrats and clients, on public encounter highlighting the lack of an interactional focus. Afterward, we describe the case setting and our methodological approach. Eventually, we present the findings of our analysis including their implications.

Clients' and bureaucrats' behavior

There is no specific definition of a public encounter, but it is often characterized by its dyadic nature in which public officials and clients[1] interact with each other in order to fulfill the needs or goals of at least one party (Bartels, 2013; Goodsell, 1981). This broad description covers encounter types that range from school encounters between teachers and students to police encounters between victims and offenders. According to Goodsell (1981, p. 5ff.), distinctions may be based on (a) who initiates the encounter, (b) the purpose of the encounter, (c) the amount of control and constraint involved, (d) the duration and scope, and, lastly, and (e) the medium and setting in which the encounter occurs. This study analyzes public encounters between street-level bureaucrats and clients by focusing on encounters that are initiated by citizens in need of social support, which creates power hierarchies and information asymmetries typical of most public encounters (Hasenfeld & Steinmetz, 1981). In the literature on public encounters, varying concepts are used to describe the parties interacting in these encounters, such as street-level bureaucrats, employees, or caseworkers on the one hand, and clients, customers, or citizens on the other.

Based on Lipsky's (2010) work on street-level bureaucrats, public administration research has produced seminal research on how these actors internalize their roles (Biddle, 1986) with regard to service delivery and their perspective toward clients. For instance, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) formulate two ideal narratives that frontline workers might relate to: state agents and citizen agents. These narratives outline roles that employees at the frontline may enact and thus adjust their behavior to. The first, the state agent, emphasizes the role of a state-employed gate-keeper that focuses strictly on the accuracy of rules and regulations (Dubois, 2014). This role resonates with the classic Weberian bureaucrat concerned with rule abidance and impartiality (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). Within this narrative, clients have an explicit role imposed on them. They will have to justify their needs by being as cooperative and obedient as possible. The expected client's script will therefore focus on following instructions, producing all relevant information when asked for it and accepting the decisions made by the street-level bureaucrat. The second ideal type, the citizen agent, reflects a different identity where employees have a stronger sense of agency toward their clients and the fulfillment of their professional tasks, which translates into different roles being performed during interactions with clients. Moreover, it changes employees' expectations of clients' behavior, as well as their perception of clients' deservingness and needs, which, in a citizen agent perspective, justifies street-level bureaucrats' attention and assistance (Jilke & Tummers, 2018). Cecchini and Harrits (2022) expanded this typology by emphasizing a focus on problem solving and the routine-based knowledge about "what works," which is deeply rooted in street-level bureaucrat's professional background and identity.

While these narratives and different types of behavior are well-researched in various studies (Gassner & Gofen, 2018; Hupe et al., 2015; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Riccucci et al., 2005), client roles in these constellations are rather implicit. On a macro-level, public policy scholars have debated the role of welfare recipients from different perspectives (see Wright, 2016 for an overview). The dominant model describes recipients as passive and dependent "pawns" (Le Grand, 1997, 2006) that show little agency of their own. In contrast, the counter model criticizes this simplified model (Hoggett, 2001) and assumes that recipients are much more active and autonomous "queens." Le Grand's (2006) typology is based on the extent of agency that individuals enact, referring to their potential to change service providers. While this conceptualization works in quasi-markets, Djuve and Kavli (2015) point out that classic social welfare services may fall short of exit options (Hirschman, 1970). Rather, Dean (2003) points out that such agency "rooted as much in actors' understanding of their actions as in their capacity to act" (2003, p. 702). Clients' competences are potentially essential to determine clients' roles during encounters. While these studies provide useful starting points, their discussion mostly focusses on welfare systems rather than individual behavior at the micro-level. The welfare state and its services are rather enacted through institutionalized pattern of citizen–state interactions. They are produced and reproduced, hence, "the benefits that citizens receive from the welfare state are not fixed because they must be awarded and transferred through casework" (Rice, 2013, p. 1044). More recently, Nielsen et al. (2021) used latent class analysis to differentiate between various strategies of preparation and potential coping behavior in fictitious encounters. They identify Resisters, Activists, Accommodators, Fighters, and Cooperators and provide a useful heuristic to understand how citizens react to unfavorable demands imposed on them. However, it is rooted in data from vignette studies rather than observations of actual encounters. Accordingly, we lack the insights about how street-level bureaucrats react to these different behavior types. A recent study by Mik-Meyer and Haugaard (2021), however, provides outstanding first insights based on video-recorded consultations with Danish homeless people. They find evidence of strategic behaviors enacted by clients and how caseworkers often respond by enacting "repair work" to harmonize expectations and actions between both parties. However, the consultation meetings at shelters provide a rather specific type of public encounters that are less bureaucratically structured and addressing clients with extreme life circumstances.

Hence, this study aims at contributing to this increasing body of research by investigating the interplay between client behavior during public encounters and how caseworkers react to these patterns. The case setting and methodological approach are presented below. Following that, the analysis focuses on three core topics: (1) a typology of public encounters based on the preparedness of clients and employees, (2) transitions between encounter types, and (3) the role of episodicity in public encounters. Subsequently, the conclusion sums up the article's findings and offers perspectives for future research on citizen–state interactions.

METHODOLOGY

As the goal is to understand how public encounters unfold through a series of interactions, an ethnomethodological approach has been applied because "its potential lies in the development of analytical concepts and theoretical generalizations" (Møller, 2021, p. 474), providing situational observations and opportunities for contextually grounded assumptions (Cappellaro, 2017; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). Weick (1985) defines ethnography as "sustained, explicit, methodical observation and paraphrasing of social situations in relation to their naturally occurring events" (1985, p. 568). In this sense, ethnography focuses primarily on "first-hand, field-based observations and experiences" (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 6), especially compared to more ubiquitous qualitative methods, such as interviews.

The ethnographic study enables us to investigate the observed persons' behavior in a specific situation and their reactions to other peoples' behavior in the moment. In this article, the focus contributes to an in-depth understanding of the in-between of an interaction, rather than trying to dismantle its antecedents, thereby delineating sequences of encounters that allow us to typify them theoretically.

Data were collected through a multifaceted study in several social administration offices in a major German city to obtain a comprehensive image of administrative work at the street level. As a result of the administrative structure of the German welfare system (Boockmann et al., 2015), social administration offices may vary in their specific configuration across different municipalities; however, their core services remain similar. They cover a range of services for various groups of clients in need. This encompasses educational support benefits, social benefits for people with low or no income, support for the elderly and people with special needs, as well as homeless people and refugees. This setting provides us with an especially interesting case setup, as it involves some of the most vulnerable groups in society. This makes the work of our respective street-level bureaucrats essential and relevant, and clients have a vital interest in successful interactions as their well-being often depends on this support. While a broad range of services targets groups with apparently low socio-economic status specifically, encounters include people from every socio-economic class.

In terms of Goodsell (1981), our encounters are mostly initiated by clients in order to obtain welfare support for their various life situations. Thus, while there is often substantial economic constraint involved, there is rarely a legal requirement for interactions, except for follow-up meetings to check on continuing eligibility. The duration and scope of such encounters vary considerably. On average, however, individual episodes last only about 10–15 min. However, such interactions can establish long-term relationships that can persist over multiple years depending on the client's life circumstances. Finally, all these encounters are processed in-person without digital communication tools or other channels except for rare phone calls. As such, our cases form specific types of encounters. Their generalizability is discussed later.

To investigate the public encounters, 14 initial semi-structured interviews have been conducted with street-level bureaucrats from four social administration offices in this city (see Appendix 4). First, supervising employees were recruited. Second, those interviewees referred us to additional candidates within their organization. The interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix 3) and person-centered with the aim of interpreting the meaning of their experiences (Geertz, 1973). Interviewees were street-level managers from the services that see the most client traffic. They served as experts on public encounters, also with insights into more general patterns and differences among their subordinates' strategies to address and cope with the course and outcome of such interactions. The insights from these interviews allowed for the identification of possible core themes during the observations. The interviews lasted about 60–70 min on average.

The interviews were complemented by 43 public encounters observed on six different days in two of these offices with a total length of approximately 300 min of counsel and fieldwork (see Appendix 1). The observations were assisted by trained student groups that collected data and informed clients in the waiting rooms. Moreover, they were conducted during consultation hours, meaning that street-level bureaucrats would have no or little overview of the clients and cases they would encounter on these days, making the interactional setup even more vital. All participants gave their informed consent prior to the observed encounters. As a relevant number of services in this context are provided outside the office, the focus was on in-office interactions to limit complexity. Thus, the office context provided a degree of standardization and comparability between the observed encounters. Partially standardized field notes were compiled for the subsequent data analysis, in which themes and topics were identified from these encounters. The observed services ranged from financial support for elderly and other people in need (allowances for rent payments, refugee shelters, broader social work, e.g., for homeless people) to financial support for relatives' burials, which would otherwise overburden clients. Despite this wide range of services, common elements are social stigmatization and potentially severe, personal consequences for clients resulting in financial and emotional pressure during public encounters.

Analyzing the empirical data

Interviews and observations were analyzed following the structured approach promoted by Gioia et al. (2013). In order to preserve the theoretical nature of our study, data have been abductively interpreted, as quantitative testing and analyzing are not applicable in an ethnographic context (Hand & Catlaw, 2019). Transcripts and observation protocols were structured and coded to explore the underlying narratives of the encounters using NVivo. The coding process was conducted by two of the authors. After an initial independent coding procedure, the authors met to compare their developed codes and discuss interpretations. In case of conflicting interpretations, these were discussed in the entire team including both interview and observation data to find consensus. By doing that, we increased the reliability and validity of our coding scheme.

Applying an abductive analysis of the empirical data, we were able to structure and code the empirical data, and through the revision of the data identify relevant themes that assisted in stringently structuring the coding process and the data material (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The initial coding process was structured in accordance with themes indicating (1) the clients' emotional state and responses as well as their preparation and knowledge about their rights and obligations operationalized as their preparedness, (2) stressors caseworkers had to cope with (e.g., interfering elements like other clients, telephone, noise, third-party individuals), (3) coping strategies employed by the caseworker to deal with these stressors, and their emotional state and responses, both comprising caseworker's preparedness, (4) the social relationship between clients and caseworkers as well as spillover effects between client encounters, ultimately coded as episodicity, and (5) the encounter's outcomes (see Appendix 2).

Moreover, as trust is difficult to establish in initial encounters, there is a need to account for the effect of multiple interaction episodes. The article conceptualizes this longitudinal perspective, termed *episodicity*, for the analysis of public encounters—a perspective which, as we argue, has been largely neglected so far. The longitudinal perspective enables an analysis of spillover effects between multiple episodes that emphasize the role of situational aspects in street-level bureaucracy.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical findings suggest that the interactional dynamics in public encounters are affected by behavior expectations and enacted behavior. In the following, we present a typology of public encounters based on clients' and caseworkers' preparedness. We elaborate on their antecedents and how these types play out in real life encounters. Afterward, we describe how encounters allow for transitions between these types to finalize the case processing. We describe obstacles and facilitators for these transitions.

A process-based typology of public encounters

Public encounters as dyadic social phenomena are affected by both participating parties. As such encounters serve to provide services (either voluntarily or not), their success depends on these parties' ability to contribute to the processing procedure. We label this ability as "preparedness." It encompasses both cognitive as well as affective preparedness, which combines the formal dimension of public encounters (processing cases based on exchanged information) as well as the social and psychological dimension that determine the inter-personal relationship and interaction.

> Usually, people know very well what to do and that they will be informed and asked to come, to bring their application, because their approval period ends. […] Then it's okay. […]. But sometimes not—it has to do with the attitude of people and their refusal, for whatever reason, and yes, some people are simply not able.
>
> (INT 6)

Roughly summarized, these two dimensions describe the "skill" and the "will" (Ajzen, 1985) to act within public encounters. From the client's perspective, preparedness relates to their cognitive abilities to overcome imposed administrative burden (Herd & Moynihan, 2019) by collecting relevant information and documents necessary to facilitate the case processing (Döring, 2021). Citizens that show higher levels of administrative literacy (Döring & Jilke, 2023) will accordingly have a higher chance to successfully "make their case" (Lipsky, 2010). At the same time, they require emotional resources, especially in public service areas that often suffer from stigmatization (Döring & Madsen, 2022; Hasenfeld et al., 1987). Citizens that are not willing to collaborate, comply with requirements, or act according to expected norms during the interactions will be less likely to achieve favorable outcomes during encounters:

> These are rather the ones that are burdensome, because you can't get ahead with logic and common sense. […] Then the public agency or we have no choice but to carry out the standard administrative procedure, […] knowing that it is completely for nothing.
>
> (INT 3)

On the caseworkers' side, cognitive preparedness is characterized by the expertise not only regarding the service area, but also about the specifics of the respective case. Especially in organizations that suffer from high levels of turnover (Shaw et al., 2005), sickness absence (van den Heuvel et al., 2010), but also more volatile policy frameworks (Meyers et al., 1998), cognitive preparedness can be limited or threatened. The affective preparedness on the other hand is determining the willingness to engage with the client. "*First of all, you have to be interested in them*," as one interviewee stated (INT 13). It can be affected by individual norms (e.g., state vs. client-narrative; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), organizational circumstances (e.g., caseload; Andersen & Guul, 2019), but also by the nature of dyadic relationship between caseworker and client (Senghaas et al., 2019).

These two dimensions outline a matrix that differentiates four ideal types of encounters (see Figure 1). We propose that encounters have higher success rates (in the sense of mutually accepted closure of the case) the closer they are to the top right type. In most cases, this will symbolize a case where either (a) the client was able to provide all necessary information so that the caseworker could provide the required service or (b) both client and caseworker realize that the services does not apply to the circumstances. In social services, this could, for example, describe a client that applies for social allowance payments, while they do not fulfill the eligibility criteria. In policing, this could imply that suspicions were ruled out. In any case, both parties would need to agree on the shared interpretation of the situation implicitly or explicitly.

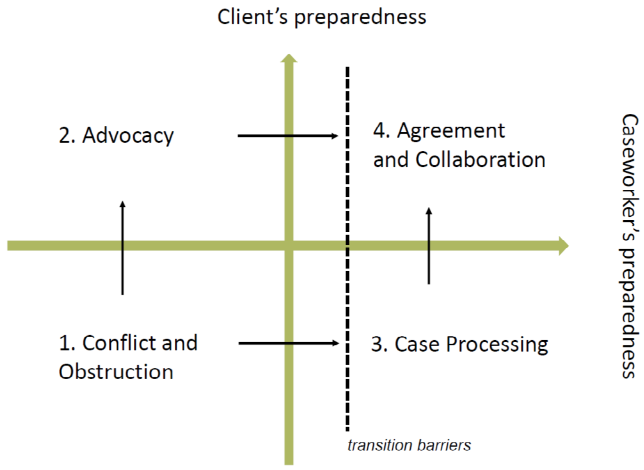

FIGURE 1 Process-based types of public encounters.

The type of encounters affects the style and content of communication. While interactions in quadrant 1 will be strongly characterized by uncertainty, lack of knowledge, and even antagonism, encounters in quadrant 4 will be characterized as collaborative, supportive, and respectful interactions.

The model implies that these encounter types are conceptualized as dynamic categories that clients and caseworkers can transition to. Encounters that start out by very limited preparedness on either the client's or the caseworker's side can potentially move into another category if the respective actor is cognitively or affectively stimulated (e.g., as information are shared among actors or as emotions and motivation are evoked). These transitions are especially likely when caseworker and client are able to develop rapport among them (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000), for example, based on trust from long-term interactions.

However, these encounters do not occur among equals. Street-level bureaucrats have an inherent power advantage over their clients (Hupe & Hill, 2007) and work within rigid regulation and organizational frameworks, sometimes even setting incentives that counter the value of equal treatment and equity in service provision (Cohen & Gershgoren, 2016). Thus, especially transitions from quadrant 1–3 as well as 2–4 can be inhibited due to ubiquitous barriers (Møller & Cecchini, 2023), such as (a) organizational practices (e.g., reduced client interaction as clients are asked to wait in front of the office), (b) work routines (e.g., division of responsibility in different service areas), or (c) other restrictions (e.g., workload and budget constraints) that prevent the caseworker from becoming active without their explicit willingness to do so:

> The effort is gigantic to actually check, does someone meet the requirements or not? Or do they? Should he get more, should he get less, if so, how much and why […], etc. etc., that, of course, makes it all very time-consuming.
>
> (INT 12)

Quadrant 1—Conflict and obstruction

The first quadrant describes situations in which neither client nor caseworker have the necessary preparedness to proceed with the case. This includes citizens that are not well-informed (or misinformed) about the services they are eligible to, while the caseworker lacks information about the client's circumstances or the service's rule framework. Moreover, the caseworker might not be willing to invest much effort in the case due to a lack of trust, lack of resources, or a general expectation that it is up to the client to convince them of their deservingness. The example below describes such a situation:

> A man enters the encounter to apply for benefits, accompanied by a friend to support him due to language barriers. He starts the encounter by emphasizing:
>
> I don't understand this bureaucratic stuff. And I don't care. I am more of an artist or philosopher; I don't care for this bureaucratic gibberish.
>
> He produces an abundance of documents which is unsorted. Moreover, it's unclear which of these documents are actually needed. The caseworker rolls her eyes digging through the documents.
>
> Meanwhile, the man stares around the room and out of the windows. The caseworker continues to ask questions about documents that appear to be missing. The man responds with 'I don't know. You are supposed to help me.' She starts addressing his companion instead. She retains intense and increasingly aggressive eye contact and uses extensive hand gestures, while talking to the man's companion. She repeats similar questions multiple times.
>
> In the end, she concludes: 'Well, then I cannot help you. You need to come again when you have all the necessary documents. There are others waiting for my attention.'
>
> (OBS 36)

This exchange highlights the client's unpreparedness. Cognitively, he had problems preparing for the case, hence the abundance of unnecessary documents, missing documents, and difficulties with bureaucratic language (which is likely exacerbated by general language barriers). At the same time, he shows explicit disinterest in his case and the caseworker.

On the caseworker's side, cognitive preparedness was lacking as this was apparently a new case and new client. The unstructured and incomplete documentation and inability to answer specific questions inhibited a phase transition to quadrant 3 due to vague and incomplete information, which complicated the assessment of the case (Raaphorst, 2018). These obstacles triggered substantial frustration (expressed by the aggressive eye contact, eyerolling, and repeated and extensive gestures), inhibiting the caseworker's affective preparedness, showing clear signs of frustration and anger with the client. In the end, the encounter remained in quadrant 1, which led to a failed service interaction.

The example highlights the lack of preparedness both cognitively as well as affectively on the side of clients. Due to the interaction being the first with the caseworker, they lacked the necessary information to process the case. The client's inability to collaborate during the encounter led to frustration on the caseworker's side, which decreased their willingness to facilitate the case processing (quadrant 3).

In another case, a client (with refugee status) enters the encounter complaining about her shelter where they are not allowed to film sanitary issues in the shelter. The client is accompanied by a person helping with language barriers. The caseworker notes that they will refer the matter to her superiors, indicating already, however, that there is very likely little they can do at this point. The accompanying person is initially calm and sympathetic, however, after several rounds of back and forth, they become increasingly frustrated and raising their voice. The employee tries to remain calm, while emphasizing clear boundaries ("That's not how we do it!"). In the end, the case is postponed without results and the client leaves.

This case illustrates a situation in which the client is in a very weak position and needs considerable help from an accompanying person with an administratively unclear complaint and request. Although the caseworker indicates some kind of action, they already indicate the very low success rate of actual consequences and actions. Substantive action (e.g., contacting the contractor of the refugee shelter or initiating a change of accommodation) would have required a substantial investment of resources. The increasing verbal pressure and aggressiveness visibly cemented the unwillingness to take additional action outside of bureaucratic routines. Both parties show low levels of preparedness to solve the problem described, thus, remaining in quadrant 1.

Quadrant 2—Advocacy

The second quadrant represents encounters in which clients are either well-prepared and/or highly motivated to engage with the caseworkers. The latter, however, either (yet) lack the necessary information about the case or are unwilling to follow the client's bidding (for legitimate reasons or not). The example below describes such a situation:

> A woman enters the encounter to file a complaint about her discarded application for benefits, accompanied by her daughter to support her due to language barriers. Her daughter explains: 'We have moved to this district three years ago and now we got a request from our previous social office to repay the apartment's deposit.'
>
> The caseworker sympathizes by remarking: 'Wow, that's really late, that's really something else… However, you must go to your old social office to figure this out.' The daughter translates for her mother and asks again: 'But can you not simply call them and figure it out now? We know that we are eligible for the benefits.' The caseworker answers: 'No, we are not responsible for that case. You have to do this at your old social office.'
>
> The daughter continues: 'Yeah, but there's a relative that is still living in the apartment.' The caseworker responds: 'Well, then they have to figure this out. You will have to bring the following documents [lists different documents].'
>
> [Mother loudly discusses with her daughter, avoids eye contact with the caseworker. Meanwhile, the caseworker seems stressed due to multi-tasking: responding to client, searching for her file, and having the phone ring multiple times during the encounter].
>
> The client suddenly claims that she received less and less benefits over the past months. The caseworker looks wary and checks in the IT system. 'That's not true, in fact you've received more. Again, I cannot help you, I am not responsible for your case.' The encounter ends without further results.
>
> (OBS 4)

This example illustrates a case in which the clients were aware of their general eligibility to services. While they still lacked full mastery of the underlying process, they were committed to getting the problem solved and tried several times to convince the caseworker into processing their case, emphasizing their willingness to get involved in the encounter. The case was new to the caseworker, thus, challenging her cognitively with a new situation. While some basic information was given to understand the case, the caseworker decided not to get involved and directing her to a different office, arguing with procedural responsibility. Here, procedural rules served as a barrier to prevent a move from quadrant 2 to 4. The client's second push claiming alleged decreased benefit payments was potentially an attempt to trigger the caseworker's empathy. However, it eventually backfired leading to a quick termination of the encounter.

In another example, a client tried to signal a level of competence and preparedness by entering the encounter with an abundance of documents, most of which were not relevant for the case processing. Instead, relevant documents were missing. However, the man did not perceive any wrongdoing on his part, claiming that he had done everything correctly and became aggressive and irate. Eventually, however, he gave in to the employee's reasoning. Still, his behavior did not yield a positive outcome as the encounter was stuck in quadrant 2 (OBS 16).

Quadrant 3—Case processing

The third type describes encounter in which the client remains highly passive and unable to actively steer their case. At the same time, the caseworker is in full control, being familiar with the case and willing to finalize the processing. While these encounters may lead to closing of cases and the provision of basic services, it is likely that these services do not fully meet the clients' needs (compared to quadrant 4). The situation below described an example:

> A man enters the encounter to apply for benefits. He has difficulties explaining his situation in German due to language barriers. He is friendly, yet very reserved and unsure when answering to question. Furthermore, he makes the impression of being heavily overwhelmed by the situation.
>
> The caseworker quickly catches up and starts gathering documents and form, while stating: 'Don't worry, it's not that bad.' The client failed to produce all necessary document, lamenting: 'Oh no, oh oh, no…' [He folds his hands in visible agony]. However, the caseworker makes time to go through a list of required documents as well as the official form, commenting: 'I know it is a lot, but I'll explain it to you.'
>
> The caseworker starts processing the case, inserting available information, while highlighting information that is still needed. The client follows actively.
>
> In the end, the caseworker summarizes the missing information and documents, asking the client to return with these later that week.
>
> (OBS 13)

The example shows a typical situation in which the client is overwhelmed with interacting with the public organization. However, the caseworker is quickly moving the encounter into quadrant 3 as she is familiar with similar processes (cognitive preparedness) and, more importantly, willing to process the case as best as possible (affective preparedness). Moreover, she invests a significant amount of time explaining the process to the client and enabling him to take the last steps, possibly moving the encounter even into quadrant 4. The client himself was very willing to learn about the requirements and the necessary documents.

In another case, a man was initially applying for social benefits. He provided the employee with a considerable number of documents, but appeared silent and insecure during the encounter, avoiding eye contact with the employee. As the employee noticed that information regarding his bank account was missing, he tried to provide explanations, stating "those are just informational pages" (OBS 6). Subsequently, the caseworker pointed out that there was no information about the payment of rent, to which the applicant struggled to answer convincingly. Over the course of the conversation and based on the client's demeanor, the employee grew more and more suspicious of him despite the initial signal of preparedness. This culminated in an adjournment of the case processing until all doubts could be eliminated by the client providing adequate documentation of his situation (OBS 6). This case emphasizes that even if caseworkers increase their preparedness during an encounter by processing relevant information, traces of suspicion may even lead to a re-transition back to a lower quadrant (e.g., from quadrant 3 to 1). The lack of the client's ability to collaborate diminished his chances of successfully completing this case.

Quadrant 4—Agreement and collaboration

The final quadrant describes encounters in which both client and caseworker collaborate on a level playing field. Here, the most optimal outcomes are likely to occur—in the sense of the best outcome for the client as well as quick and easing case processing for the caseworker. The situation below provides an example:

> A woman enters the encounter to deliver documents for an ongoing procedure. She has a well-organized folder which she gives to caseworker. The caseworker herself is apparently relieved about the ease of this case (especially compared to the previous client). She repeatedly states: 'Oh, super!' 'Great, thank you' etc.
>
> The client asks further questions about the process which signal her depth of preparedness regarding the process.
>
> The caseworker remarks that one documentation piece is missing, however she adds: 'Well, I don't have any reason not to trust your information' and continues the processing. Both make some small talk a bit.
>
> Together, they go through the form. The client asks several questions which the caseworker is answering patiently. The process is finalized, and the encounter terminates.
>
> (OBS 20)

These findings stress the relevance of taking social aspects into consideration when analyzing interactions between clients and street-level bureaucrats. As the case suggests, signals of preparedness may have a positive effect on the employees' willingness to invest resources in the interaction (Raaphorst & van de Walle, 2018). "*Well, there's no doubt that we must try to be as neutral as possible, no question at all. But it is only natural that if the personal contact is positive, I will also change the way I approach this case*," one of the employees concluded (INT 1). However, the employee's reaction when clients fail to confirm such signals may differ significantly, depending on social aspects such as trust, perceived deservingness, and the caseworker's individual role identification, reflecting ideal types of either state agent or client agent (Jilke & Tummers, 2018; Kallio & Kouvo, 2015; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012).

This example emphasizes the mutual gain from such encounters. The case is concluded in a relatively short time, while the caseworker signals extensive trust toward the client; even finalizing the case when documentation is actually missing. Preparedness on both sides was sufficient to process the service delivery efficiently and effectively.

Transitions between encounter types

While some of the examples described here were stable situations that showed limited dynamic, there were plenty observations in which encounter types changed during the encounter itself. Clients trying to push for their agenda, emphasizing their helplessness, and invoking empathy. Caseworkers attempting to "educate" their clients, preparing them for future encounters with third parties (e.g., their landlords or other public offices). Moreover, to appease the emotional situation, employees sometimes state that they will "*take another look into the system*" (OBS 25; INT 12) in order to signal that they are taking the clients' remarks seriously (while not necessarily changing their planned action).

In the end, those transitions were, however, only possible if the caseworker was willing to transition into another phase (hence the vertical dotted line in Figure 1). This emphasizes the structural hierarchy that persist to characterize public encounters, such as those we have observed (Dubois, 2014). Even though citizens may attempt to strategically affect or even steer encounters (Mik-Meyer & Haugaard, 2021), they might still be dependent on the caseworker's willingness to transition.

Lastly, there were several cases in which individual encounters were clearly affected by previous encounters, either with other clients or with the same client over multiple months or even years (Yue et al., 2022). This role of "episodicity" as a conceptual characteristic of public encounters is analyzed in the next session.

The role of episodicity in public encounters

The data indicate that public encounters should not be considered as singular episodes of isolated interactions. Rather, public encounters are often embedded in a series of interactions with the same or different interaction partners. Hence, applying an episodic perspective to public encounters allows for an in-depth study of the role of social aspects and interactional dynamics in public encounters, as expectations and behavior may be informed by the multi-episodic character of public encounters. Analyzing the role of episodicity may be operationalized through two aspects, namely *intra-* and *inter*-client episodicity.

Intra-client episodicity is relevant when clients have continuous interactions with the same employee on multiple occasions. Such settings serve to reduce the uncertainty between the two actors for various reasons. First, clients become familiar with the bureaucratic setting of such encounters through their experiences. If they receive information about underlying processes and rationales, they can adjust their own skills, expectations, and thus the role they will enact in future interactions. Second, both client and employee learn about their mutual attitudes, habits, and implicit goals. While employees grow impatient or even frustrated with new clients who seem to meander aimlessly through the interaction, other employees with long-term clients anticipate that some individuals use such encounters to fulfill their need for social interactions. One of our interviewees explains: "For some of them [the citizens], these interactions are the only opportunity to talk to other people" (INT 5). Third, long-term interactions between the same client and employee provide a platform on which to build mutual trust. Clients are less likely to question the employee's demands or decisions, while employees are more likely to accept deviations from standard procedures, stressing the potentially positive effect of intra-client episodicity:

> There are those who have been coming for years and they probably feel they belong here somehow, like to a family, because they have no other place to go
>
> (INT 14).

Djuve and Kavli (2015) also show evidence about how clients turn from "pawns" to "queens" based on their increasing experiences with public encounters. Such long-term relationships have been coined as *rapport* in the service management literature (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Lin & Lin, 2017). Here, studies show that rapport is related to higher customer satisfaction (Macintosh, 2009), higher levels of mutual trust (Bailey et al., 2001), and other positive outcomes for both customer and employee (DeWitt & Brady, 2003).

In a similar vein, Harrits (2016) highlights the importance of establishing relationships toward clients for service professionals in contrast to mere contact, hence pointing to the longitudinal and developmental aspect of public encounters. However, having multiple of intra-client episodes does not necessarily create positive value for clients. Rather, Peeters and Campos (2021, p. 1008) point out that the number of appointments can also create additional burden on the clients rather than relief.

Inter-client episodicity refers to the spillover effects of sequential public encounters. These spillovers may be experienced by both employees and clients. The observations in this study indicate various cases in which the course and outcome of employees' prior encounters with other clients affected later interactions. In one case, an employee was visibly emotionally strained by the preceding encounter with an infuriated client. This caused the employee to approach the following client in a rather harsh way, which obviously confused him. He expected professional behavior from the employee, while he was trying to enact the role of a well-prepared client. This discrepancy at the beginning of the encounter startled him, changing his standard script as he then tried to appease the employee by posing cautious questions and making jokes. Reflecting, the employee soon realized the extent of her emotional spillover and re-adjusted her behavior, which led to obvious relief on both sides. Both actors returned to the standard script they were used to, as the second client was a long-term client (OBS 17; OBS 20). Likewise, clients may also be the carriers of spillover effects. This is often the case with asynchronous communication channels that are used for official decisions (e.g., letters). If these carry decisions that negatively affect the client's status, such as rejections of service or cutting of allowances, it will affect how clients initiate interactions. This can be especially challenging for employees who are not aware of such spillover effects before the encounters take place. Indeed, Hansen (2021, p. 92) points to similar patterns in the behavior of caseworkers and clients in the face of other clients and how this affects individual behavior. Furthermore, studies of frontline workers' coping with incidents of violence highlight an extreme case of such spillover effects (Lotta et al., 2022).

Episodicity can potentially explain differences in mutual trust and familiarity between street-level bureaucrats and their clients. Likewise, it may explain both positive and negative expectations. As the analytical findings suggest, episodicity affects the interactional dynamics of public encounters and may be a key to understanding clients' and employees' behavior in interactions. The experiences and understandings acquired over time inform and shape behavior, stressing the relevance of time for the social aspects of public encounters.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed at investigating the public encounter types that clients and caseworkers enact, that is, in the specific context of German social service offices. Drawing on empirical findings, four types of public encounters have been identified: conflict and obstruction, advocacy, case processing, and agreement and collaboration. The four types contribute as analytical constructs to the investigation of how the actors' social practices in interactions inform the dynamics of the public encounters. This article thereby applies an interactional approach to contribute to the field of research related to street-level bureaucracy, citizen–state interactions, administrative burden, and equity in public services.

Summing up the article's findings, the analysis illustrates how different encounter types may affect the outcome of interactions between street-level bureaucrats and citizens. The observations show that the aspect of citizens' preparedness and signals of willingness to put effort into the interactions affect how employees react during interactions. Simultaneously, caseworkers' affective and cognitive preparedness poses a substantial barrier to most encounters to transition to more mature constellations (Cohen et al., 2024; Davidovitz & Cohen, 2023). For example, citizen agent-orientated caseworkers are more likely to invest extra work and resources, such as time and information, when clients display motivation, effort, and a willingness to improve their situation. Clients' active participation supports caseworkers' ability to identify potential solutions to the clients' problems, thereby highlighting the relevance of examining the interactional dynamics and social aspects of public encounters. Furthermore, the analytical findings suggest that mutual trust may have a positive effect on the course of public encounters (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022a). Trusted clients face less uncertainty, as they have developed competences and administrative awareness that positively affect their ability to navigate the public encounters. Clients' competences related to basic language skills, administrative knowledge, and preparatory skills play a crucial role in developing employees' trust and confidence in the citizens' competence and efficacy (Döring, 2021; Masood & Nisar, 2021).

Episodicity is a decisive factor for understanding citizen–state interactions and street-level bureaucracy. Both types of episodicity, namely intra-client and inter-client episodicity, appear to shape public encounters. Concerning intra-client episodicity, long-term relationships appear to have a strong effect on alignment and synchronization of expectations between street-level bureaucrats and citizens, as both parties are more likely to display trust in one another as a result of their mutual acquaintance, which also leads to fewer conflictual encounters (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022b). Inter-client episodicity, however, may be considered a source of spillover effects between different encounters (Hansen, 2021). Occasionally, prior distortions may be absorbed by the participants, but this is not always the case. Investigating the role of episodicity has been on the agenda for studies on policing and education (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Hajovsky et al., 2020; Lennings, 1997; Vallano et al., 2015) but largely remains underresearched in the field of general public administration. Based on the study's findings and its limited scope, applying an episodic perspective to future studies of interactional dynamics in public administration research is suggested.

While we argue that clients' preparedness can potentially be shaped and affected by the clients' themselves, socio-economic disparities may severely inhibit this potential (Döring, 2021; Dubois, 2014; Heinrich, 2016). People from marginalized groups will find it much harder to prepare well for these encounters, while they may also suffer from greater exercise of power imbalances in encounter episodes. In order to better understand these dynamics, it will be even more important to examine how administrative literacy and self-efficacy develop over time and how they are distributed across different groups in society.

The discussed interplay between both actors is also emphasized by role theory which assumes that interacting partners often assume roles that are culturally or institutionally expected of them (Biddle, 2013). How well they are able to recognize and enact these roles may affect their ability to "play the game" and persuade their counterparts to act and react. As a theoretical framework, role theory may provide a fruitful approach to more comprehensive investigations of interactional research questions and designs that account for social dynamics in public encounters.

Furthermore, this study stresses the relevance of applying a micro-perspective to understand social aspects that affect the course of public encounters. However, our study does not explicitly include the aspect of motivation to interact and get involved with public services because the research setting itself creates a presumably strong pressure and need for these specific services. When investigating other public services, however, motivation may be essential to incorporate. Le Grand's differentiation between "knights" and "knaves" Le Grand's (1997), Le Grand's (2006) offers a useful starting point by differentiating between extrinsic and prosocial motivational aspects.

Moreover, our study does not capture the clients' perspective in as much detail as the caseworkers' as we were not able to conduct interviews with them. Future studies should continue pursuing a more client-focused investigation of public encounters than has been done in the past. Moreover, our study is limited in the data extracted from the encounters. As recordings were not possible due to data security concerns, we were limited to field notes conducted during the interaction episodes. This might create a first interpretative filter that might affect the encounter's assessment by the observer (LeBaron et al., 2018). While we argue that this still provides us with valuable and novel data addressing an important research gap, future studies will hopefully be able to conduct more detailed material (e.g., with video recordings). Doing so would for example enable us to assess emotional micro-response, body language, and linguistic analyses in much more detail.

Lastly, our study focuses on a specific example of public encounters that are formalized and more service-oriented. Hence, eligibility criteria and inter-personal interaction are much more pronounced than in other public services (e.g., ad-hoc police encounters, receiving school education). However, we would argue that even in these policy areas, more formalized encounters like the ones observed in this study are existent, for example, when parents apply for exemptions in school for their kids. More specifically, our results are likely to differ for services that are fully digitalized. Future research should thus investigate, how the lack of rapport and personal interaction affects the clients' ability to shape encounter outcomes.

Nevertheless, our typology provides an analytical frame for future studies. It would be relevant to investigate which circumstances, despite preparedness, affect the types of encounter and the clients' and employees' behavior that occur. One may assume that, with increasing administrative burden imposed (Burden et al., 2012)—and thus increasing costs of various types—clients will be pushed toward the bottom quadrants of this typology because their levels of competence and confidence will no longer suffice. At the same time, Halling and Petersen (2024) emphasize that citizens communicating severe burdens may influence the willingness of caseworkers to support them, potentially reducing burdens if possible.

With an increasing number of public services provided digitally, it will be crucial to understand whether and how this development changes the client's perception of administration (Baekgaard et al., 2023; Madsen et al., 2022; Peeters & Widlak, 2018). Although synchronous communication channels are often provided to accompany fully digitized services, it is likely that the nature of role enactment in such settings changes considerably. Further research will be needed to apply an interaction-focused perspective to digital services in a public administration setting. Moreover, empirical investigations in other types of public encounters would serve as interesting arenas to examine the generalizability of our typology.

Finally, more communication-oriented studies are needed to investigate how communication changes over the course of encounter episodes (Bartels, 2013). Here, voice and video recordings of encounters can provide additional insights into strategic angles that clients and caseworkers take to initiate the described encounters shifts. Our data provide first starting points for that.

ENDNOTE

[1] There is a wide debate in the literature concerning the appropriate label to use when addressing the civic counterparts in public encounters. The debate mostly circles around the use of the terms "citizens" (Lucio, 2009; Roberts, 2021), "customers" (Fountain, 2001), and "clients." In this article, we use the concepts interchangeably, as the semantic implications are of less relevance in this research.

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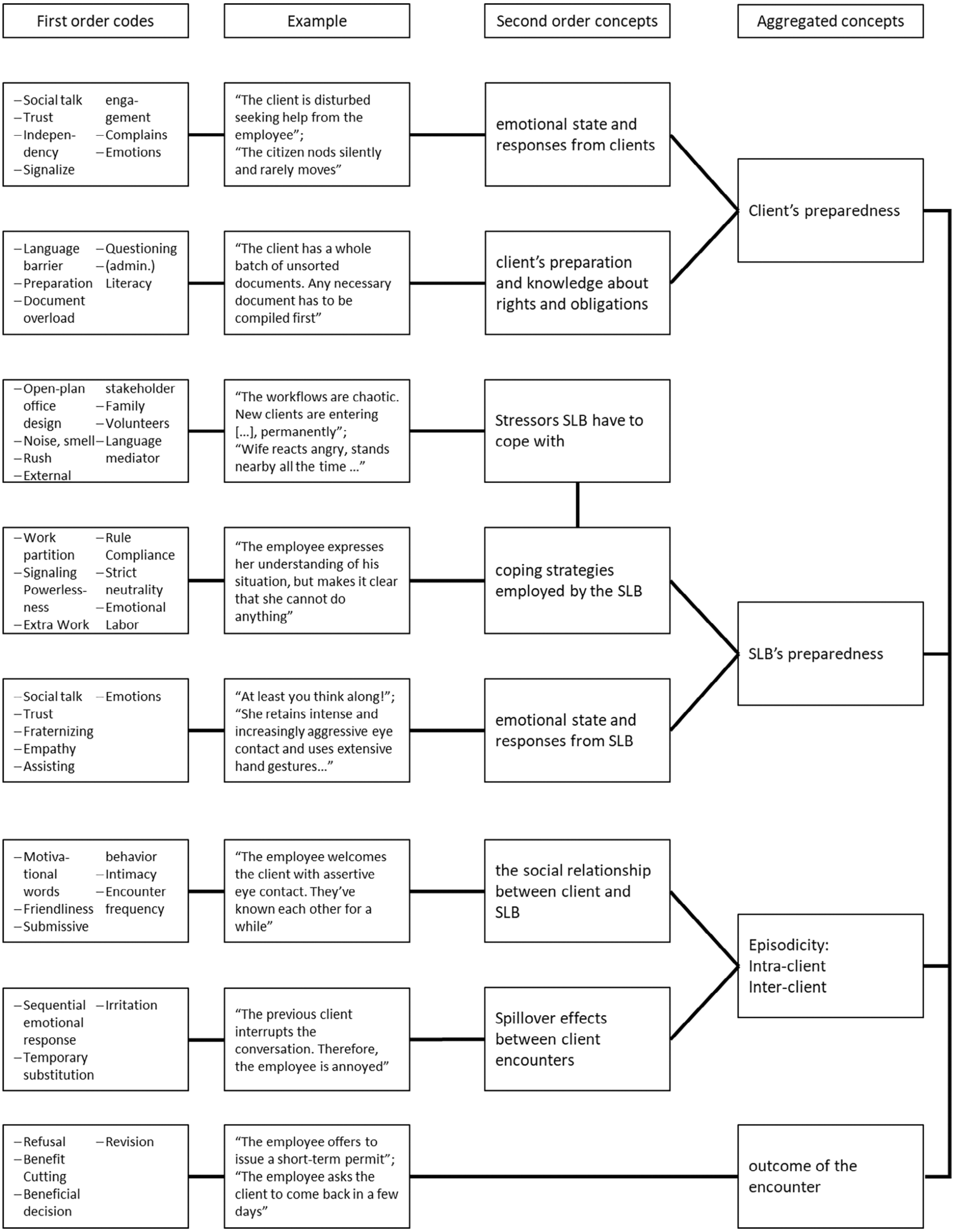
How to cite this article: Döring, Matthias, Nicolas Drathschmidt, and Stine Piilgaard Porner Nielsen. 2024. "It Takes (at Least) Two to Tango: Investigating Interactional Dynamics between Clients and Caseworkers in Public Encounters." *Public Administration Review* 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13816

APPENDIX 1: OVERVIEW OF OBSERVATIONS

No	Sex (emp.)	Age (emp.)	Sex (client)	Age (client)	Migrant	Client's preparedness	Employee's preparedness	Type of encounter	Episodicity
1	F	31–59	M	60+	No	High	Low	Advocacy → Agreement and Collaboration	n.a.
2	F	16–30	M	31–59	No	High	High	Agreement and Collaboration	Intra-client
3	F	16–30	M	60+	Yes	Low	Low	Conflict and Obstruction	n.a.
4	F	16–30	F	60+	Yes	High	Low	Advocacy	n.a.
5	F	31–59	M	31–59	Yes	Low	High	Case Processing	n.a.
6	F	31–59	M	31–59	No	Low	High	Case Processing	n.a.
7	F	31–59	M	n.a.	n.a.	High	High	Agreement and Collaboration	Intra-client
8	F	31–59	F	31–59	No	High	Low → High	Case Processing → Agreement and Collaboration	Intra-client
9	F	16–30	F	31–59	No	Low	High	Case Processing	n.a.
10	F	31–59	M	60+	No	Low	High	Case Processing	Intra-client
11	F	16–30	F	31–59	Yes	High	Low	Advocacy	n.a.
12	F	16–30	M	31–59	No	Low	High	Case processing	n.a.
13	F	16–30	M	31–59	Yes	Low	High	Case processing	n.a.
14	F	31–59	M	31–59	Yes	High	High	Agreement and Collaboration	Intra-client
15	F	31–59	M	31–59	Yes	Low	High	Conflict and Obstruction → Case Processing	n.a.
16	F	16–30	M	31–59	Yes	High	Low	Advocacy	n.a.
17	F	31–59	M	60+	No	Low	Low → High	Conflict and Obstruction → Case Processing	Inter-client
18	F	16–30	M	31–59	No	Low	Low	Conflict and Obstruction	n.a.
19	F	31–59	M	31–59	No	High	High	Agreement and Collaboration	Intra-client
20	F	16–30	F	60+	No	High	High	Agreement and Collaboration	Intra-client
21	F	31–59	M	16–30	Yes	High	High	Agreement and Collaboration	Intra-client
22	F	31–59	M	16–30	Yes	Low	High	Case Processing	Inter-client
23	F	31–59	F	31–59	Yes	Low → High	High	Agreement and Collaboration	n.a.
24	M	31–59	M	31–59	No	High	High	Agreement and Collaboration	n.a.
25	F	31–59	F	31–59	Yes	Low	Low	Conflict and Obstruction	Intra-client
26	M	31–59	F	31–59	Yes	Low	High	Case Processing	n.a.
27	M	31–59	M	31–59	No	Low	Low → High	Conflict and Obstruction → Case Processing	n.a.
28	M	31–59	M	n.a.	No	Low	High	Case Processing	n.a.
29	M	31–59	M	16–30	Yes	Low → High	High	Advocacy → Agreement and Collaboration	n.a.
30	F	16–30	F	31–59	Yes	High	Low	Advocacy	n.a.
31	F	16–30	M	31–59	Yes	Low	High	Case Processing	Inter-client
32	F	16–30	F	31–59	Yes	High	Low →High	Advocacy → Agreement and Collaboration	Inter/intra-client
33	F	60+	f	60+	Yes	Low → High	High	Case Processing	n.a.
34	F	60+	F	31–59	Yes	Low	High	Case Processing	n.a.
35	F	60+	F	31–59	No	High	High	Agreement and Collaboration	Intra-client
36	F	16–30	F + M	60+	Yes	Low	Low	Conflict and Obstruction	n.a.
37	F	16–30	F	31–59	No	High	High	Agreement and Collaboration	n.a.
38	F	31–59	M	60+	Yes	Low	High	Case Processing	n.a.
39	F	31–59	M	16–30	Yes	High	Low → High	Advocacy → Agreement and Collaboration	n.a.
40	F	31–59	F	16–30	Yes	Low	High	Case Processing	n.a.
41	F	31–59	F	60+	No	High	Low	Advocacy	n.a.
42	F	31–59	M	31–59	Yes	High	High	Agreement and Collaboration	n.a.
43	F	31–59	F	60+	Yes	Low	High	Case Processing	Intra-client

APPENDIX 2: CODING SCHEME



APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Please describe the organizational structure of your social administration agency.
2. What are the main services you are providing? Which of these include direct citizen interaction?
3. Could you please describe the health situation of your colleagues? To what extent are mental health issues relevant?
4. What are the most dominant mental strains (stress, burnout, anxiety, etc.)?
5. What are, in your opinion, the main causes of these strains?
6. How and to what extent do these mental health problems stem from situations with client interaction?
7. Which divisions and units of your organization are particularly affected by these problems?
8. To what extent do certain client groups play a particular role in stressful situations?
9. Please elaborate to what extent are clients' knowledge and skills/resp. competencies a source of frustration and aggressive behavior?
10. Are clients with high expertise and competence treated differently?
11. To what extent are certain groups of employees particularly affected or vulnerable?
12. What approaches have been taken in recent years to reduce (mental) health issues (spatial, structural, process-based, service-based)? To what extent have these been successful?
13. What approaches would you like to see? What other ideas would there be?

APPENDIX 4: OVERVIEW OF INTERVIEWS

Interview	Sex	Length (min)	Organization
1	M + F + F	71	1
2	M	40	1
3	M	60	2
4	M	75	2
5	F	46	3
6	F	56	3
7	F	55	3
8	M	75	3
9	F	72	3
10	F	62	3
11	F	170	3
12	M	105	3
13	F	60	4
14	F	72	4