

# Social Representations in Street-Level Bureaucracies – Production and Reproduction of Knowledge Within Public Administration

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## Abstract

The concept of street-level bureaucracy is central to understanding public administration as it pinpoints the role of individual civil servants in the realisation of policy. One issue in need of further illumination is that of knowledge production and reproduction in street-level bureaucracies. This paper seeks to examine these issues by linking street-level bureaucracy with the theory of social representations. Social representations offer a social-psychological understanding of how individuals make sense of their reality in day-to-day interaction. The overarching aim of the paper is to suggest a theoretical synthesis of these two perspectives – a synthesis that connects interaction at street-level with common-sense knowledge, as well as knowledge generated within organisations and among professionals. The synthesis is demonstrated by presenting an analysis of social representations of unemployment among two groups of street-level bureaucrats.

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## Introduction

In his seminal work, Michael Lipsky (1980/2010) argued that street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) possess relatively extensive discretion in providing public services – a degree of autonomy that arises due to conflicting goals and practices, as well as the limited possibilities supervisors have to monitor the work of SLBs. Lipsky's work has led to an extensive body of research focusing on issues such as managerial practices, governance, and moral reasoning (cf. Brodtkin 2012; Zacka 2017). One aspect that needs further illumination, however, is the production and reproduction of knowledge within street-level bureaucracies. This aspect, i.e. how knowledge develops and what kind of knowledge that is developed in certain occupational and/or administrative contexts, is pivotal for understanding the background of decisions and actions made within public administration. There is a large body of research concerning professional groups and knowledge development (cf. Abbott 1988; Freidson, 2001; Etzioni 1969). Most SLBs however, do not belong to a professional group with an institutionalised body of knowledge which limit the usefulness of such theoretical approaches when analysing public administration contexts. Rather, SLBs knowledge is better understood as a bricolage of sources such as policies, organisational and occupational cultures, and/or the lived experiences of SLBs. Such an understanding of knowledge raises important questions. How do SLBs perceive their tasks and their target group? How does knowledge come about in street-level bureaucracies? These questions are important when considering the

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afore-mentioned discretion, as well as the extensive power that SLBs have over citizens - not least for citizens in difficult situations such as unemployment or health related issues. There is often limited transparency within street-level bureaucracies (Lipsky 1980/2010) – a better understanding of knowledge production and reproduction can increase this transparency.

One theoretical perspective that can deepen the understanding of knowledge, and knowledge production, at street-level is social representations. Social representations shed light on how individuals internalise representations in their daily interactions as members of sub-groups of society as well as of society at large, in order to make sense of the world (Moscovici 2000; Wagner & Hayes 2005). The emphasis on day-to-day interaction has made the occupational domain a central analytical focus in the study of social representations. Organisational cultures as well as professional norms are likely to generate particular representations that are produced and reproduced among workers. SLBs such as health professionals, therapists and prison officers have therefore been thoroughly studied in relation to social representations (Moscovici 1961/2008; Flick et. al. 2002; Lindberg 2005). However, thus far there has been few attempts to explicitly integrate social representations and street-level bureaucracy (Bruhn 2009). This paper proposes a way of doing so.

With roots in social psychology, the theory of social representations can be used to unpack the issue of knowledge production and reproduction in relation to the complex interaction between individual SLBs and their context. The overarching aim of the paper is to suggest a theoretical synthesis of these two perspectives – a synthesis that connects interaction at street-level with common-sense knowledge, as well as knowledge generated within organisations and among professionals. Hence, we aim to describe how the theory of social representations can enrich the analysis of knowledge production and reproduction in street-level bureaucracies. We also demonstrate how to integrate these perspectives by analysing data from a study of two groups of SLBs that carry out Swedish labour market policies: Social Assistance Officers and Public Employment Service Officers. In doing so, the paper also shows a way to study social representations.

The paper is structured as follows: a description of the theoretical perspectives (section one) is followed by a presentation a synthesis that combines the two theoretical strands (section two). The usefulness of the synthesis is demonstrated in section three by presenting an analysis of empirical data from a project on representations of unemployment.

## Section 1. Theoretical starting points

### Street-level bureaucrats as policymakers

In his work, Lipsky (1980/2010) sets out to understand how public officials, such as social workers, teachers, and health personnel, shape the outcome of policies in interaction with citizens. According to Lipsky, SLBs do not simply implement policies. Policies are often vague and founded upon conflicting goals. When performing their work, SLBs need to navigate among these ambiguities, as well as interpret rules and regulations in interaction with actual clients. Furthermore, management is often limited in the possibility it has to monitor the

work done by SLBs. These circumstances allow individual SLBs a certain autonomy or room for discretion in performing their duties. However, SLBs often face high caseloads as well as limited knowledge of clients. These predicaments generate a need to use coping strategies such as developing unauthorised individual routines and simplifying how clients and the environment are conceived. What Lipsky and subsequent scholars in this line of research show is that policy is not a top-down process, where SLBs are neutral means of policy implementation. Rather, SLBs must balance conflicting goals under the pressure of insufficient resources – a balancing act affected by how they conceive of their work and their clients.

### Social representations

The concept of social representations captures the human capacity for sense-making. This sense-making process draws upon collectively shared understandings of reality. The concept of social representations was developed by Sergé Moscovici (1961/2008) and builds upon Durkheim's work on collective representations. Durkheim saw collective representations as mediators between the individual and the surrounding world, in other words, the way in which a subject conceives of an object is mediated by representations. These representations are shared by members of a society and enable a common understanding of the world. By using the prefix social, Moscovici acknowledged the social-psychological aspects of knowledge. He argued that representations occur not only at a societal or collective level, but also at lower levels in sub-groups of society. Understanding representations in such a way, he defined a social representation as:

*“... an organized corpus of knowledge and one of the psychological activities that allow human beings to make psychological and social reality intelligible, to insert themselves into groups or day-to-day relations of exchange and to free the powers of their imagination” (Moscovici 1961/2008, xxxi, italics in original)*

As described in this quote, interacting on a daily basis and sharing tasks are likely to result in shared representations among people.

Because scholars of social representations focus on everyday interaction, it is not surprising that the occupational domain has been of interest for them. In his seminal work, Moscovici (1961/2008) studied the reception of psychoanalysis among different professional groups. Other scholars have subsequently sought to understand how occupational, professional and/or organisational affiliation affect social representations. This interest has been reflected in the concept of *professional representations*, a sub-concept of social representations that has attracted attention more recently (Piäser & Bataille 2011; Bruhn 2009; Bruhn, Nylander & Lindberg 2010). Following Durkheim's (1893/2014) conceptualisation of the division of labour, one can speak of a division of representations. As society becomes more specialised, people's representations become more dependent on their professional and/or occupational affiliation.

A central characteristic of research on social representations is its dual focus on content and structure. The former refers to the discursive elements of the representation. This shares characteristics with discourse analysis and concerns the symbolic use of words and expressions, such as positive or negative framing of an object (Flick & Foster 2011). However, social representation theory does not stop at analysing the discursive elements. It also acknowledges the structure, which refers to how elements are interconnected (Abric 1994). The underlying assumption is the need to analyse the depth of institutionalisation of the discursive elements by considering what elements of the representation that are central as opposed to peripheral. The central elements constitute the core of a representation, i.e. are fundamental and resistant to change. The peripheral elements are less stable, making them more likely to change.

A concept used to understand the structure of social representations is cognitive polyphasia. It focuses on the possibility for contradictory elements to co-exist in a representation (Jovchelovitch 2007). This co-existence generates ambiguities that can occur on an individual as well as group level. On an individual level, human knowledge is understood as dynamic. People do not have a single clear-cut understanding of the world. Rather, the emphasis given to different elements in a representation depends on the situation at hand. When applied to inter-individual processes, cognitive polyphasia concerns the fact that a group does not necessarily share one single representation, but can have contradictory, co-existing elements within the group. Hence, cognitive polyphasia can be used when analysing both individuals and groups.

In clinical social psychology, social representations have commonly been treated as an independent variable that shapes the understanding of reality (Moscovici 2000). In the social sciences more generally, however, social representations are often treated as dependent variables, i.e. as the outcome of one or several characteristics of the studied population. For instance, Danermark et. al. (2014) have studied how teachers' representations of social workers differ between different countries. The authors suggest that these differences are explained by the different institutional settings. The difference between these two ways of viewing social representations, as independent or dependent variables, lies in the level of inquiry. Using them as an independent variable, psycho-sociological scholars such as Moscovici (2000) aim to explain why certain behaviours come about (the behaviours are explained by representations). Scholars who study social representations as dependent variables focus on why specific representations come about. It is important to emphasise, however, that the difference between these approaches is a matter of analytical and methodological focus, rather than theoretical disagreement. Hence, representations can be studied as both a cause and a consequence. In this paper social representations are treated as dependent variables, as will be further discussed in the next section.

## Section 2. Studying social representations among street-level bureaucrats – a theoretical synthesis

The usefulness of synthesising the two perspectives discussed in this paper (social representations and SLBs) lies in the enhanced understanding it offers of

the production and reproduction of knowledge in street-level bureaucracies. The motivation for such an enhancement is the need to increase our understanding of the predicament in which SLBs find themselves, having incomplete information about clients, and the relatively extensive autonomy that SLBs possess. Because they continuously need to make decisions based on incomplete information, SLBs must fill in the knowledge gaps (cf. Lipsky 1980/2010) – but how does this “filling in” come about? From the perspective of social representations, it stems from shared representations of clients among SLBs. As described by Moscovici (2000), social representations are intertwined with people’s daily interactions. These interactions take place in a specific institutional framework – a framework conditioned by several factors. In this paper, we consider two types of factors, organisational and professional, to be of particular importance for representations in the occupational domain. Hence, SLBs perform their work in relation to social representations at organisational and professional levels – representations that help SLBs to understand their clients.

A key argument for Lipsky (1980/2010) is that SLBs adapt administrative categories that stem from policies. One might mistakenly interpret this claim as describing a process where SLBs inherit a single coherent discursive apparatus from policy. However, policies are often not harmonious, but filled with conflict. This is not least the case in human service organisations where multiple goals exist – goals that are desirable but often contradictory (cf. Matland 1995). This conflict-oriented understanding of policy implies that multiple representations are inherited by single policies. Following the concept of cognitive polyphasia, described above, it is likely that SLBs, individually as well as collectively – whether within a working group or a community of practice (cf. Wenger 1998) – possess self-contradictory understandings of the area in which they work. For instance, unemployment might simultaneously be represented as caused by a lack of motivation and by economic cycles. Hence, the social representations among SLBs are likely to reflect ambiguities in the policy area.

One can understand the organisational influence on representations in relation to both formal and informal aspects of organisations. Formal aspects concern rules and regulations inside organisations. It is important to emphasise that “inside” also refers to how street-level bureaucracies translate external rules, such as law and national policies, into internal rules. Understood in this way, street-level bureaucracies are mediators between national regulations and individual SLBs. This explains why different street-level bureaucracies – for instance different municipalities or local offices of the same national agency – might differ in their realisation of the same policy (cf. Raeymackers & Dierckx 2013). The informal aspects of organisations concern cultural and normative institutions (cf. Scott 2014) that, despite their non-legal status, shape organisations. It is important to emphasise that the influence of both formal and informal institutions is not absolute. Rather, local conditions and organisational history shape how organisations interpret and adapt to macro changes. Hence, one can talk about a local organisational culture (Martin 2001) that shapes the representations held by SLBs. This local culture relates to another informal aspect of organisational influence, namely peer-to-peer interaction, i.e. interaction between co-workers. Following the concepts of community of practice (Wenger 1998) and sense-making in organisations (Weick et. al. 2005),

we describe SLBs as developing representations while they work together, representations that are reproduced when more senior SLBs instruct their juniors. Hence, the organisational culture is reproduced because of interaction between co-workers.

Many SLBs are members of a professional or semi-professional group (cf. Abbott 1988; Etzioni 1969), which is why it is important to include an understanding of the role of professions in this theoretical synthesis. The influence of professions on representations relates to the institutionalisation through specialised education of bodies of knowledge that are maintained in professional praxis. Students training to be professionals learn certain representations grounded in a specific body of scientific knowledge, as well as values about the meaning of professionalism within a certain occupational group. For instance, aspiring physicists develop bio-medical representations of people, and aspiring psychologists develop psychological ones. These professional representations, stemming from education, can remain despite organisational affiliation. For instance, inter-organisational collaboration in highly professionalised sectors, such as health care, often tend to fail due to an inability to overcome different professional representations (Croker et. al. 2012).

According to Lipsky (2010), the organisation exerts greater influence than individual characteristics in street-level bureaucracies. For instance, he argues that the organisational setting and work environment are more central factors in shaping SLBs' attitudes towards clients than educational background and individual experiences. (For the link between attitudes and social representations, see Farr [1994]; Moliner and Tafani [1997] and Horwarth [2006]). He downplays the educational background and individual experiences of SLBs, claiming them to be of lesser influence than the organisation. We interpret this claim as chronological, in the sense that the present, i.e. the organisational effect on SLBs' attitudes, is superior to their previous experiences. One can, however, argue that this claim does not explain differences in attitudes between SLBs within the same organisations. As highlighted by scholars of inter-professional collaboration, such as Croker et. al. (2012), professional affiliation is a potential source of miscommunication between employees in the same organisation. Another objection to Lipsky's argument is that one does not need to make such a definite claim. Rather, we argue for the need to be open, both theoretically and analytically, to the potential influence of both organisational and professional affiliation. In some settings, Lipsky's claim might be correct, but in other settings, the influence of professional affiliation might be greater than he assumes.

Summing up, our argument is that the concept of social representations can shed light on knowledge, and knowledge production, within street-level bureaucracies. SLBs face different social representations of clients, representations that partly stem from organisational and professional practices. These representations help SLBs to make sense of their daily interactions, and not least situations where they have insufficient knowledge of clients.

The novelty of the theoretical synthesis presented here lies in the generic approach to understand knowledge in street-level bureaucracies. Much literature has been devoted for understanding knowledge in relation to professionals in public administration (Abbott 1988; Etzioni 1969). Such frameworks focus on

knowledge derived from formal education and professional practice. Others have localised causes of polyphasia at the level of individual conceptions based on moral philosophy (c.f. Zacka 2017). We do not reject the possible influence of professional education, moral conceptions, and other potential sources. On the contrary, social representation theory can be used as an overarching concept to include the mentioned perspectives by highlighting the nature of representations at individual and group level, as well as their origin inside or outside the organisation at hand. With this theoretical synthesis, the authors of this paper call for a wider understanding of knowledge production, and reproduction, when analysing street-level bureaucracies.

### Section 3. An empirical illustration – representations of unemployment

This section demonstrates the theoretical synthesis outlined in the previous section by presenting an analysis of data from a project studying social representations of unemployment. The surveyed population consists of two occupational groups in Sweden, Social Assistance Officers and Public Employment Service Officers. The question of interest for the analysis is the potential importance of organisational versus professional affiliation on the representations held by officers. As mentioned above, working life has been a central area of analysis for scholars of social representations. However, scholarly discussions on the relationship between organisational and professional affiliation are scarce. We seek to understand the potential influence on representations of belonging to the profession of social work while working in different organisations.

Both occupational groups work in the policy area of active labour market policies. This area has been the subject of continuous reconfigurations in several welfare states in recent years (Eleveld et. al. 2020). One aspect of these reconfigurations is the framing of social services as a component of labour market policies. In the Swedish case, studied in this paper, this aspect is manifested in the institutionalisation of municipally organised activation programmes aimed at increasing labour market entrance and re-entrance among social assistance claimants (cf. Nybom 2011). Meanwhile, Sweden has maintained extensive labour market programmes at a national level, delivered by the Public Employment Service (*Arbetsförmedlingen*). These processes have meant that social assistance claimants who are unemployed have contact with both a Social Assistance Officer and a Public Employment Service Officer – two types of officers whose tasks have come to overlap. From a wider perspective, the empirical study presented in this paper is motivated by the need to increase the understanding of how social assistance claimants are affected by having contact with two agencies. Does this client group encounter similar or different representations of unemployment at these two organisations? How do officers in the different organisations conceive of their client group? The answers to these questions can shed light on how the reconfigurations of labour market policies affect unemployed persons in need of social assistance.

The project also aims to understand the relevance of social workers in the deliverance of unemployment policies. As will be described below, social

workers comprise a common professional group in the Swedish activation context. The ethical code formulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (2014) emphasises social justice and social cohesion. Judging from earlier research, the so-called “activation turn” in Western welfare states, sometimes referred to as workfare or welfare-to-work, with its emphasis on conditionality, often comes into conflict with the ethical code of social workers (Kjørstad 2005; Raeymackers & Dierckx 2013). The project presented here seeks to understand the influence of professional affiliation on social representations.

To sum up, we aim to discern in this project social representations about unemployment among SLBs in two different types of organisations that serve social assistance claimants. Further, we study the influence of professional affiliation by distinguishing between social workers and non-social workers. We aim to reveal the structure, generality, and possible degree of commonness of social representations among SLBs, and possibly the presence of polyphasia within them. The outline of this section of the paper is as follows: first we present the studied context. Second, the design, data collection and analytical process are described. Finally, the findings are presented and contextualised in relation to the institutional setting.

### The studied context

The empirical case concerns two groups of Swedish SLBs: Social Assistance Officers and Public Employment Service Officers. Social assistance is provided by the 290 Swedish municipalities but regulated through the National Social Services Act. Social Assistance Officers have two tasks. The first is to assess eligibility for social assistance. The second is to help social assistance recipients to achieve self-provision either through (re-)entrance into the labour market or through national social insurance schemes. The latter task is of interest in so far as it frames social assistance as a labour market policy. Following a stepwise transformation of praxis, policies were revised in 1998 and 2008 to enable municipalities to require claimants to participate in municipal activation programmes to qualify for social assistance (SOU 2015:44). Activation policies differ between municipalities in terms of spending and content (Jacobsson et. al. 2017; Bergmark et. al. 2017). There is also the possibility of intra-municipal differences due to Social Assistance Officers’ discretion in assessing the need for activation (Nybom 2011). Still, for several years the general trend has been that municipalities are developing activation programmes for social assistance claimants.

The second group works at the Swedish Public Employment Service, a national authority with local offices in 106 municipalities. (Inhabitants in municipalities without a local office are served by an office in a neighbouring municipality). Apart from providing regular job-seeking assistance, their services include programmes such as skill enhancement, workplace training and occupational education. These services are delivered by officers at the authority as well as subcontracted organisations. In 2010, the authority took over the responsibility for integrating immigrants into the labour market from the municipalities. The Public Employment Service Officers also handle wage subsidy programmes accessible for persons in long-term unemployment. Clients



are assigned to caseworkers based on what programme they enter. The Public Employment Service Officers surveyed in this study are mainly working as case managers. Their task is to support individual clients in their search for employment.

The two occupational groups differ in terms of their degree of professionalisation. The role of Social Assistance Officer came to be a distinct occupation due to the specialisation of Sweden's social services. Up until the 1990s, policymakers emphasised the value of holistic social services, with cases being managed by a single, generalist social worker able to offer individualised services (Perlinski et. al. 2010). In practice, however, the social services became more specialised during the 1980s. This development accelerated in the 1990s, spurred on by policymakers who emphasised accountability and professionalisation through specialisation. Social Assistance Officer was often the first occupational category to be detached from the other social services (Bergmark & Lundström 2007). The assessment of eligibility for social assistance has also been made more standardised by national legislation, with the ambition to reduce sub-national differences and thereby increase accountability (Giertz 2004). Another shift that occurred during the same period was the growth of local activation programmes. Social Assistance Officers often have the task of assessing the need for such a programme among claimants (Nybom 2011). Taken together, Social Assistance Officer is a relatively novel occupation with roots in the social work profession.

In comparison, Public Employment Service Officers do not have a clear professional foundation, which is indicated by practitioners' diverse educational backgrounds and limited discretion. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the role of Public Employment Service Officers was often to serve as a clerk administrating the announcement of job openings (SOU 1990:31). There is limited historical data concerning educational background. However, in 2009 the agency decided that applicants must have minimum of three years of higher education to be hired as Public Employment Service Officers. Liljeberg and Söderström (2018) show a steep increase in education during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, from 52% with at least two years of tertiary education in 2003 to 78% in 2015. No single academic subject is preferred by the agency, which is reflected in the diversity of educational background among Public Employment Service Officers (as shown in the following section). In parallel to the increase in education, the agency has placed more emphasis on accountability in terms of predictability and standardisation (Liljeberg & Söderström 2018).

Our motivation for comparing these two groups comes from the gradual emergence of an overlap in their tasks and target groups. Since the 1980s, the previous dominance of support provision through national social insurance schemes has been contested. The number of unemployed persons in need of social assistance has increased, not least since the financial crisis of the early 1990s (Bergmark & Bäckman 2004; Salonen 1993). The ambition among several municipalities to decrease social assistance rates by developing local activation programmes is also an important motivation. During the 2010s, the Public Employment Service has come to focus on the long-term unemployed. This development has two causes. The first is the rise in non-public digital services, which are mainly used by more well-established jobseekers to find employment.

The second is the increase in the proportion of unemployed persons with limited employability. This change in the composition of the unemployed is in part caused by high employment rates among persons able to work, which means that the average skill and experience level among the unemployed has decreased. Another explanation of the change in composition is the influx of low-skilled migrants during the 21st century. Taken together, these developments have led the Public Employment Service to focus its support on unemployed persons far from the labour market (Bergström & Calmfors 2018). This change in composition is vital for this study. Unemployed persons far from the labour market are often not eligible for unemployment benefits, due to lack of work experience (in Sweden), and therefore need social assistance. Because the Public Employment Service has come to focus on unemployed persons far from the labour market, the overlap in client groups between the Public Employment Service and Social Assistance offices has increased in recent years. Scholars, politicians, and officials have criticised the overlap in client groups, since it makes the division of responsibilities between the agencies unclear (Panican & Ulmestig 2017). Among other things, this criticism has resulted in national efforts to enhance collaboration between the Public Employment Service and municipalities. These efforts include both financial stimulation, such as collaborative association grants (Andersson 2016), and soft-power initiatives, such as encouraging agreements with municipalities and local branches of the Public Employment Service. Despite these efforts, it seems as though problems with collaboration remain. One aspect, mentioned by Panican and Ulmestig, concerns the differences in interpretation of unemployment and ability to work. One motivation for the empirical study presented in this paper is the need to further understand these interpretations. Following the theoretical synthesis described above, the differences described by Panican and Ulmestig can be understood as conflicting representations held by officers in the different agencies.

## Material and method

The project presented here uses a mixed-method design. This choice of approach reflects Abric's (1994) emphasis on the use of different types of data sources to investigate social representations in terms of both content and structure. In this paper, the analysis will mainly focus on the quantitative data. The qualitative data will be used to contextualise the quantitative findings. This section presents the procedures used for collecting and analysing the data.

### *Quantitative data*

The quantitative data was collected through a web-based questionnaire distributed via e-mail to the two groups of officers in Spring 2017. Concerning the municipal Social Assistance Officers, the sample covered 11 out of 12 municipalities in a Swedish county (the same county where the qualitative data was collected). The twelfth municipality was excluded because the public authority did not respond when asked to deliver contact information to its Social Assistance Officers. An additional municipality located in a neighbouring county was added to enable comparisons between larger cities. The response rate among the Social Assistance Officers was 58.8% (n=90 of 153). Four of the responding

officers worked in smaller municipalities with less division of labour; these officers also worked as case managers for persons with addiction problems. Concerning the Public Employment Service Officers, the survey was sent to the five local offices that serve the 12 included municipalities. The response rate among the Public Employment Service Officers was 48.9% (n=215 of 439). Out of these, 16 respondents were excluded since they did not work as Public Employment Service Officers but had other tasks at the offices.

The characteristics of the employees differ between the two types of organisations. The Social Assistance Officers are more heavily dominated by female respondents. The average age of the Social Assistance Officers is lower than that of the Public Employment Service Officers. Number of years working in the organisation also differs between the two groups. Among Social Assistance Officers, 75.6% have a degree in social work, i.e. a university diploma awarded after completing three and a half years of academic studies. 18.9% have a bachelor's degree in behavioural science. The Public Employment Service Officers have higher degree of heterogeneity concerning education. The vast majority have some sort of university degree in the social sciences, for example a bachelor's degree in behavioural science (23.6%), human relations (10.6%) or social work (8%), however 12% do not have any higher education. In conclusion, at the aggregate level the Social Assistance Officers are more often younger females with fewer years working in the organisation and a high degree of homogeneity concerning education. The Public Employment Service Officers are generally older, have more experience, and display greater heterogeneity concerning education.

*Table 1. Respondents' characteristics.*

	Social Assistance Officers N=90	Public Employment Service Officers N=215
Female/Male/Other	87.8/12.2/0%	63.1/36.9/0%
Mean age (SD)	35 (12)	45 (10)
Mean years worked (SD)	3.6 (6.7)	8.6 (8.2)
Degree in social work	75.5%	8.1%
No degree in social work	24.5%	91.9%

The original questionnaire contains four sections, two of which are used in the subsequent analysis. The first concerns background questions such as education, age, and years worked. The other section includes free associations (cf. Danermark et al. 2014), where the respondents were given the word, *unemployment*, and asked to write up to five words or sentences concerning what they associated it with. The respondents were also asked to assess if the

associations were negative, neutral, or positive on a five-grade scale (“Very negative”, “Negative”, “Neutral”, “Positive”, “Very positive”).

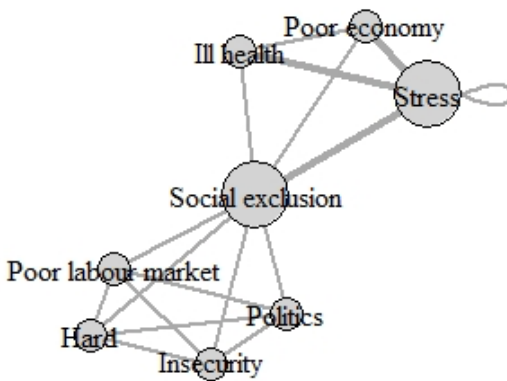
To enable analysis, the associations were coded into categories. For instance, words or expressions such as *economy*, *money* and *economic assistance* was coded into the category *economy*. This procedure reduces the number of categories to a level where it feasible to make comparisons. The coding was done by the first author and validated by the other authors. In the second step, the recoded associations were analysed using network analysis. The network analysis was carried out in igraph (Csardi & Nepusz 2006) and plotted in ggplot2 (Wickham 2016) – both of which are parts of the programming language R (R Core Team 2014). The underlying assumption of the analysis is that all associations should be handled as nodes. Edges or ties between the nodes represent intra-individual connections. Hence, the thickness of an edge represents how common it is that an individual respondent associates to both categories. These procedures are illustrated in Table 2 and Figure 1.

Table 2. Fictitious associations.

Input:

ID 1	Poor economy	Ill health	Social exclusion	Stress	Stress
ID 2	Social exclusion	Poor labour market	Insecurity	Politics	Hard

Figure 1. Network graph of data from Table 2



The input table, Table 2, displays data of two fictitious respondents (ID1 and ID2). As is apparent in Figure 1, the two rows result in eight nodes. The nodes *social exclusion* and *stress* are twice as large as the other nodes because they occur two times in Table 2. The thickness of the edges (the lines between the nodes) represents the commonality of the edges. The thicker the edge, the more common the connection. The looped edge that begins at, and returns to, *stress* indicates that a respondent, in this case ID 1, made more than one association belonging to the same category. As with the other edges, the thickness of a looped edge indicates the prevalence of intra-individual associations, in this case

how many respondents associate to multiple ideas subsumed under the category of *stress*.

We constructed three network graphs for each organisation, one for all officers in the organisation, a second for officers with a degree in social work and a third for officers who have not completed a degree in social work. These six graphs were analysed in terms of both structure and content, in accordance with the social representation theory, by focusing on how different nodes are interconnected and on the discursive content of the associations. The graphs presented here are limited to representing only the most frequently occurring associations and are therefore referred to as maximum trees (Manchaiah et. al. 2019). The threshold value is set to 5%, meaning that edges that occur in 5% or more of all associations are included in the graphs. In this way, we study the most central elements, the core of the representations (cf. Abric 1994).

### *Qualitative data*

The qualitative data consists of twelve semi-structured interviews with officers and managers working either at a Social Assistance office or at a local Public Employment Service office. The interviews were conducted during 2018–2019. The qualitative data also includes a total of 28 hours of observations of collaborative meetings between managers and/or officers at offices in the two municipalities. Interviews were carried out in two of the surveyed municipalities. One is a larger city in terms of population, with approximately 150,000 inhabitants. The other municipality is smaller in terms of population, with approximately 15,000 inhabitants. At the time of data collection, both municipalities had an ongoing collaboration with the Public Employment Service.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the observation of meetings, the observing researcher took notes with pen and paper. These notes were rewritten on a computer directly after the meetings. The transcribed interviews and rewritten field notes were analysed and coded in NVivo to discover themes and patterns in the data. Following the mixed-method design of the project, it was also possible to further situate the quantitative findings by comparing them to the qualitative data.

### **Results**

This section begins with an analysis of officers' associations to the word *unemployment*, with a dual focus on structure and content. First, the representations are analysed at an organisational level by comparing the two agencies. Professional affiliation, in terms of being a social worker, is then added as a moderating variable. After the analysis of the associations has been presented, it is contextualised in relation to the qualitative data as well as to the institutional setting.

#### *Representations at the organisational level*

Figures 2–3 present maximum trees of associations at the organisational level, i.e., without considering professional affiliation. None of the graphs display any clear clusters in terms of structure. Rather, the associations are relatively uniform

in each respective organisation. The interpretation of this relatively uniformity is that officers in both organisations tend to share a central core of elements – the elements represented in the figures.

Figure 2. Maximum tree of associations with the word unemployment – Public Employment Service Officers

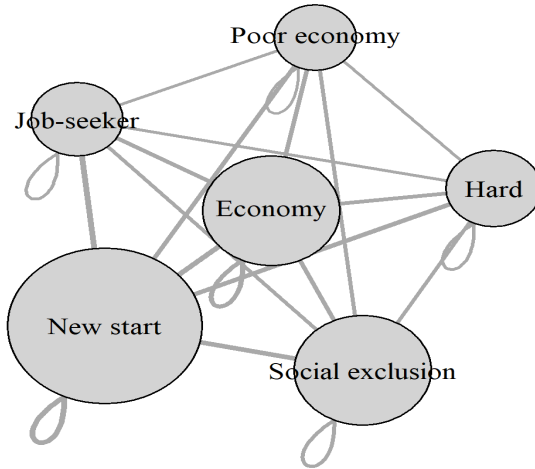
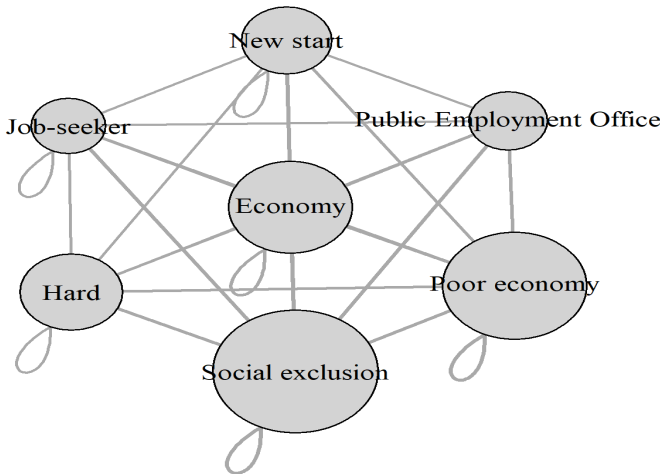


Figure 3. Maximum tree of associations with the word unemployment – Social Assistance Officers



In terms of content, the associations overlap between the organisations to a great extent. In total, six out of seven associations occur in both organisations. However, there are differences in their degree of emphasis. The most obvious difference concerns *new start*. As is apparent in Table 3, most officers in both organisations assessed this association as positive. However, as illustrated in figures 2 and 3, the association *new start* was much more common among the

Public Employment Service Officers. When looking at all nodes, i.e. also including the nodes occurring less than 5 %, *new star* represented 15.6% of the nodes among Public Employment Service Officers, as compared with 6.8% among Social Assistance Officers. The Social Assistance Officers, on the other hand, display a higher degree of negative associations such as *social exclusion* and *poor economy*, in comparison with the Public Employment Service Officers. These differences indicate that more Public Employment Service Officers emphasise a positive aspect of unemployment (*new start*) – when compared to the Social Assistance Officers. And in reverse, these differences also mean that the Social Assistance Officers tend to be more inclined to emphasise negative aspects of unemployment (*poor economy* and *social exclusion*) than the Public Employment Service Officers.

Table 3. Assessments of associations with the word unemployment made by the respondents. VN=very negative, N=negative, Neu=neutral, P=positive, VP=very positive

	Public Employment Service Officers					Social Assistance Officers				
	VN	N	Neu	P	VP	VN	N	Neu	P	VP
<b>New start</b>	0%	3%	10%	55%	32%	0%	0%	0%	83%	17%
<b>Poor economy</b>	67%	33%	0%	0%	0%	67%	20%	0,7%	0,7%	0%
<b>Economy</b>	25%	35%	24%	16%	0%	15%	25%	35%	15%	10%
<b>Social Exclusion</b>	73%	27%	0%	0%	0%	80%	15%	5%	0%	0%
<b>Hard</b>	52%	35%	10%	2%	0%	50%	38%	12%	0%	0%

The assessments of associations can be analysed further by comparing the means of all assessments between the two organisations. Very negative is coded as 1, negative as 2, and so on. The mean value of these recoded variables is analysed by using a T-test. The mean for Public Employment Service Officers is 2.59, as compared to 2.24 for Social Assistance Officers (p=0.0008). This result is in line with the difference in emphasis of positive versus negative associations described previously, where the Public Employment Service Officers emphasised more positive aspects of unemployment (*new start*) at the same time as the Social Assistance Officers tended more to emphasise the negative aspects of unemployment (*poor economy* and *social exclusion*)

#### *Influence of social work education*

In order to analyse the influence of having a degree in social work, we introduce professional affiliation – being a social worker, i.e., having a degree in social work – as a second dimension along with organisation. This procedure results in four network graphs. When looking at the Public Employment Service Officers

(figures 4–5), we see that the addition of a professional dimension does not yield any great differences. As can be seen by the sizes of the nodes, *New start* is still the dominant association among the two groups, followed by the negative association *social exclusion*. A difference between the groups is a greater emphasis on the negative association *poor economy* made by officers with a social work degree. In comparison, the associations among the officers who are not trained social workers included the more neutral association *job-seeker*.

Figure 4. Maximum tree of associations with the word unemployment – non-social workers at Public Employment Service offices

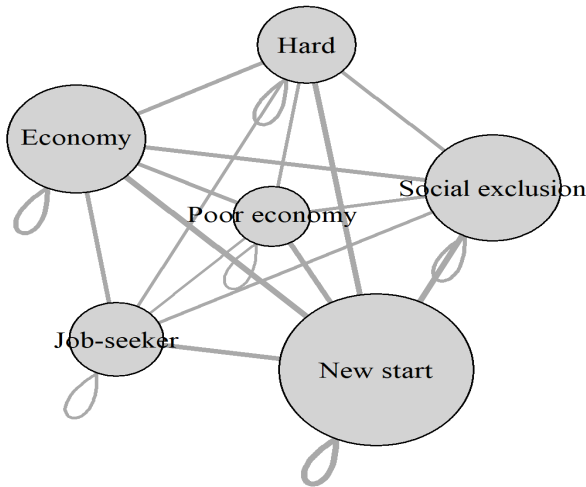


Figure 5. Maximum tree of associations with the word unemployment – social workers at Public Employment Service offices

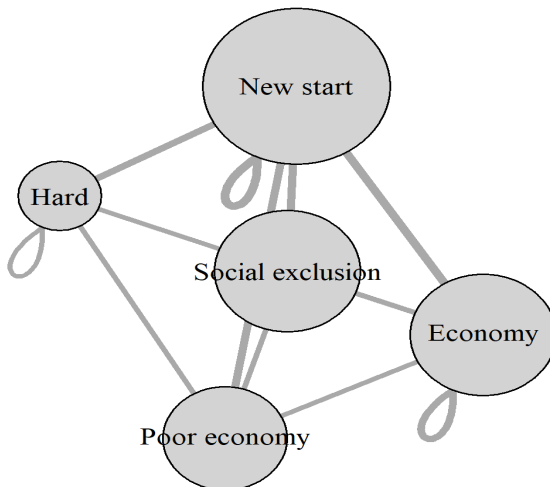




Figure 6. Maximum tree of associations with the word unemployment – non-social workers at Social Assistance offices

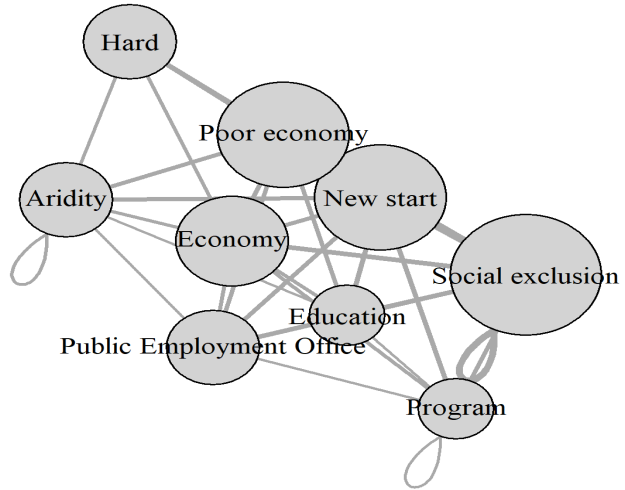
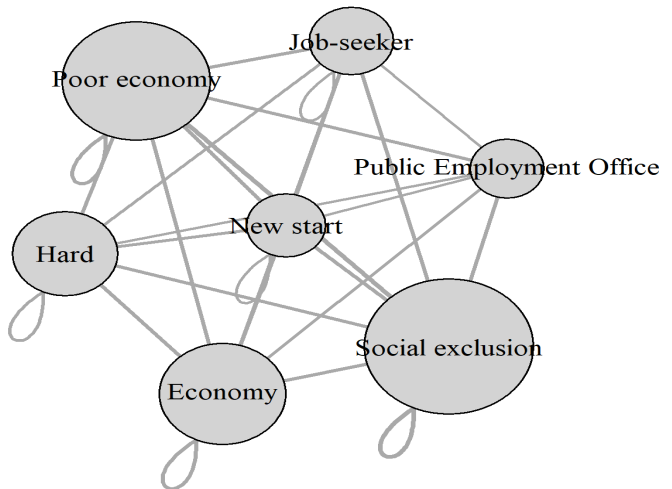


Figure 7. Maximum tree of associations with the word unemployment – social workers at Social Assistance offices



Among Social Assistance Officers, the inclusion of professional affiliation yields greater differences than among Public Employment Service Officers. The structure of representations becomes less coherent when comparing the social workers to non-social workers (figures 6–7). Among the latter, i.e. Social Assistance Officers without a social work degree, the number of associations is greater than among the social workers. Our interpretation of this difference is that, among the Social Assistance Officers, the non-social workers have a less uniform understanding of unemployment than the social workers. Further, non-

social workers put greater emphasis on a *new start*, and include more neutral associations such as *public employment office* and *programme*.

### *Contextualisation of the quantitative results*

The results from the network graphs capture the ambiguity of unemployment. On the one hand, unemployment can be a *new start*, an opportunity for people to progress in their career. On the other hand, there is a correlation between unemployment and negative outcomes such as social exclusion and poor economy. Hence, it is not surprising that the central cores of the studied representations are ambiguous. When looking at officers in their respective organisations, we find no distinct clusters, i.e., there are no clear indications of cognitive polyphasia (Jovchelovitch 2007). Instead of a situation where some officers are more or less inclined than others to emphasise solely the positive or negative aspects of unemployment, we find that single officers tend to represent unemployment as partly positive and partly negative. There are differences between the organisations, however. At an aggregated level, the Public Employment Service Officers have more positive associations with unemployment than the Social Assistance Officers. Why do these differences occur? A possible explanation lies in the different amounts of emphasis on coercive measures between the two organisations, which was stressed by several interviewees in both types of organisations. Clients have an individual action plan at both authorities, but the use of this instrument seems to differ between the types of organisations. For most clients at Public Employment Service offices, the main rule is that they ought to apply for jobs rather than participate in activation programmes. This rule is motivated by the risk of lock-in effects – which occur when clients prioritise programme participation instead of looking for work. As long as the clients submit a short review every month, summarising the jobs they have applied for, the Public Employment Service Officers assume that everything is going as planned for the clients. At the social assistance offices, on the other hand, there is a greater emphasis on monitoring. Clients apply for social assistance on a month-to-month basis. The Social Assistance Officers must assess whether the client has made an effort to find employment, which requires the officer to contact the client if the client does not submit information about his or her efforts. In some municipalities, officers meet their clients every month and handle the application in order to monitor and assess the efforts made by the client. Further, mandatory participation in activation was considered an important means to prevent them from becoming passive recipients of social benefits, according to many of the interviewed Social Assistance Officers and their supervisors. The two differences, regarding the monitoring of effort and mandatory participation, are possible explanations of why the Public Employment Service Officers had more positive associations with unemployment. They do not work under the same constraints, and they allow clients a relatively higher degree of freedom. Social Assistance Officers work in an organisation with greater mistrust of clients, and where unemployment is partly explained by the inactivity of unemployed persons.

One of the most striking differences is the emphasis on unemployment as a *new start* among the Public Employment Service Officers. A possible explanation may lie in differences between the organisations' typical clients. The

Public Employment Service Officers meet a larger group of unemployed persons, not least people who have recently had a job and are eligible for unemployment benefits. In addition, a recurring claim among the interviewed Social Assistance Officers is that Public Employment Service tend to deny support to clients deemed as not able to work. This is confirmed by interviewed Public Employment Service Officers as well as their supervisors, who argue that their agency must consider who is employable from an employer perspective. Social assistance claimants who are rejected by the Public Employment Service are referred back to the social assistance office. Hence, Social Assistance Officers meet persons with greater needs in terms of work ability. For these clients, unemployment is not necessarily a *new start*, but often a permanent state of temporariness.

Concerning professional affiliation, the results were mixed. At the Public Employment Service offices, there were only minor differences between the two sub-groups. At the Social Assistance offices, the inclusion of the professional dimension resulted in two very different graphs. One possible explanation could be the existence of a rivalry between organisation and profession in terms of influence on representations. The Public Employment Service is a national agency with in-service training of officers, strictly regulated from the national headquarters as well as by the Ministry of Employment. In comparison, the social assistance offices are more decentralised, being controlled locally by municipalities. It might be the case that the representations stemming from social work thrive in weak organisational cultures. Expressed more generally, a strong organisational culture can be more influential than professional affiliation. On the other hand, differences in relation to professional affiliation may be found at other levels, for example concerning the approach to interaction with and treatment of individual clients, and how discretion is handled in unique cases. To reveal such differences in representations, a more thorough qualitative inquiry may be needed.

## Discussion

This paper has addressed the possibility to incorporate the concept of social representations into the study of street-level bureaucracies. Organisational and professional affiliation have been argued to affect how SLBs represent their work experiences and the predicaments they face when working with clients in day-to-day interaction. By using concepts from the theory of social representations, such as *core* and *cognitive polyphasia*, it is possible to study the degree of epistemic cohesion among SLBs. The analytical synthesis was demonstrated by analysing social representations of unemployment. By following the theoretical synthesis presented in this paper, we found that organisational affiliation was relevant to understanding the relative levels of emphasis of the representational elements. The influence of professional affiliation was mixed, which can possibly be explained by the difference in organisational culture between the social services and employment services, with professional affiliation being more influential among Social Assistance Officers.

The empirical demonstration in this paper relies heavily on quantitative analysis. Also, for the sake of space, the empirical analysis was limited to the

central core of representations (cf. Abric 1994). However, it is important to emphasise that the choice of focus, method, and design presented here is only one of several possible approaches when working on the basis of the theoretical synthesis. The concept of social representations is versatile, in that it lends itself to qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods of inquiry (Flick & Foster 2011; Doise et. al. 1993). This versatility is passed on to the theoretical synthesis presented in this paper. The synthesis can be combined with different methods of empirical inquiry. Acknowledging the methodological breadth of public administration research (Nesbit et. al. 2011) our ambition is for the synthesis to connect scholars studying similar issues from different angles under a shared theoretical concept.

An issue that has been discussed extensively during the 21st century is the growth of collaborative and network-based public administration. In modern states, there is an extensive division of labour between agencies. Policymakers as well as scholars have sought to overcome such divisions by enhancing collaboration between public as well as non-governmental organisations (Batory & Svensson 2019). The outcomes of these collaborative efforts are contested. While some argue that they have positive effects, others have emphasised the new problems that arise. One obstacle is related to communication failures across organisational boundaries (O’Leary & Vij 2012; Germundsson & Danermark 2012). The synthesis can be used to further understand this obstacle by highlighting the connection between representations and communication. If SLBs in different organisations have widely diverging social representations, this will undermine communication between them, making collaborative efforts more difficult and likely to fail.

The strength of the presented synthesis is the expanded understanding it offers of knowledge in street-level bureaucracies. Knowledge is not a streamlined collection of assumptions, but something dynamic and sometimes self-contradictory. In the empirical analysis, this conceptualisation of knowledge was demonstrated in the ambivalent representations of unemployment among the SLBs. Our hope is that the presented synthesis can be used to better understand how competing representations within and between organisations and professions contribute to, and are a part of, the production and reproduction of knowledge in street-level bureaucracies. Considering the impact that such agencies have on people, not least disadvantaged groups, it is crucial to further open the black-box of street-level bureaucracy to uncover the processes that affect individuals’, professionals’ and organisations’ perceptions of clients and their needs.

Drawing on recent developments in behavioural public administration, Moynihan (2018) calls for a division of labour between micro and macro public administration. Another possibility would be to develop approaches that connect micro interaction with meso and macro processes. This paper does the latter by suggesting an understanding of how SLBs’ daily interactions are intertwined with their organisations and professions, as well as with broader ideas and institutions at macro levels.

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The authors report no potential conflict of interest.

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