“That’s the System”: An Ethnographic and Theoretical Account of Bureaucratic Decoupling in Welfare Encounters

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Terminology

I use the term “client” in this dissertation. The term “client” has different meanings. It can either refer to a person who receives services or professional advice from a lawyer, accountant, advertising company, etc. It can also refer to a person who is a customer, or a person who is a dependent because of being under the patronage of another. Finally, it can refer to a person, in general, who receives a benefit from a government or municipal organization. This is the understanding that I use in this dissertation.[1] To be more specific, I use the term “client” to describe a person who receives a benefit and, therefore, is obliged to engage directly with frontline workers in a bureaucratic organization for a considerable period.

[1] In paper A, I use the term “citizen” when I refer to the participants in the utility jobs scheme. However, this is because of journal-specific issues and it does not have any analytical implications.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Street-level bureaucrats such as frontline welfare workers, police officers, and doctors are the "face" of public policy. Although situated at the ground-level of policymaking, frontline workers' actions become the realization of public policy (Lipsky 1980). How do clients then experience their encounters with frontline workers? Research shows that clients find it difficult to separate their perceptions of frontline workers from their perceptions of bureaucratic organizations and from government as a whole: In their view, they all become "one big system" (Soss 1999a).

This dissertation investigates a phenomenon of street-level bureaucratic organizations that captures clients' perceptions of their encounters with frontline workers. It is a phenomenon I define as "bureaucratic decoupling.[2]" Contrary to the assumption in public administration that clients identify the frontline workers with the policies they enforce, bureaucratic decoupling means that clients decouple frontline workers from their official bureaucratic role as ground-level policy-makers. In other words, bureaucratic decoupling means that clients place frontline workers *outside* of street-level bureaucratic organizations and do not consider them as the "face" of public policy. As a result, clients do not hold frontline workers accountable for their decisions. Bureaucratic decoupling is therefore a micro-level phenomenon of bureaucratic organizations with broader macro-level effects: It reshapes the distance between clients, bureaucratic organizations, and government. The conversation below is an example of this.

> *Field notes, 02.04.2019*
>
> #Oscar: "I've been sanctioned even though I've been here every day for two weeks … I don't get it … But that's the system, so there's nothing to do about it. I mean, I'm so angry that I'll slap someone if they just say 'boo.' I don't give a crap […] But it's kind of hard to know whether you're a client or just a number."

[2] The term "decoupling" is also associated with institutionalist theory where it refers, broadly speaking, to the creation and maintenance of gaps between formal policies and concrete organizational practices (see e.g. Meyer and Rowan 1977.). However, in this dissertation, bureaucratic decoupling is an individual-level concept that captures how clients perceive and act upon their perceptions of frontline workers in street-level organizations.

> #Simon: "You're probably a client here [at the activation site] and a number at the job center."
>
> #Ocar: "Yeah, I think so too because Sebastian [work supervisor at the activation site] is a nice guy, right, and the others [work supervisors] are also generally nice people."

The conversation takes place at a municipal activation site (officially called "utility jobs") in the outskirts of a large city in Denmark. At the site, clients perform manual work assignments every day for more than three months as an obligation to receive their cash-assistance benefits (in Danish, *kontanthjælp*). A group of frontline workers (officially called "work supervisors") plan and direct these assignments, and they make sure that clients are in attendance. The political aim of this form of activation is to teach clients the value of work and incentivize them to find employment (Ministry of Employment 2013).

Two things are relevant in this conversation. First, at the activation site, Oscar feels that he is treated as a "client"[3] because the work supervisors are, in his words, "nice guys." By contrast, at the job center (in Danish, *jobcenter*), he is treated as a "number." However, the activation site and the job center are not two separate institutions. They are part of the same organization – that is, the cash-assistance scheme. Yet, he views the work supervisors as being decoupled from and outside of the cash-assistance scheme. Second, this appears to be the reason why he does not assign blame to the work supervisors. He reports his attendance every day to the work supervisors, which they register. Therefore, the reason why he has received a financial penalty stripping him of one month's benefits is either because the work supervisors forgot to register his attendance or because they simply did not do so. However, he blames the system rather than the work supervisors.

This seems paradoxical. Based on the characteristics of the activation site, we should expect that it is a "most likely case" where clients would come to view the work supervisors as ground-level policy-makers and as the "face" of the cash-assistance scheme. First, there is an overt form of bureaucratic power at the site. Clients wear identical work clothes with the municipality's nametag. They are transported to and from work sites in municipal cars. They sit and wait for instructions in municipal buildings set up for the sole purpose of enforcing work obligations on clients. Second, the work supervisors have large discretionary power. They govern clients' everyday lives for five hours every day more or less at will. They decide when clients should change into their work clothes, when they get to take them off, when to work, and when to go

[3] In Danish, he uses the term "borger" (in English, *citizen*).

home. They exercise this discretion in the immediate face-to-face encounters with clients, and these encounters occur for 25 hours each week for a period of more than three months. Moreover, their ability to conduct their work is influenced by structural constraints such as the number of clients at the site (and their willingness to work) as well as the often lack of work assignments to find for clients to conduct. Therefore, these work supervisors fit the criteria for being a "street-level bureaucrat" and a ground-level policy-maker (Lipsky 1980, xvii).

Despite these conditions, this dissertation shows that clients do not come to view these frontline workers as the "face" of the cash-assistance scheme. Clients view these frontline workers as decoupled from their role as ground-level policy-makers in the cash-assistance scheme. I argue that the existing literature is unable to explain this because it lacks a thorough understanding of how clients interpret their encounters with frontline workers and their decision-making. Focusing on the client in street-level bureaucracies, this dissertation therefore constructs an ethnographic and theoretical account of bureaucratic decoupling.

1.1. Research question

This dissertation investigates the research question:

> "How do clients on social assistance experience the decisions of frontline workers during face-to-face encounters, and how do these encounters convey political lessons?"

By "political lessons" I mean the mechanism in which clients' perceptions formed during their encounters with frontline workers "spill over" into broader perceptions of bureaucratic organizations (Soss 1999a). I investigate this research question through participant observations of clients' face-to-face encounters with work supervisors at the activation site as well as interviews with clients at the site. Based on these observations, I now present two central findings that answer this research question.

First, face-to-face encounters in activation lead clients on social assistance to evaluate frontline workers both as "individuals" and as "decision-makers." As individuals, clients perceive frontline workers as nice, fun, and helpful. As decision-makers, clients acknowledge that frontline workers face multiple challenges beyond their control. Therefore, clients deflect responsibility away from frontline workers' decisions onto factors beyond their control (e.g. "the system"). Moreover, clients act upon this perception by behaving in ways that reduce the challenges they believe are beyond the control of frontline workers. In other words, they make frontline workers' job tasks as easy as possible.

Second, the political lesson of this is "bureaucratic decoupling." Clients do not view the frontline workers' decisions as the realization of public policy. Clients consider the frontline workers as decoupled from the bureaucratic organization – the cash-assistance scheme – that implements the policy of cash-assistance. Therefore, the main political lesson is not a "one big system" perception. The main political lesson is that frontline workers are outside of this system.

In the dissertation, I theorize the causes, processes, and outcomes of bureaucratic decoupling. This is based on ethnographic data consisting of more than 370 hours of fieldwork at the activation site over a period of a year as well as 62 recorded interviews with both clients and frontline workers.

1.1.1. Causes of bureaucratic decoupling

To understand why bureaucratic decoupling occurs, it is necessary to look at the nature of face-to-face encounters in activation. I argue that four features govern the face-to-face encounters between clients and work supervisors. Overall, these four features allow the work supervisors to dissociate themselves from their role as decision-makers. This causes the clients to decouple them and place them outside of the cash-assistance scheme.

- **Feature 1:** The work supervisors are able to blur the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients. This enables the work supervisors to present themselves as compassionate individuals rather than decision-makers and representatives of a bureaucratic organization.
- **Feature 2:** The work supervisors hold a "deep discretion." This enables them to enforce the rules leniently, for example by allowing clients to take multiple breaks and leave early. The work supervisors therefore leave the impression that they are acting on behalf of clients rather than the cash-assistance scheme.
- **Feature 3:** There is a presence of a "public." Surrounded by multiple clients at once, clients assert themselves and demand that the work supervisors justify their decisions. To retain an image of themselves as compassionate individuals, the work supervisors deflect responsibility away from themselves onto factors beyond their control.
- **Feature 4:** These encounters occur over a long period of time. This means that lessons learned at the activation site leave a significant impression on clients.

1.1.2. Processes of bureaucratic decoupling

First, these four features of the face-to-face encounter teach clients that the work supervisors have an individual identity outside of their role as bureaucratic decision-makers. As a result, they think of the work supervisors as nice, fun, and helpful. Yet, as the work supervisors deflect responsibility away from their decisions, clients also form an image of them as decision-makers. They learn that the work supervisors' decisions are determined by factors beyond their control. This makes clients refrain from criticizing them and holding them accountable for their decisions. Second, this leads clients to adjust their behavior in ways that reduce the challenges that determine the work supervisors' decisions. For example, they avoid asking too many questions, and they teach other clients how to behave in ways that do not create any challenges for the work supervisors.

1.1.3. Outcomes of bureaucratic decoupling

As clients think of the work supervisors as individuals decoupled from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers, they develop very diffuse and fragmented views on how decisions are made, by whom, and with what purpose in the cash-assistance scheme. For example, clients come to view the cash-assistance scheme as a "top-down system" where frontline workers' decisions are always subjected to the will of some diffuse higher authority. They also come to view the cash-assistance scheme as a "mechanical system" where computers, rather than human beings, are the primary decision-makers.

Although I base these findings on empirical data from a single ethnographic site, the findings identified here can be transferred to other bureaucratic organizations. In other words, the four features of the face-to-face encounters that lead clients to decouple the work supervisors are not case-specific descriptions: They are general theoretical concepts that can be used to explain clients' interpretation of encounters with frontline workers and their decision-making. In the final chapter, I argue that bureaucratic organizations such as the police and prisons display a set of characteristics that make it highly likely that scholars will also find bureaucratic decoupling there.

1.2. Implications and relevance of the dissertation

What are the implications of placing frontline workers outside of bureaucratic organizations and dissociate them from the policies they enforce? I argue that bureaucratic decoupling has three implications.

The first implication is perceptual. The analysis shows that the work supervisors have large discretion in their management of clients every day. They use this discretion to make clients wait or perform seemingly useless work assignments. Yet, as clients do not think of them as bureaucratic decision-makers, they do not hold them accountable for their decisions. Instead, they deflect responsibility onto a diffuse "system" in which they are unable to dissect who makes decisions and how.

The second implication is behavioral. As clients believe that the work supervisors face a number of challenges that are beyond their control, they adjust their behavior to make the work supervisors' job as easy as possible. However, they often adjust their behavior in ways that either reduce their own efficacy (by avoiding asking questions) or defeat the objective of utility jobs (by working passively).

Finally, the results have implications for citizenship. When clients do not think they are dealing with bureaucratic decision-makers, the activation site is consequently not an arena in which clients exercise their social rights (Marshall 1964). Moreover, the analysis shows that their encounters in activation lead clients to become skeptical of administrative procedures that protect their rights as citizens. Compared to how the work supervisors interact with clients, procedures for how to appeal decisions come to appear complicated – and even as hidden ways of keeping frontline workers employed at the expense of clients.

The results are relevant[4] to scholars in public administration and sociology as well as scholars focusing on policy feedback and political learning effects. Studies in public administration of street-level bureaucracies have primarily researched the actions and decision-making of frontline workers. These stud-

[4] The results are also relevant to studies on the "lived experiences" of workfare programs (see e.g. Patrick 2014; 2017; Mcintosh and Wright 2019; Feldman and Schram 2019; Garthwaite 2014). This scholarship – broadly speaking – focuses on the consequences of workfare, for example, whether it increases the employability of social assistance recipients. However, the aim of this dissertation is to construct a new and more general theory for how clients perceive their encounters with frontline workers in street-level organizations. Therefore, I engage with studies within the scholarship of street-level bureaucracy, sociology, and law as these scholarships address more generally the interactions between clients and frontline workers. If the reader is interested, I engage with studies in the scholarship on the "lived experiences" of workfare programs in an article, which is not included in this dissertation: Hansen, Lass S., & Nielsen, Mathias H. (2021). Working Less, Not More in a Workfare Programme: Group Solidarity, Informal Norms and Alternative Value Systems Amongst Activated Participants. *Journal of Social Policy*, 1-17 (*first view*).

ies show that frontline workers' decision-making is influenced by political factors, such as governance structures (Brodkin 2011; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a), or individual-level factors, such as their identities and work trajectories (Dubois 2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Watkins-Hayes 2009). Although these studies show that their decisions have consequences for clients – e.g. discrimination (Fassin 2013; Schram et al. 2009) – few studies explore how clients view frontline workers' decisions. This dissertation contributes to this scholarship by focusing on the clients.

Studies on the client in street-level bureaucracies often explain clients' perceptions either by focusing on the design of policies (Soss 2000) or the power asymmetry between the client and the frontline worker (Dubois 2010). This dissertation shows that both power asymmetries and policies are revoked in the face-to-face encounters between clients and frontline workers, leading clients to decouple frontline workers. This dissertation therefore explains clients' perceptions by theorizing the features that govern their face-to-face encounters with frontline workers.

The results are also relevant to scholars in micro-sociology. I contribute to this scholarship by conceptualizing new forms of client strategies. Although some studies in public administration research client strategies (see e.g. Dubois 2010; Bisgaard 2020; Nielsen, Nielsen, and Bisgaard 2020), it is within micro-sociology that the greatest advancements have been made. These studies show how clients circumvent the demands of frontline workers, through various tactical measures, such as changing their appearance (Stuart 2016b), their way of presenting their life situation (Mik-Meyer and Silverman 2019), or by making secondary adjustments (E. Goffman 1961a). The results presented in this analysis show that clients use strategies that make the jobs of frontline workers as easy as possible. However, this is not a form of coproduction (Jakobsen 2012; Jakobsen and Andersen 2013). The clients in this study do not help the frontline workers fulfill the official objective of utility jobs activation of teaching clients the value of work. Instead, they help the frontline workers enforce passivity by, for example, teaching other clients the value of working inefficiently.

Finally, the results are relevant to scholars working with policy feedback and political learning. Their studies explore how bureaucratic encounters influence clients' political efficacy and political participation (Campbell 2012). They explore groups within areas such as social assistance clients (Kumlin 2004; Soss 1999a), social security (Campbell 2003), education (Bruch and Soss 2018; Mettler 2005), health (Mettler 2011), and incarceration (Lerman and Weaver 2014). These studies are all based on the theoretical premise of the "one big system," namely that clients' perceptions of frontline workers spill

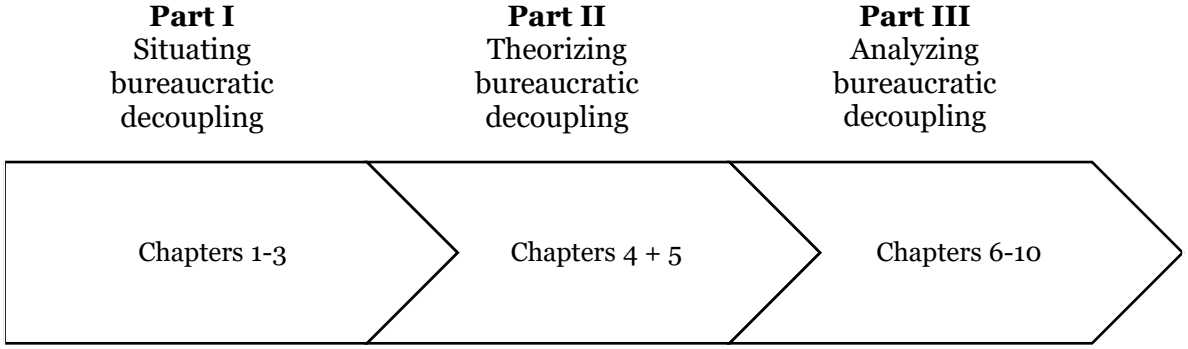
over into broader perceptions of bureaucratic organizations, such as government, and the efficacy of political participation (Soss 1999a).

Theorizing bureaucratic decoupling, I find that it is only clients' perceptions of frontline workers as decision-makers that spill over into broader beliefs about the bureaucratic organization. For example, clients believe that there is no power asymmetry between themselves and the work supervisors because they view the work supervisors as nice and fun. Yet, they describe the cash-assistance scheme as a "top-down system." This means that clients draw lessons from the work supervisors' ways of deflecting responsibility "upwards" onto the cash-assistance scheme.

1.3. Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation is a combination of a monograph and one article: Hansen, Lasse (2020). "It's not even the leaders out here who have any say at all in how long they're gonna have to wait: A study of waiting time, power, and acceptance." *Time & Society*, 29(4), 1128-1149.[5] Both are based on the same ethnographic material of clients in activation. The monograph develops a theoretical framework for bureaucratic decoupling, whereas the article uses elements of this framework to explore field-specific issues such as waiting time. The dissertation consists of ten chapters divided up into three parts, as I illustrate in figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1. Outline of the monograph



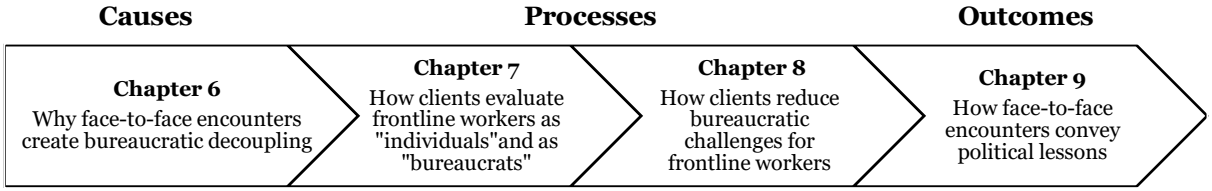
In Part I, I situate bureaucratic decoupling in both the existing literature and the empirical context. I situate the reader in the context of Danish welfare-to-work encounters and policies in Chapter 2. I then review the existing literature on bureaucratic encounters in Chapter 3. The review shows that existing studies mainly reduce clients' perceptions of frontline workers' decisions to either the power asymmetry between clients and frontline workers or the design of policies.

[5] In the remaining parts of this dissertation, I refer to this as article as Paper A.

In Part II, I theorize bureaucratic decoupling. In Chapter 4, I argue that in order to understand bureaucratic decoupling, it is necessary to theorize face-to-face encounters in street-level organizations. I theorize that these encounters are governed by an "institutional order" with four features that structure how clients interact with frontline workers, as also mentioned above. Chapter 5 details how I theorized bureaucratic decoupling and collected the data for this dissertation.

In Part III, I analyze bureaucratic decoupling through four chapters. I illustrate the structure of these chapters in figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2. Structure of the analytical chapters



In Chapter 6, I explore the *causes of bureaucratic decoupling*. In the chapter, I explore empirically how each of the four features governs the encounter between the clients and the work supervisors. For example, the chapter shows that the work supervisors blur the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients by remembering their names, including clients in their decision-making, and by deemphasizing the importance that clients fulfill their official obligations as cash-assistance recipients. The chapter also analyzes how the work supervisors deflect responsibility away from their decisions when questioned by clients. For example, they often hold their managers accountable for their decisions to allow clients to leave early, whereas they blame the clients themselves when there are longs periods of waiting time at the site. This analysis is based on field notes from the participant observations as well as interviews with the work supervisors.

In chapter 7, I explore the first process of bureaucratic decoupling: how the face-to-face encounters lead clients to separate their perception of the work supervisors as individuals from their perception of them as decision-makers. The analysis shows that as "individuals," clients view the work supervisors as "one of them." As "decision-makers," clients believe that the work supervisors face multiple challenges beyond their control, which prevent them from changing their decisions. As a result, clients do not hold the work supervisors accountable for their decisions. This analysis is based on interviews with the clients at the activation site.

In Chapter 8, I explore the second process of bureaucratic decoupling: how clients act upon their perception of the work supervisors. The analysis shows

that when clients believe that the work supervisors have no control over their decisions, they begin to behave in ways that reduce the challenges of the work supervisors' job. For example, clients teach new clients not to ask too many questions and to work inefficiently as this means that the work supervisors do not need to find new work assignments for them. This chapter is based on field notes from the participant observations.

In chapter 9, I explore the outcomes of bureaucratic decoupling. The chapter shows that clients come to develop diffuse and fragmented perceptions of the cash-assistance scheme as a bureaucratic organization. For example, clients come to view the cash-assistance scheme as a top-down system where low-level frontline workers do not have any decision-making power. This analysis is based on interviews with clients at the activation site.

In Chapter 10, I contemplate whether bureaucratic decoupling as a theoretical concept can travel to other bureaucratic organizations, and if so, to which bureaucratic organizations.

Part I
Situating Bureaucratic Decoupling

Chapter 2. Working for Your Benefits: The Context of Utility Jobs

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I situate the reader in the empirical context of the utility jobs scheme. In 2013, the Danish government introduced "utility jobs" (in Danish, *nyttejobs*) as a new central feature of the cash-assistance scheme (in Danish, *kontanthjælp*). The program entails that if you receive cash-assistance, you must now work for your benefits, for example by picking up trash in public parks or by cleaning public facilities such as libraries.

The dissertation aims to theorize bureaucratic decoupling and construct a general argument for how and why clients decouple frontline workers from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers. Why is it then relevant to situate the reader in the utility jobs program?

First, a core principle in ethnographic research is that individuals' actions and perceptions are structured by the context in which they act (E. Goffman 1989; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In order to understand how bureaucratic decoupling emerges in face-to-face encounters between clients and frontline workers, it is necessary to understand the empirical context of these encounters. Therefore, I situate the reader in the policy, governance, organizational, and occupational contexts of client–frontline worker encounters (Caswell et al. 2017) in the utility jobs scheme.[6,7]

Second, the disciplinary nature of the utility jobs scheme was the reason why I originally selected the program as my case. However, as I will explain in

[6] The policy context refers to the policy content, i.e. both the objectives and instruments of welfare-to-work policies (Caswell et al. 2017). The governance context refers to how the delivery and provision of welfare to-work services are organized and by which actors (e.g. private or public actors). The organizational context refers to how frontline work is organized within organizations and which agencies are responsible for the delivery of welfare-to-work services (Caswell et al. 2017, 6). The occupational context refers to the degree of professional training of frontline workers and the impact of professionalism on their work.

[7] As various studies have dealt with the history of Danish unemployment policies in depth (see e.g. Caswell and Larsen 2017; Larsen 2013; Larsen et al. 2001; Loftager 2002; Torfing 2004; 1999), I will concentrate on the contemporary context and structure of cash-assistance and utility jobs.

Chapter 5, I found that the utility job program was far from disciplinary – at least in the sense that I expected it to be – and I therefore had to adopt an abductive method of reasoning (Tavory and Timmermans 2014) to make sense of my data. As the chapter will show, when looking at the policy context and the political objective of the utility jobs scheme, it appears as a disciplinary policy instrument to incentivize cash-assistance recipients to find a job as soon as possible (Nielsen 2014). Although the political rhetoric that justifies the program also draws upon more communitarian arguments, such as including the clients in a work community, it is essentially a program that is aimed at either "intimidating" clients from applying for assistance or incentivizing clients to find employment as soon as possible.

Planning this study, I was initially interested in how clients' participation in social assistance programs influenced their perception of citizenship, including their perception of their own status as well as their belief in government responsiveness (see Soss 2000; Schneider and Ingram 1993).[8] Studies show that when social assistance clients feel degraded and humiliated in their encounters with frontline workers, these experiences inadvertently spill over and become perceptions of government (Soss 1999a). Due to the disciplinary nature of the utility jobs scheme, I expected that clients would feel degraded in their encounters with work supervisors in particular. Compared to welfare-to-work frontline workers researched elsewhere (see e.g. Brodkin 2011; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011), the work supervisors appeared to have an unprecedented amount of power: They decided when clients should put on their work clothes, when they should work, and when they were allowed to leave. Moreover, they enforced this power in the immediate face-to-face encounters with clients for several hours each day for more than three months.

However, when I arrived at the site, I found that there was a low power asymmetry between the two parties and that clients held positive views of the work supervisors. In Chapter 5, I elaborate on how I discovered this through an abductive logic of reasoning. Yet, in order to understand this apparent paradox, it is necessary to understand the mismatch between the policy context of the utility jobs scheme and the organizational and occupational contexts. When looking at the organizational context, the reader will learn that the work supervisors interact with clients far away from the power structures of the cash-assistance scheme in the municipality, such as the job center or the social benefit office. Moreover, the work supervisors have very little formalized knowledge of social work. Instead, they have backgrounds as artisans or gardeners, which means that their interactions with clients often become informal and more power asymmetrical. In sum, this creates the potential for an

[8] I elaborate more on this in Chapter 3.

encounter between clients and frontline workers where clients view frontline workers as decoupled from their official role as bureaucratic decision-makers.

Third, the reader will find the chapter relevant as it explains the distinctions between the job tasks of the work supervisors, the caseworkers, and the job consultants at the activation site. In Chapter 6, for example, I analyze how the work supervisors present themselves in contrast to the caseworkers and the job consultants as a way of blurring the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients. In Chapter 7, I compare clients' perceptions of the work supervisors to their perceptions of the caseworkers and the job consultants. The aim is to show that when the nature of the encounter changes, so do clients' perceptions of frontline workers and their decision-making. In Chapter 9, I analyze how the contrast between clients' encounters in different venues of the cash-assistance scheme (e.g. their encounters at the activation site vs. their encounters with the social benefit office) produces very diffuse and fragmented images of the cash-assistance scheme.

This chapter is structured in two parts. The first part introduces the reader to the different contexts of the utility jobs scheme while the second part introduces the reader to the ethnographic site.

2.2. The policy context

Unemployment services in Denmark are delivered through a two-tier system (rik van Berkel 2010, 22). Cash-assistance[9] is provided to the uninsured unemployed whereas unemployment benefits (in Danish, *dagpenge*) are provided to the insured unemployed. Since adopting a welfare-to-work approach[10] in the area of unemployment policy in the 1980s and 1990s, activation has increasingly been used in Denmark to re-integrate the unemployed back to work. Originally, activation for both cash-assistance recipients and recipients of unemployment benefits was dominated by a "human capital approach" consisting mainly of education, internships, and mentorships (Larsen et al. 2001; Torfing 1999).

Since the early 2000s, however, the human capital approach has been supplanted by a more "work first" oriented approach with the aim of transferring recipients to the labor market as soon as possible (Caswell and Larsen 2017). In Denmark, this approach was introduced, in particular, with the proposal

[9] For clients with physical and mental disabilities, there are other social assistance benefits where they are provided training to regain their ability to work.

[10] Welfare-to-work approaches include "those programs and services that are aimed at strengthening the employability, labor market, or social participation of unemployed benefit recipients of working age" (Caswell et al. 2017, 3).

"more people into employment" (in Danish, *Flere i Arbejde*) in 2002 by the, at the time, Liberal-Conservative government.[11] In the proposal, it was explicitly stated how "the road to employment should be the fastest possible" (Ministry of Employment 2002, 1). With the proposal, the Liberal-Conservative government enforced a stronger focus on activation measures such as job and résumé courses rather than educational training of the unemployed.

A part of this context, in 2011, before entering government, the Social Democrats proposed that all non-disabled cash-assistance recipients should be obliged to be activated in "work-for-the-benefits-related programs." The social policy visions of the Social Democrats were heavily inspired by one specific initiative in the Danish municipality of Aalborg, referred to in the popular rhetoric of public debate at the time simply as the "Aalborg model." Aalborg activated all non-disabled cash-assistance recipients under the age of 30 in municipal work teams from their first day of claiming benefits. They worked full time, or close to full time, for their benefits (equating an hourly "salary" far below the negotiated minimum income of Danish collective agreements) (Hansen and Nielsen 2021, 5).

The initiative appealed to politicians for a number of reasons (Nielsen 2017; 2019). First, at a time with relatively high youth unemployment, the results from the municipality were striking. The majority of the activated cash-assistance recipients quickly refrained from claiming benefits. This sent a clear signal that keeping people out of the system was an important quality of the model. Second, the Aalborg model was justified as a form of empowerment where it taught the values and norms of doing hard work to the "passive unemployed." This was an important aspect as there was, around this time, an intense media debate about the "laziness" of cash-assistance recipients and their unwillingness to find employment (Hedegaard 2014; Esmark and Schoop 2017). Third, utility jobs benefited the wider community. Recipients carried out useful work assignments such as cleaning public libraries or trimming trees in parks (Hansen and Nielsen 2021, 6).

In 2013, the Social Democratic-led government presented a program similar to the Aalborg model as part of their largescale reform of the Danish cash-assistance system called "Everyone Can Be Useful" (Ministry of Employment 2013). From this point on, municipalities were to activate selected groups of cash-assistance recipients in so-called utility jobs, defined in the reform documents as "municipal work sites" that are not "anti-competitive" (Ministry of Employment 2013). Most often, utility jobs are targeted the most resourceful

[11] The proposal by the Liberal-Conservative government was enacted and signed by the majority of the parties in Parliament, including the Social Democrats, the Danish People's Party, the Social-Liberal Party, and the Christian Democrats.

groups of cash-assistance recipients (officially categorized as the "job-ready" or "obviously education ready"). They are usually obligated to participate in the utility jobs scheme after they have participated in a job-searching course or if they fail to find an internship.

Part of this policy context was a change of the categories that frontline workers used to assess the employability of cash-assistance recipients. The categories had already been revised gradually since 2000 (Nielsen 2015). The categories initially had a strong "problem focus," and the majority of the categories emphasized the barriers for the unemployed to enter the labor market. Practically, this meant that many recipients of cash-assistance were not obliged to participate in activation. With the reform in 2013, the number of categories was reduced to only three categories ("education ready," "job ready," and "activity ready") that all emphasized the "readiness" of cash-assistance recipients to regain employment (Nielsen 2015).[12] This meant that all groups in the cash-assistance scheme, regardless of their mental or physical condition, were now viewed as ready and capable of participating in some form of activity when receiving their cash-assistance benefits. For example, the most disadvantaged (i.e. "activity ready") groups would participate in mentorships, whereas the most resourceful (i.e. the "job ready" or "obviously education ready" group) would be activated in the utility jobs scheme.

Moreover, in 2016, the now Liberal-led government introduced two additional measures aimed at increasing cash-assistance recipients' incentive of finding a job as soon as possible. First, they introduced the so-called 225-hour rule, which implied that cash-assistance recipients have to perform 225 hours of work (utility jobs or job internships do not count) each year. If they fail to meet this obligation, their benefits are reduced. Second, they introduced the so-called "cash-assistance cap" (in Danish, *kontanthjælpsloft*). This means that the government sets a limit on how much each recipient can receive in cash-assistance each month by, for example, deducting recipients' housing benefits from their cash-assistance.[13]

2.3. The governance context

The governance context of the delivery of cash-assistance is inspired by New Public Management (NPM) ideals. This context does not directly influence the

[12] For an analysis of how these categories were perceived by clients themselves, see Danneris & Herup (2018).

[13] This rule has been criticized for increasing the number of children living below the poverty threshold, (see Juul 2018).

frontline workers at the utility jobs scheme, but it provides a general understanding of how the central government enforces the work-first approach across municipalities.

A part of the "more people into employment" proposal in 2002, the then Liberal-Conservative government proposed a change in the governance structure of the delivery of unemployment services. Originally, there was a "two-track" governance system: The government-led Public Employment Service (PES) (in Danish, *Arbejdsmarkedsformidlingen*) was responsible for the insured unemployed (those receiving unemployment benefits), whereas the municipalities were responsible for the uninsured employed (those receiving social assistance benefits such as cash-assistance).

In 2002, the government proposed to set up a "one-stop" employment system by merging the national PES and the municipal employment services (Damgaard 2003). However, this was not directly implemented before 2007 where the government implemented a reform of local government. The reform entailed a transfer of authorities from the regional level of counties to either the government or the municipalities, and it reduced the number of municipalities from 270 to 98. The local reform also meant the delivery of unemployment services, for both the insured and uninsured unemployed, were municipalized in 94 job centers.

The government reform was a part of the push towards the work-first approach (Caswell and Larsen 2017, 167). In the years before the local reform, Liberal and Conservative politicians argued that there was an "implementation gap" between the work-first approach introduced by the government and the implementation of this approach by frontline workers in the municipalities (Clausen and Smith 2007). Frontline workers were criticized for resisting the work-first approach and for focusing too much on recipients' barriers to entering into employment (Damgaard and Torfing 2010, 250). To enforce this work-first agenda, the Liberal-Conservative government introduced two measures.

First, they implemented a new governance system of "decentralized centralization" (Larsen 2013). Regarding the central control of the municipalities, the Ministry of Employment sets a number of performance goals for the municipalities to reach, for example regarding the number of people receiving cash-assistance recipients in each municipality. The local municipal government is then allowed to add additional local goals. The central government then tracks and monitors each municipality's performance and sanctions municipalities if they fail to meet their planned goals. In addition, the central government has set up a benchmarking system, open to public inspection, where it goes beyond the goals stated for each municipality to measure and compare

a range of activities of the job centers in the municipalities (Caswell and Larsen 2017, 168).

Second, the central government obliged the municipalities to make an organizational distinction between the job center and the social department. The job center now only had to focus on one problem: getting people into work. The objective was to increase the municipalities' focus on employment and decrease their focus on social problems. People with severe social problems were then referred to the social department in the municipalities.

2.4. The organizational context

The utility jobs scheme often receives lots of media attention, portraying recipients in identical work clothes picking up trash (Nielsen 2014). Expanding the utility jobs scheme has also often been proposed by politicians, for example so that it targets refugees or migrants (Holst 2021). Despite this, the utility jobs scheme is only one of many activation schemes that municipalities use for cash-assistance recipients. In 2019, 75 out of 98 municipalities activated cash-assistance recipients using the utility jobs scheme.[14] However, as of 2019, little less than 11.000[15] cash-assistance recipients in total, across all municipalities, were activated in the utility jobs scheme. The majority of cash-assistance recipients are activated in activation schemes such as job internships or courses in writing résumés and job applications.

There are large differences across municipalities in terms of how they organize the delivery of cash-assistance and therefore the utility jobs scheme. Within the municipality I conducted fieldwork, which is one of the four largest municipalities in Denmark, there was a division between (1) the job center (in Danish, *Jobcenter*), where frontline workers assess clients' employability; (2) the social benefit office[16] (in Danish, *Ydelseskontor*), where frontline workers manage payments and impose economic sanctions;[17] and (3) several utility

[14] Data from Jobindsats.dk, the official archive of statistics from Danish job centers.
[15] This is less than 10 percent of the total amount of cash-assistance recipients in 2019 (Danmarks Statistik 2021).
[16] In paper A, I define this as a "social assistance office".
[17] There are two types of financial sanctions in the cash-assistance scheme (Deloitte 2016, 7–8). A "Period sanction" (in Danish, *Periodesanktion*) is where clients are penalized for each day they have been absent without notice from an activation course or a consultation with a caseworker. Thus, the longer the recipient is absent without notice, the larger the period sanction will be. The "Point Sanction" (in Danish, *Punktsanktion*) is issued if clients violate a specific rule (e.g. declining a job offer without reasonable cause or calling in sick without giving the job center notice). In 2016, Deloitte, in an evaluation of the municipalities' use of sanctions in the wake of

jobs sites. This organizational division is also used in other municipalities, but it cannot not necessarily be generalized to all municipalities (Caswell and Larsen 2017, 172).

The distribution of labor between the three institutions can be portrayed in a simplified way like this: The recipient applies for cash-assistance at the job center where a job consultant assesses the employability of the recipient and whether or not the client can participate in an activation measure. Afterwards, the cash-assistance recipient is sent to one of the utility jobs sites, which are often located several kilometers away from the job center and the social benefit office. It varies across municipalities, but this occurs within one to six months after the recipient initially applies for assistance.[18] Meanwhile, or after the recipient has finished their utility jobs course, they also participate in other activation measures, including job application and résumé writing courses and internships. Once a cash-assistance recipient has been sent to a utility jobs site, the frontline workers at the site report their presence, which the social benefit office tracks, but without physical contact with the recipients (Caswell and Larsen 2017, 174).[19] If the recipient is absent without due cause, it is the social benefit office that decides to issue an economic sanction.

While frontline workers at the job center and the social benefit office have to comply with nationally set performance measures and benchmarks (Caswell and Larsen 2017; Larsen 2013), for example in their level of sanctioning (Caswell and Larsen 2017, 172), each municipality has great freedom to choose how they will organize their utility jobs sites (see STAR, 2017).[20] They can arrange them as "project places" where groups of recipients are sent to municipal workplaces organized by a group of municipal frontline workers. Another solution is to send recipients to existing public or private work places

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the cash-assistance reform in 2014, estimated that the highest average financial penalty, across all groups in the cash-assistance scheme, was DKK 2,078 whereas the lowest average financial penalty was DKK 230 (Deloitte 2016, 21–22). For an analysis on how the organizational structure within the Danish municipalities influences their use of financial penalties, see Caswell and Larsen (2017).

[18] In some municipalities, cash-assistance recipient are sent to the utility job site the same day they apply for assistance (Larsen 2018).

[19] If recipients are unable to find a job or an internship, they are activated in the utility jobs scheme several times. For instance, if recipients do not find employment while being in the utility jobs scheme, they are often sent to other activation schemes after the end of their utility jobs activation period, for example a course on writing job applications. If they, during this course, also fail to find employment, they are often sent back to the utility jobs scheme.

[20] For information about how other municipalities arrange their utility jobs sites, see STAR (2017, 18).

("single projects"), for example to nursing homes or libraries where the existing staff at these places organizes the work assignments. In both places, beneficiaries are obliged to work 25 hours a week for up to 13 weeks.[21]

One of the major challenges for the municipalities in their planning of work assignments is the fact that the work assignments must not compete with ordinary jobs. For example, several chairmen of unions representing low-skilled workers have criticized the scheme for stealing employment from their members (Rønning-Andersson 2014). However, as stated in the proposal of the scheme from 2013, the work assignments must be "useful" for society (Ministry of Employment 2013). This creates the problem of finding enough work assignments for cash-assistance recipients. This is particularly a problem for the utility jobs schemes arranged as project places where the frontline workers at the site have to find and organize work assignments that do not already exist (Nielsen and Hansen 2021). As I will show in Chapter 6 and in Paper A, this creates a significant amount of waiting time at the site because the work supervisors simply cannot find enough work assignments for the clients to do.

2.5. The occupational context

Although this can vary across municipalities, there is a division of labor between the three types of frontline workers present at the utility job sites arranged as project places (DAMVAD 2015).

A group of work supervisors has the main responsibility for managing clients at the site. The task of the work supervisors is to direct work assignments (e.g. where to pick up trash and which areas in the public park need a trimming of the trees). The work supervisors are therefore in charge of managing the core task of the utility jobs scheme and the enforcement of the policy goal that cash-assistance recipients should make themselves "useful" for their benefits (Ministry of Employment 2013). However, it is not clearly specified how this should be enforced. This gives the work supervisors a significant amount of discretion in their planning of work assignments, namely how many work assignments clients have to perform and how quickly. The work supervisors are also in charge of registering clients' attendance at the activation site, which they then report back to the social benefit office. Finally, the work supervisors are obliged to carry out informal conversations with clients about their job-searching strategies. These conversations often take place while working

[21] Most municipalities combine the two models, while 20 percent of municipalities solely use the project model, and 27 percent solely use the single project model (DAMVAD 2015, 21).

alongside the clients or in the car driving back and forth from the work sites (DAMVAD 2015, 37). In sum, this means that the work supervisors are the clients' primary contact person at the utility activation site.

The second group is the job consultants who plan internships for the clients and advise them on what kinds of jobs would fit their profile. The third group is the caseworkers who similarly give job advice, but they also have the first meeting with clients when they enter the activation site. During these meetings, they inform clients of their obligations, including reporting job searches and daily attendance at the activation site. If clients fail to meet these obligations, they can decide to issue a financial penalty. Moreover, they can also decide to re-categorize clients from "job ready" to "activity ready." This means that clients will be removed from the utility jobs scheme and participate in a different activation course.

Although there has been a decrease in the number of welfare-to-work frontline workers in Denmark with an educational background in social work (Badsgaard et al. 2014), there is sharp educational division between the three types of frontline workers at project places in the utility job scheme. As the core task of the work supervisors is to find and direct work assignments for clients, former gardeners and artisans are often recruited for this position. Moreover, work supervisors are also recruited based on their empathetic qualities. In one job advertisement for a work supervisor at the municipality where I conducted fieldwork, they emphasize how the work supervisors are expected to have the ability to "create a nice workday" and "establish contact with people in an equal and respectful way and work from an appreciative view of human nature." By contrast, the caseworkers and the job consultants often have educational backgrounds that are more academic or related to social work. In both chapters 6 and 7, I show how this educational divide influences how these three types of frontline workers engage with the clients.

2.6. The ethnographic site

I gathered ethnographic data at a project place in a municipality in one of the four largest cities in Denmark. The project place is one of three project places in the municipality.

The activation site is located in a desolate area outside the city. The activation site is far removed from the power structures of the job center and the social benefit office, and the site appears to be in the middle of nowhere. Arriving at the activation site, you enter on a gravel road. At the end of the road, there are several old and ill-maintained garages. Before reaching those buildings, you make a right turn. Here, a set of hut-like structures appears. The

meeting room, the staff room, and the locker room are located inside these huts.

Clients gather in the meeting room in the morning to register their attendance and be informed by the work supervisors of the work assignments for the day. Located just above the meeting room is the men's locker room where they have their individual lockers to store their own clothes after changing into their work clothes. The women's locker room is in the building just behind the building with the meeting room. There is a staff room in the final building as well as a lunchroom and two additional rooms where the job consultants and caseworkers carry out conversations with clients. Parked outside is a number of trucks that are used to transport the clients, along with the work tools, back and forth from the work sites. Moreover, there are two containers outside where all the tools are stored.

At the site, the work supervisors manage between 20–40 people 25 hours a week for 13 weeks. There are two teams of clients at the site. The first team is there from 08:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. ("the eight o'clock team") and the second team from 09:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. ("the nine o'clock team").[22]

Upon the first day of arrival, clients are given a general introduction by one of the work supervisors and one of the job consultants or caseworkers to the utility jobs scheme as well as the types of work assignments they will be doing. Clients then decide which team they wish to be on, and at the end of the introduction, they are issued a set of work clothes and a lock for a locker in the locker room.

Three types of work assignments are arranged for the clients at the site. The largest majority of clients conduct work assignments in a nearby park located 1.5 kilometers away from the meeting room. Either clients are transported to the park in one of the trucks or they can decide to walk or borrow a municipal bicycle and bike there. In the park, clients work in teams of 5–10 people where they either pick up trash or trim trees. Typically, there are two work supervisors, both of whom monitor clients' work while working alongside the clients themselves. This was the group that I mainly followed and observed as part of my fieldwork. Another and smaller group of clients stay back at the meeting room where they are in charge of cleaning the different rooms and washing clients' work clothes. A final small group of clients, often with a background as carpenters, also stays behind in one of the garages near the meeting room where they build benches and birdhouses for the park.

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[22] Officially, the two teams are obliged to stay at the activation site until 1:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m., respectively. However, the work supervisors have removed their lunch break, which allows the citizens to leave 30 minutes earlier to have lunch at home. They inform citizens of this rule on the first day of their activation.

Regarding the staff, there are three[23] work supervisors at the site who have a background working as gardeners or artisans[24]. Moreover, several of the work supervisors had experienced unemployment themselves. This is crucial as studies show that this often leads frontline workers to use their personal identity and life trajectory as a primary parameter in their decisions rather than the official rules (Schram et al. 2009; Watkins-Hayes 2009). There are also two job consultants and two caseworkers at the site. The two caseworkers[25] and one of the job consultants are trained as social workers, whereas the final job consultant had a background working as a manager in a smaller company[26]. The work supervisors are the clients' main contact persons at the site, while the caseworkers and the job consultants only encounter clients two or three times during their time in activation.

2.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have situated the reader in the empirical context of bureaucratic decoupling. Politically, the objective of utility jobs is to both teach recipients of cash-assistance the value of work and simultaneously incentivize them to leave the utility job scheme and find employment as soon as possible. However, the organizational and occupational contexts of the utility job scheme influence the extent to which this objective materializes in the daily face-to-

[23] Officially, four work supervisors are employed at the site. However, during the majority of my time doing my first round of fieldwork, there were only three work supervisors at the site, including Sebastian, Ole, and Arne. The final work supervisor, Torben, was on sick leave during the majority of the time that I was conducting fieldwork. I carried out interviews with Ole, Sebastian, and Arne. When I conducted follow-up observations, I also interviewed two new supervisors who had been employed after I finished my first round of fieldwork, including Steffen and Brian.

[24] Sebastian is a former carpenter while Arne and Ole are former gardeners. Both Arne and Ole had previously experienced unemployment themselves. Ole originally worked as a gardener and then later obtained a graduate degree in biology. However, after obtaining his degree in biology, he became unemployed, and after a little while, he applied for a job as a work supervisor. Torben, the fourth supervisor who was on sick leave, is a former pedagogue. Steffen is a carpenter while Brian has a degree in social work, but have experienced long-term unemployment previously in his life.

[25] I interviewed three caseworkers working at the site. The final caseworker were working at one of the other project places in the municipality.

[26] There is a slight inconsistency between Paper A and the monograph in terms of the description of the educational background of the job consultants. The above description is correct. For reasons of simplicity, the job consultants and the caseworkers are defined both as "caseworkers" in Paper A.

face encounters between the clients and the work supervisors. As the work supervisors in particular have very few guidelines or performance measures influencing their work, they have large discretion in their planning of the work assignments and in their interaction with clients. Moreover, as they have very little formal social work training, this means that their interaction with clients is very different from clients' interaction with other frontline workers in the other venues of cash-assistance scheme.

In the next chapter, I will situate the reader in the theoretical context of bureaucratic decoupling and review what influences frontline workers' decision-making and how clients perceive this. In Chapter 4, I construct a theoretical framework for bureaucratic decoupling that explains why this phenomenon is created in face-to-face encounters between clients and frontline workers.

Chapter 3.
Literature Review

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I situate the reader in the existing literature to provide the basis for later theorizing bureaucratic decoupling. This dissertation investigates the research question: "How do clients on social assistance experience the decisions of frontline workers during face-to-face encounters, and how do these encounters convey broader political lessons?" This makes the following three aspects relevant to review:

a. How do frontline workers make decisions?
b. How do clients experience frontline workers' decisions?
c. How do frontline workers' decisions convey broader political lessons to clients?

If these are the relevant aspects to focus on, which scholarship should I then address? As the dissertation focuses on clients in a social assistance program as part of the Danish welfare-to-work approach to employment policy, addressing the comprehensive scholarship on social policy and social work seems obvious. This scholarship addresses welfare-to-work policies from both the perspective of clients and workers.

Focusing on the clients, this scholarship has engaged significantly with clients' "lived experiences" of welfare-to-work policies (e.g. Bauld et al. 2012; Garthwaite 2014; Mcintosh & Wright 2019; Patrick 2014, 2017; Patrick 2020). For example, it explores issues such as the stigma of receiving assistance (Baumberg 2016) and the experience of complying with workfare obligations as well as the behavioral adaptions clients make in reaction to these obligations (e.g. Danneris and Herup Nielsen 2018; Feldman and Schram 2019; Woolford and Nelund 2013). Similarly, this scholarship addresses frontline workers in welfare-to-work programs, for example how different factors influence their discretion (Eric Breit, Alm Andreassen, and Salomon 2016; Brodkin 2013; Ellis, Davis, and Rummery 1999; Evans and Harris 2004; Møller and Stone 2013) and their relationships with clients (e.g. Djuve and Kvali 2015; Senghaas, Freier, and Kupka 2019).

However, the aim of these studies – broadly speaking – is to assess the impact of a specific welfare-to-work reform or policy on either the clients or the frontline workers. For example, does a specific policy increase clients' (perceived) employability or does it make frontline workers more willing to

sanction particular groups of clients? In other words, explaining a particular welfare-to-work policy has intrinsic value and becomes an end in and of itself. By contrast, the aim of this dissertation is to use a specific welfare-to-work program (i.e. the utility jobs scheme in the cash-assistance scheme) as an instrument to theorize more broadly the relationships between clients and frontline workers and their political implications.

As such, I review studies in the public administration and street-level bureaucracy scholarship. In this scholarship, I focus specifically on the "policy-focused" studies[27] (Brodkin 2012, 3), namely studies that treat street-level bureaucrats as ground-level policy-makers with a focus on how their actions shape the social and political context in which clients act. Focusing primarily on unemployment programs as well as on health, schools, and law enforcement (Tummers et al. 2015, 1107), this scholarship uses these cases to develop and test broader theoretical mechanisms about both frontline workers and clients. In consequence, these studies provide the basis to explore and theorize bureaucratic decoupling as a theoretical concept that can be applied across various bureaucratic organizations (I discuss this further in Chapter 10).

As I will show, however, the focus in these studies is heavily skewed in favor of frontline workers. With the exception of a few studies (e.g. Barnes and Henly 2018; Soss 1999), little work is done to provide the basis for theorizing how clients experience the decisions of frontline workers. Therefore, I engage with the policy feedback scholarship as well as various studies in sociology (e.g. the sociology of deviance and industrial work) and law. In table 3.1, I summarize the findings of this review

[27] For a discussion and review of the differences between the "policy-focused" tradition and the "management studies" tradition in the public administration scholarship, see Brodkin (2012).

Table 3.1. Summary of findings from review

How frontline workers make decisions			
Focus	Findings	Selected studies	Problems and limitations
Factors from above	Frontline workers' decisions are influenced by policies or governance structures. In particular, frontline workers develop coping strategies such as moving away or towards clients as a reaction to these factors.	May and Winter (2009) Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011a; 2011b) Brodkin (2011) Tummers, Bekkers, and Steijn (2009) Tummers, Steijn, and Bekkers (2012) Tummers and Bekkers (2014)	This scholarship is based largely on "individualist ontology" where the studies focus only on the perspective of the frontline workers. Therefore, it "fails to address how frontline workers' tendency to enforce the rules in counter-productive ways or use their identities to develop informal relationships with clients are created as a reaction to the nature of the face-to-face encounter with clients.
Factors from below	Frontline workers' decisions are made more autonomously from rules or policies. Instead, their own identities or work trajectories influence their decision-making. These factors work as interpretive schemas to process clients and decide how to handle them.	Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003; 2000) Dubois (2010) Watkins-Hayes (2009) Fassin (2013) Schram et al. (2009)	

How clients perceive frontline workers' decisions			
Focus	Findings	Selected studies	Problems and limitations
Power asymmetries	Clients find themselves in an asymmetrical power relationship with frontline workers. They have limited knowledge of the rules, and they do not have the social or linguistic competences to challenge bureaucratic decisions. Clients can try to revoke this power asymmetry by resisting frontline workers' decisions – either formally (e.g. going to court) or informally (e.g. through secondary adjustments). They can also adapt to the frontline workers' wishes or institutional demands, for example by acting as the "ideal client."	Mechanic (1962) E. Goffman (1961a) Hasenfeld (1987; 1985) Dubois (2010) Sarat (1990) Lens (2007a; 2007b; 2009) Matthews and Hastings (2013) Brayne (2014)	This scholarship reduces clients' perceptions of frontline workers' decisions to structural and "fixed" power asymmetries between clients and frontline workers. It fails to address how these asymmetries are often revoked in the face-to-face encounter between clients and frontline workers.
Policy designs	The design of policies (e.g. the size of benefits or deservingness perceptions of client groups) influences clients' perceptions of frontline workers' decision-making. When policies are designed to reinforce clients' undeservingness, clients view frontline workers as acting on behalf of the bureaucratic organization and as having the power to punish them.	Soss (1999b; 2000; 2005) Barnes and Henly (2018)	The scholarship reduces clients' perceptions of frontline workers' decision-making to the design of policies. Therefore, it fails to account for how clients and frontline workers, in their face-to-face encounters, often reenact and reinterpret the meaning policies that are aimed at reinforcing clients' undeservingness.

How frontline workers' decisions convey broader political lessons to clients			
Focus	Findings	Selected studies	Problems and limitations
Policy designs	Policies "feed back" and influence the inputs that clients can deliver to the political process. Policy feedback is created by the design of policies, as policies convey messages to clients about their status and how government views them as a group. These messages are conveyed to clients in their direct encounters with frontline workers creating a so-called "spill-over effect". This means that clients use their encounters with frontline workers as lessons of how government works and treats them as a group.	Schneider and Ingram (1993; 1995; 1997) Soss (1999a) Campbell (2003; 2012) Mettler (2005) Mettler and Stonecash (2008) Mettler and Soss (2004) Bruch, Ferree, and Soss (2010) Lerman and Weaver (2014)	This scholarship reduces the types of political lessons that clients inadvertently draw from their encounters to the design of policies. Therefore, fails to account for how clients and frontline workers, in their face-to-face encounters, often reenact and reinterpret the meaning policies. Therefore, clients may draw very different lessons about bureaucratic organizations, such as government, than what was intended when the policies were formulated.

Note: As the main focus in this dissertation is the clients, I focus less on addressing this problem in my theoretical account compared to the problems regarding the scholarships that focus on the clients.

As I highlight in table 3.1, very few studies explore how the face-to-face encounter influences how workers make decisions and how clients experience them. In face-to-face encounters, policies are often reinterpreted and reenacted while power asymmetries are sometimes revoked. Therefore, there is a need to further conceptualize the nature of face-to-face bureaucratic encounters and the way they convey broader political lessons to clients.

In Chapter 4, I argue that utility jobs in the cash-assistance scheme can be used as a case to conceptualize the particular features of face-to-face encounters that structure how clients come to view frontline workers' decisions. These features create bureaucratic decoupling because they enable frontline workers to reduce the power asymmetry between themselves and clients. Therefore, clients come to view them as individuals rather than as bureaucratic decision-makers. The political lesson of this is bureaucratic decoupling because clients come to view frontline workers outside of bureaucratic organizations.

3.2. How do frontline workers make decisions?

Lipsky (1980) argued that frontline workers, such as teachers, policemen, or social workers, acted as policy-makers. Even though they are not part of the official formulation of policies, their everyday actions at the frontlines become the realization of these policies. He therefore labeled them "street-level bureaucrats." This means that when they interact with clients, they become the "face of public policy":

> Most citizens encounter government (if they encounter it at all) not through letters to congressmen or by attendance at school board meetings but through their teachers and their children's teachers and through the policeman on the corner or in the patrol car. Each encounter of this kind represents an instance of policy delivery. (Lipsky 1980, 3).[28]

[28] In the aftermath of Lipsky's book, however, scholars argued that the concept of "street-level bureaucracies" are outdated. This is the case regarding the contemporary delivery of welfare-to-work services. In many countries, private contractors are responsible for the delivery of welfare services rather than government agencies. Moreover, new public management (NPM) tools increasingly govern the conditions under which these services are delivered. Therefore, Brodkin (2013) proposes the term "street-level organizations". However, scholars generally agree that the basic characteristics of street-level bureaucrats hold in today's delivery of public services.

Street-level bureaucrats share two defining characteristics[29]: First, they have considerable discretion in their work – that is, the freedom to determine the sort, quantity, and quality of sanctions and rewards during policy implementation. Yet, when they exercise this discretion, they often face the dilemmas of complying with policies and attending to clients' needs at the same time. Therefore, they use various coping strategies to solve these dilemmas. Second, they exercise this discretion in the immediate face-to-face encounter with clients. This implies that frontline workers who have considerable discretion without exercising it in face-to-face encounters cannot be regarded as street-level bureaucrats.

Based on the assumptions of Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy, I will now review the existing literature and focus on how frontline workers make decisions. To answer this question, I focus mainly on the studies that explore the determinants of discretion[30] (Scott 1997) – that is, the numerous factors that influence how frontline workers exercise their discretion and make decisions.

I divide these determinants or factors into two broad categories: (1) Factors "from above," which is how factors such as policies, governance, and organizational structures influence frontline workers' way of exercising their discretion; and (2) factors "from below," which is how frontline workers' own identity, work trajectory, or perception of clients influence how they exercise their discretion. These two categories[31] are not mutually exclusive as some of the studies attest (e.g. Dubois 2010; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a); yet, they provide an analytical lens that allows for a critical assessment of frontline workers' decision-making.

3.2.1. Factors from "above" that influence frontline workers' decisions

Frontline workers' decisions and everyday practices are bound by hierarchical relationships such as policies, rules, and governance structures. Although, frontline workers rarely act completely in accordance with the rules or intentions of policies, their decisions are, to a large extent, informed by these factors, for example in their ways of coping (Tummers et al. 2015) or even sabotaging their work (Brehm and Gates 1997).

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[29] See also the work of Prottas (1979) and his discussion on the characteristics of street-level bureaucrats.

[30] For a full review of studies that explore the determinants of discretion, see Nothdurfter and Hermans (2018).

[31] These two categories are also inspired by Maynard-Moody & Musheno's (2003, 10) distinction between "state-agents" and "citizen-agents".

As frontline workers are ground-level policy-makers, the extent to which frontline workers implement policies (Gofen 2014; Isett, Morrissey, and Topping 2006; Meyers, Glaser, and Donald 1998) as well as their willingness to do so (e.g. May and Winter 2009; Tummers and Bekkers 2014; Tummers, Bekkers, and Steijn 2009; Tummers, Steijn, and Bekkers 2012) has been subject to wide scholarly attention. This can depend on their level of discretion (Thomann, van Engen, and Tummers 2018; Tummers and Bekkers 2014). For example, when they have large discretion, frontline workers feel they have more influence and autonomy, making them more willing to implement policy. Large discretion also creates a feeling among frontline workers of "client meaningfulness" – that is, a belief that policies benefit and is useful for clients, which in turn creates a larger willingness to implement policies (Tummers and Bekkers 2014). By contrast, limited discretion can also create a "policy alienation" among frontline workers – that is, a "state of psychological disconnection from the policy programme being implemented" (Tummers et al. 2009, 686).

Moreover, when there is a gap between the policies and the everyday realities of clients, frontline workers often have to invent various coping strategies to carry out their jobs (Lipsky 1980). Tummers et al. (2015, 1100) define coping as "behavioral efforts frontline workers employ when interacting with clients, in order to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts they face on an everyday basis." They conceptualize three ways in which frontline workers cope: moving towards clients, which implies that frontline workers adjust to clients' needs; moving away from clients, which implies that frontline workers avoid a meaningful interaction with clients; and moving against clients, which implies that frontline workers initiate confrontations with clients.

Scholars have particularly analyzed the coping strategies used by frontline workers when they have to deliver policies that are governed by New Public Management methods. For example, when police officers are subjected to a performance target that specifies a certain number of stops and arrests per day, this can create behaviors where police officers "move against people", for example by initiating confrontation and provoking people on the street in order for them to commit an offence (Fassin 2013).

Frontline workers also use coping techniques as a reaction to governance structures in welfare-to-work policies. Frontline workers cope with this by moving away from clients by focusing on meeting the performance targets rather than clients' individual needs. For example, some welfare-to-work frontline workers adopt a strategy of "cost shifting" (Brodkin 2011, 262–65). This means that they schedule multiple clients for the same appointment. This allows them to achieve efficiency and expedite more clients, while clients often

have to wait several hours before their consultation. Frontline workers can also cope by moving against clients. For example, meeting performance targets can be so stressful that frontline workers sanction clients out of mere frustration (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a, 224).

3.2.2. Factors from "below" that influence frontline workers' decisions

Frontline workers also make decisions more autonomously from governance structures or policies. Their decisions are then influenced by factors such as their own identity (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Dubois 2010), professionalism (Cecchini 2018; Harrits and Larsen 2016; Harrits and Møller 2016), bodily dispositions (Dubois 2010), and even their morality (Fassin 2013; 2015; Zacka 2017). This means that frontline workers are "socially situated actors" (Watkins-Hayes 2009, 25) who reinterpret and reenact policies and governance structures in their daily work (see also Morgen 2001; Sandfort 2000).

The individual identity of the frontline worker therefore matters significantly for how they delivery policies. They act as "citizen-agents," which means that "workers first make judgments about the citizen-client and then turn to policy to help enact or, if negative, to rationalize their judgments" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 18). In particular, frontline workers use their identities to "put a fix on people," which means that they assign clients a specific identity that becomes the basis for their decisions.[32] This could, for example, be the case of a police officer who refuses to help a prostitute who is pregnant but suffers from a drug addiction because his own wife just gave birth to their child. The police officer therefore views the prostitute as undeserving of help because drug abuse while pregnant is considered bad behavior compared to how his own wife acted while pregnant (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 77–79)

Frontline workers' professionalism also influences their decision-making. For example, as the welfare-to-work frontline profession has become a deskilled position where former welfare clients are often hired, they are more inclined to use their personal identity in their decision-making rather than official rules (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a, 242; see also Watkins-Hayes 2009). As a result, frontline workers use a "logic of appropriateness" when they make decisions. In other words, rather than turning to official rules, they

[32] In light of this, various studies explore how frontline workers' deservingness perceptions influence their decisions (See Guul, Pedersen, and Petersen 2020; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen 2018, and Schram et al. 2009).

ask themselves how their clients' stories correspond to their own (see also Schram et al. 2009).

However, it is far too simplistic to argue that frontline workers only use their personal identities in their decision-making. Frontline workers possess a so-called "double body", which means that they can adopt both "the neutral language of bureaucracy or the personal and familiar language of ordinary life" (Dubois 2010, 74). There are multiple factors in frontline welfare workers' jobs that make them use their personal identities in their decision-making: They have to apply a set of vague rules, and they receive little training. They also deal with clients whose individual characteristics do not match the administrative categories (see also Dubois 2014). However, whether and how frontline workers choose to use their identities in their decision-making depends on particularities among the individual frontline workers, such as their motivation for becoming a frontline worker or their employment history. This means that some frontline workers choose to become very involved in clients' cases, for instance by joining them in their criticism of the rules or even giving them money. Yet, for other frontline workers, such personal involvement can be highly stressful psychologically. Therefore, as a way of protecting themselves and their personal integrity, they choose to move away from clients by applying the rules rigidly (see also Tummers et al. 2015).

3.3. How do clients experience frontline workers' decisions?

It is well theorized how frontline workers make decisions, and the findings are well confounded in the street-level bureaucracy scholarship.[33] However, the question of how clients perceive frontline workers' decisions largely remains a "black box" (Barnes and Henly 2018, 165). Therefore, I review various studies from public administration, sociology, and law. Across these studies, I argue that they attribute clients' perceptions of frontline workers' decisions to two factors:

[33] It is important to mention, however, that there are multiple studies on clients in street-level bureaucracies. Numerous field-specific studies document, in various respects, the lives of client groups such as inmates, patients, welfare recipients, asylum seekers, and pupils. Yet, broadly speaking, their contributions are often empirical (e.g. providing knowledge of the lived reality of asylum seekers in detention) rather theoretical. Hence, they provide a weak foundation for theorizing bureaucratic decoupling.

1. The power asymmetry between the client and the frontline worker
2. The design of policies.

By attributing clients' perceptions to either power asymmetries or policy design characteristics, clients' perceptions always become a reaction to structural and "static" conditions. The implication is that scholars overlook the possibility that clients can revoke power asymmetries and reconstruct the meaning of policies in and through face-to-face encounters with frontline workers. This means, as I also show in table 3.1, that there is a need for further conceptualization of face-to-face bureaucratic encounters and the way in which these encounters influence clients' perceptions of frontline workers' decisions.

3.3.1. The power asymmetry between clients and frontline workers

In street-level bureaucracies, clients generally find themselves in a less powerful position than frontline workers, which influences how they act towards and perceive the decisions of frontline workers. In this section, I review why clients find themselves in this position and how they react to it. I find two main forms of reactions, namely (a) resisting frontline workers' decisions both through formal and informal means and (b) adapting themselves to frontline workers' wishes.

A power-asymmetrical relationship. Clients play a double role in street-level bureaucracies (Prottas 1979, 3). On the one hand, they are the consumer of the bureaucratic organization's output. On the other hand, they are the recipients of the services of bureaucratic organizations. As clients need these services (e.g. to pay rent), this puts them in a disadvantaged and dependent position (Mechanic 1962; Hasenfeld 1985; 1987). A number of factors, which I review below, create this power asymmetry.

First, unlike clients from the middle class, clients from the lower fractions of society are less likely to join collective groups that have a say in the formulation of policies (Matthews and Hastings 2013). This means that most welfare programs are designed according to the interests of the middle class. This creates a "system of gaps" (Dubois 2010, 30). Those clients who are the closest to fitting into the administrative categories of the welfare institution (clients with stable family and employment) are rarely dependent upon it. By contrast, those who are closest and most invested in the institution (clients who are unemployed and with unstable family situations) rarely conform to the administrative categories.

Second, the majority of frontline workers are from the middle class.[34] This means that clients from the middle class are able to articulate their demands in ways that are more understandable to and recognized by frontline workers (Matthews and Hastings 2013). Clients from the middle class also have access to less stigmatizing benefits, such as entitlement programs. In these programs, caseworkers hold little discretion, and clients are, therefore, subjected to a more fair bureaucratic process (Schneider and Ingram 1993). By contrast, clients with fewer resources often only have access to stigmatizing and means-tested programs where caseworkers have large discretion. Moreover, they do not have the cultural or linguistic capital to articulate their needs in ways that are understandable to frontline workers.

Third, the majority of clients who encounter frontline workers are "non-voluntary clients" (Lipsky 1980, 54). This implies that it is difficult for clients to both exit (Hirschman 1970) and negotiate the terms and institutional roles of the encounter (Dubois 2010, 154). Moreover, the non-involuntary nature of their encounter also leads to a greater personalization on the clients' part in the encounter. Clients from the middle class often receive services from public agencies (like child support) that require that they only reveal a fraction of their private information. Clients from the lower fractions of society, however, who are dependent on social assistance to pay their rent, often have to disclose more information, like previous income and marital and sexual relationships. The revelation of these intimate and private forms of information gives the street-level bureaucrat the "upper hand" in the encounter (Dubois 2010, 31).

Fourth, some clients face cognitive challenges in terms of preparing for meetings and behaving accordingly during them (Christensen et al. 2020; see also Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2014). Some clients possess low "executive functions" – that is, the ability to engage in "deliberate thought processes such as forming goals, planning ahead, carrying out a goal-directed plan, and performing effectively" (Christensen et al. 2020, 129). This means that they are more likely to miss deadlines, and they often lose their temper and act violently during encounters with frontline workers.

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[34] This varies across bureaucratic organizations and across national contexts. In welfare-to-work services, frontline workers have become an increasingly deskilled position, in Denmark as well as in countries such as the US. In the US, this has led to a recruitment of former welfare recipients to become frontline workers (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a), while in Denmark, it has led to a recruitment of mainly academics with no social work background (Caswell and Larsen 2017). Outside of welfare-to-work organizations, there has been a curtailment of the professional autonomy of doctors and teachers, for example. However, the people who occupy these positions are often still teachers or doctors by training (Harrits and Larsen 2016).

Given this power asymmetry, this raises the question of whether clients are able to influence frontline workers' decisions. By reviewing the existing literature, I identify two ways in which clients influence frontline workers' decisions. The first way is by challenging frontline workers' decisions either formally (e.g. in court) or informally (e.g. through violence), and the second by adapting themselves to the frontline workers' wishes or to the institutional demands of bureaucratic organizations.

Challenging frontline workers' decisions. Clients in social assistance programs often find it difficult to identify mistakes made by frontline workers (Lens 2007a). However, as some clients have engaged with bureaucratic organizations for years (Sarat 1990) or because they, for example, have a large network of family members or legal experts (Dominguez and Watkins-Hayes 2003; Bisgaard 2020; Ewick and Silbey 1992; 2003), they are able to challenge bureaucratic decisions. For example, some clients choose to appeal decisions made by frontline workers and go to court (Lens 2007a, 2007b, 2009). Here, it is shown that when clients can rely on their network, they are more likely to both go to court and win their cases. Moreover, by having dealt with bureaucratic organizations for a long time, they build what can be defined as a "bureaucratic competence"[35] (Danet and Hartman 1972) or a "legal consciousness"[36] (Sarat 1990). This gives them "insider knowledge" of the rules, and it also enables them – in instances where they have to go to court – to prepare information about their cases as well as rehearse a way of presenting themselves (Bisgaard 2018).

Clients can also resist or challenge frontline workers' decisions through various informal and non-prescribed ways, for example through "self-pity" where they emphasize the difficulty of their situations. This enables the clients to get the "upper hand" in the encounter with frontline workers because – as Dubois (2010, 164) notes – "by organizing the confrontation of the agent with human misery, they create cracks in the face the agent has constructed at the desk […]." Clients can also use silence as a strategy (157-160). If clients have committed fraud, then being silent reduces the risk of being exposed. It also

[35] Bureaucratic competence is defined as the following: "Bureaucratic competence is seen here as all those abilities peculiarly related to bureaucratic interactions. Included are such factors as vocabulary, familiarity with forms and documents […]" (Gordon 1975, 198).

[36] Legal consciousness is defined as "a consciousness of power and domination, in which the keynote is enclosure and dependency, and a consciousness of resistance, in which welfare recipients assert themselves and demand recognition of their personal identities and their human needs" (Sarat 1990, 343).

disables frontline workers' ability to define clients' identities based on administrative categories. Yet, some of these types of strategies also reproduce clients' position in the asymmetrical relationship. This includes occasions where clients act violently or attempt to "hit on" frontline workers (166–67).

Moreover, clients can also challenge frontline workers' decisions, but without doing so face-to-face. For example, clients can use so-called "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990). This includes ways of contesting authorities when they are not present, such as rolling their eyes or mocking them "behind their backs." Another strategy of this kind is "secondary adjustments," which include "practices that do not directly challenge staff but allow inmates to obtain forbidden satisfactions or to obtain permitted ones by forbidden means" (E. Goffman 1961, 54). Examples of this include hiding food (e.g. in psychiatric hospitals or in prisons) or developing nicknames for frontline workers.

Clients can also develop particular oppositional cultures to challenge the authority of frontline workers. In maximum security prisons, inmates experience the "pains of imprisonments" (Sykes 1958). These so-called pains include the "shaven head, the insistence of gestures of respect and the subordination when addressing officials" (66). As a reaction to this, inmates join groups and develop argots to contest the prison authorities and convey the idea that they can still act autonomously. Yet, oppositional identities are also present in less punitive bureaucratic encounters. In schools, pupils from the working class often develop group identities that are in direct opposition to the brightest pupils as well as the teachers (Willis 1977).

Outside of bureaucratic organizations, workers develop "shop floor" cultures where they challenge their management in informal ways (Burawoy 1979a; 1979b; Cockburn 1983; Hodson 1995; 1997a; 1997b; Tucker 1993; Willis 1977).[37] For example, industrial workers in temporary contracts rarely use collective organizations such as unions to voice their grievances or complaints against their management; instead, they use strategies of "worker resistance" such as playing dumb or sabotaging production by smashing machines (Tucker 1993; Hodson 1997a). None of these forms of resistance enable a change in their employment status, but they allow clients to achieve a sense of autonomy and counter the boredom of their work (Burawoy 1979a).

However, this shows that the formation of group identities is rarely effective in changing clients' life chances. In welfare-to-work policies, this is also caused by the fact that clients often wish to dissociate themselves from other

[37] Although these studies focus on the relationship between workers and employers in factories, their insights can be applied to certain aspects of client–frontline worker relations. In both cases, there is a large power asymmetry between the parties, and both organizations assign participants clearly defined roles (Burawoy 1979b, 233).

clients. As a result, they describe other clients using public stereotypes, and they refrain from joining formal groups to challenge the premises of their situations (see Briar 1966; Goodban 1985; Popkin 1990; Soss 2005; Shildrick and MacDonald 2013; Chase and Walker 2012; Pultz 2018).

Adaptions to frontline workers' wishes or institutional demands. Another way of responding to or challenging frontline workers' decisions is to adapt or redefine their identity to fit frontline workers' wishes or institutional demands. These adaptations are rarely "totalizing" in the sense that clients refine all aspects of their identity in all aspects of their lives. Rather, they adapt particular parts of their identity to particular demands from frontline workers (Mik-Meyer and Silverman 2019).

For example, patients in closed psychiatric hospitals have been known to make several adjustments to cope with their situation. For example, they can shut off and emotionally withdraw from relationships with both fellow patients and the staff (Sellerberg 2008; E. Goffman 1961a). However, some of the patients also adapt by making a so-called "conversion". This means that the patient simply "takes over the official or staff view of himself and tries to act out the role of the perfect inmate" (E. Goffman 1961a, 63). This form of adaption is not a form of resistance but a complete redefinition of the clients' identity to accommodate frontline workers' wishes.

However, clients can also adapt their behavior in ways that enable them to avoid or escape contact with frontline workers. For example, residents in disadvantaged areas often attempt to avoid contact with the police. Therefore, they develop a form of "cop wisdom" (Stuart 2016b). This involves trying to look innocent, for example by avoiding scratching their hair, which the police often use as a sign to stop residents for possession of drugs. Others adopt a strategy of "system avoidance" (Brayne 2014) in order to escape contact with the police. This means that they deliberately avoid contact with so-called surveilling institutions such as banks, schools, and work places. These institutions keep their records and private information, which the police can find and use to track them down (A. Goffman 2014). While this enables them to escape the police, it often reproduces their status in society as they refrain from getting an education or re-entering employment.

Clients can also adapt themselves in ways that correspond to the aim of policies. For example, in social assistance programs, clients present themselves in ways that convince frontline workers to grant them assistance. They can practice what is called a "neoliberal citizenship" (Woolford and Nelund 2013) where they present themselves as "entrepreneurial," "autonomous," and "responsible" when they engage with frontline workers (see also Feldman & Schram 2019).

3.3.2 Policy designs

A second scholarship attributes clients' perceptions of frontline workers to the design of policies. This scholarship is largely associated with the work of Joe Soss (1999b; 2000; 2005). Therefore, in order to understand how clients' perceptions of frontline workers' decisions are influenced by the design of policies, I will now elaborate on his argument.

His argument is based on the idea that policies are constructed differently depending on the groups in society that they are targeted (Schneider and Ingram 1993; 1995; 1997). Policies targeted "undeserving" groups such as social assistance recipients or inmates often impose burdens upon these groups such as harsher penalties or strict obligations for receiving assistance. By contrast, policies targeted "deserving groups" such as the elderly or veterans often provide these groups with benefits such as higher pension benefits or educational scholarships.

Soss (2000) compared two welfare groups: clients receiving social security (SSDI[38]) and clients receiving social assistance (AFDC/TANF[39]). The design of the policies serving these two groups were very different. As he argued, the social insurance client is traditionally viewed as a "rights-bearing" recipient of public aid, whereas the social assistance client is positioned as a degraded and dependent object of control (Soss 2000, 91). Thus, the social assistance group (i.e. TANF/AFDC), receives a low and temporary benefit where frontline workers are granted large discretionary power. By contrast, the social security group (i.e. SSDI) receives a higher and permanent benefit where the discretionary powers of frontline workers are limited. Based on this, he attributed the two groups' different perceptions of their bureaucratic encounters to the design of each policy. He argued that "using each program as the backdrop of the other, general characteristics of welfare participation can be distinguished from characteristics that are unique to a given program" (17).

Concerning his analysis of the social assistance group (TANF/AFDC), he found that the design of the social assistance program led them to feel degraded and inferior in both their relationship with their caseworkers and the

[38] The Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSDI) is a social security disability program in the US that provides financial support to people with disabilities.

[39] Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) is a social assistance scheme in the US. In 1996, it was replaced with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, which, unlike the former program, provided only temporary assistance to families and put new obligations on the clients' part to obtain their assistance (see e.g. Lichter and Jayakody 2002).

broader agency.[40] Yet, he found two contrasts in their perceptions of their caseworker and their decision-making. Clients differed in their perceptions of their caseworkers' decisions in terms of whether they evaluated the following: (a) their first application encounter, and (b) their ability to express their needs and claim their rights during their encounters with their welfare caseworker in the later stages of their welfare encounters.

When clients evaluated their first welfare encounter of applying for assistance (see also Soss, 1999b), including waiting time in the welfare office, information processing, and their direct encounters with their caseworkers, he found a "puzzle of client evaluations." Clients expressed a paradoxical feeling of being both subordinated and satisfied. On the one hand, clients felt subordinated and demeaned by the agency that provided social assistance, and they described the agency as an invasive and hostile institution. On the other hand, they viewed the individual caseworker as helpful and supportive (Soss 2000, 121–23; see also Barnes and Henly 2018).[41]

However, once the clients had obtained their assistance, a different pattern occurred. When clients explained their ability to "speak up" and present their needs in their regular appointments with their caseworker, they viewed their caseworker-relationship as a one-way transaction: Their caseworkers did not listen or respond to their needs (130). Clients developed these perceptions because they thought that the design of the social assistance agency allowed the individual caseworker almost complete power and discretion to punish them as clients. He specifically argued that:

> These relationships focused clients' attention on the importance of specific individuals, while obscuring the limits imposed by rules and supervisory structures. Clients' contacts with the agency were almost always mediated through their caseworkers. These workers decided what information would be

[40] This was in stark contrast to the perceptions of the social security group (SSDI) who felt empowered in their encounters.

[41] Barnes & Henly (2018) document a similar puzzle. They examine clients receiving childcare assistance in two different states in the US (New York and Illinois). They focus on whether clients hold the individual frontline worker or the bureaucracy accountable for decisions. They argue that this depends on whether clients view the individual frontline worker of the bureaucracy as being in control of their decisions. For example, they found that some of the clients viewed frontline workers as "constrained bureaucrats". In the views of the clients, these frontline workers were unable to attend to their needs because of factors beyond their control, such as resource scarcity. However, other clients blamed the individual frontline workers for their decisions, because they believed that they were "autonomous bureaucrats." These bureaucrats, according to clients, had the discretionary power to respond to clients' needs.

> entered into bureaucratic records, and made any important decisions affecting participants. From clients' perspectives, caseworkers appeared to hold nearly complete power to assist or punish. (Soss 1996, 221)

In sum, in the initial phase of applying for assistance, clients evaluate frontline workers as making decisions that somehow work against the bureaucratic organization. Even though the social assistance agency is viewed as subordinating and demeaning them, they view the individual frontline worker as supportive and helpful. Yet, in the later phases of the encounter, clients view frontline workers as making decisions on behalf of the social assistance agency and in line with the policy design of their benefit. They now feel that frontline workers have been granted large discretion, which they can use to punish them.

3.4. How do frontline workers' decisions convey political lessons to clients?

Clients' encounters with frontline workers also influence clients' broader views about government responsiveness as well as their political participation. This is based on an assumption that policies "feed back." This means that citizens do not just deliver input to political decision-making. The political decision-making and the formulated policies influence what types of input citizens are able to formulate (Mettler and Soss 2004; Campbell 2012). Policy feedback can be defined more specifically as "the process through which policies shape political outcomes, which in turn either reinforce or undermine policy itself" (Lerman and McCabe 2017, 625). There are different strands in the policy feedback scholarship,[42] and I focus specifically on the political learning aspect of this scholarship.

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[42] One approach explores the "mass policy feedback effects" (Soss and Schram 2007). These studies explore how policies alter the preferences, beliefs, and behaviors of mass publics (Campbell 2003; Mettler 2011; 2005; Mettler and Stonecash 2008). For example, Mettler (2005) shows how the expansion of educational opportunities for people who served in World War II enhanced their civic and political participation significantly. These changes typically occur through resource effects (Pierson 1993) as policies provide citizens with time and money to mobilize collective political action (Campbell 2003). A second, more recent strand explores how policies are able to increase disadvantaged and underrepresented citizens' political voice in society by involving them through co-production (Hjortskov, Andersen, and Jakobsen 2018). A third strand, the historical institutionalist approach, exerts emphasis on the impact of historical policy institutions on contemporary political decisions. Pierson (2000; 2004), for example, has shown that policies create "lock-in effects" where

Studies, focusing on political learning, argue that the design of policies not only influences clients' perceptions of frontline workers' decisions (see section 3.3.2), but also clients' broader political views, such as internal efficacy (i.e. a belief in one's own ability to influence government decision-making) and external efficacy (i.e. a belief in government responsiveness). These feedback effects occur, because policies convey messages[43] to clients about their status in society:

> Social constructions become embedded in policy as messages that are absorbed by citizens and affect their orientations and participation patterns. Policy sends messages about what government is supposed to do, which citizens are deserving (and which not), and what kinds of attitudes and participatory patterns are appropriate in a democratic society. (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 334)

The question is then how are these messages of policies absorbed and interpreted by citizens more specifically? This has sparked a scholarly debate regarding which features of policies[44] that convey messages to clients (Campbell 2012; Mettler and Soss 2004; Jacobs and Mettler 2018; Soss and Schram 2007; Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010). They largely agree that the political messages of policies are absorbed by citizens through a "spill-over effect" in bureaucratic encounters. This means that bureaucratic encounters become a school classroom where clients inadvertently draw broader political lessons from this encounters:

> Program designs structure clients' experiences in ways that shape their beliefs about the effectiveness of asserting themselves at the welfare agency. Because clients associate the agency with government as a whole, these program-specific beliefs, in turn, become the basis for broader orientations toward government and political action. (Soss 1999a, 364)

This spillover effect occur, because encounters with frontline workers simply provide clients with the most proximate and reliable source of information

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elected officials seeking to transform or dismantle certain welfare policies are likely to face resistance from the interest groups and bureaucratic constituencies.

[43] Policies also influence clients' broader political perceptions through so-called "resource effects" (Pierson 1993; Campbell 2012). For example, increasing the size of social security benefits for seniors gives them more leisure time to participate in local politics (Campbell 2003).

[44] For a discussion of other features of policies that generate interpretive effects, see Campbell (2012, 338–41).

about how government works (Soss 1999a, 364).[45] In other words, clients view frontline workers as an extended arm of government. This means that if clients view their frontline workers' decisions as discretionary and arbitrary, they apply this perception to government. As a result, government comes to be seen as an "autonomous institution" that governs regardless of rules and demands made by clients (369).

3.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed the existing literature, focusing on three factors that are relevant for answering the research questions:

a. How do frontline workers make decisions?
b. How do clients experience frontline workers' decisions?
c. How do frontline workers' decisions convey broader political lessons to clients?

As I summarize the main results from the review in table 3.1, I will not go into further detail with this here. Instead, I will focus on the potentials for building upon these insights from the studies reviewed in this chapter for understanding the bureaucratic decoupling effect.

In order to understand the bureaucratic decoupling effect, it is relevant to understand how clients come to decouple frontline workers from their official institutional role as a ground-level policy-maker. This would most likely occur when clients believe that there is a low power asymmetry between them and frontline workers. However, as I have shown in this review, existing studies are based on the premise that clients find themselves in a structural and "fixed" power-asymmetrical relationship with frontline workers. This power asymmetry shapes both how they act towards frontline workers – for example, through hidden transcripts (Scott 1990) or secondary adjustments (E. Goffman 1961a) – and how they perceive frontline workers' decisions – for example, as actions of government (Soss 1999a).

Moreover, bureaucratic decoupling essentially means that clients view frontline workers as outside of the bureaucratic organization through which they enforce policies. However, existing studies view frontline workers as a "prolonged arm" of bureaucratic organizations. This means that frontline workers automatically convey messages to clients about their deservingness. For example, this means that if clients find themselves in a policy program that portrays them as undeserving and puts several burdens upon them

[45] This spillover effect has been confirmed in various studies and across different client groups (see e.g. Weaver and Lerman 2010; Lerman and Weaver 2014; Bruch and Soss 2018; Kumlin 2004).

(Schneider and Ingram 1993), they come to feel subordinated in their encounters with frontline workers as well as in their encounters with bureaucratic organizations, such as government. Yet, this disregards findings from studies focusing on frontline workers that show that frontline workers often act in ways that lead to a reconstruction or reformulation of the original objective of policies. When doing so, frontline workers reposition themselves in relation to bureaucratic organizations and potentially redefine their role as bureaucratic decision-makers. The next step is therefore to investigate how clients perceive this.

As I will show in the next chapter, clients' perceptions of frontline workers' decisions cannot be reduced to either the design of the utility jobs scheme or the power asymmetry between the clients and the work supervisors. Therefore, I theorize how clients' behavior and perceptions of frontline workers' decisions are created in their face-to-face encounters with frontline workers. Research shows that power asymmetries and the enforcement of policies are often changed and revoked when clients and frontline workers encounter each other face-to-face (Bartels 2013).

Part II
Theorizing and Operationalizing Bureaucratic Decoupling

Chapter 4. An Institutional Order of Face-to-Face Encounters: Theorizing Bureaucratic Decoupling

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I construct a theoretical framework for bureaucratic decoupling. Unlike existing studies, this framework does not explain clients' behavior by focusing on either the power asymmetry between them and the frontline workers or the design of policies. I theorize that bureaucratic decoupling is created by the nature of the face-to-face encounter. This encounter follows informal situational dynamics that revoke power asymmetries and lead to a reconstruction of policies in ways far from their official objective. This paves the way for clients to view frontline workers as individuals decoupled from their official role as bureaucratic decision-makers.

I theorize this based on the empirical setting of the activation site where I conducted fieldwork (see also chapter 2). In other words, I use my participant observations of the relations between the work supervisors and the clients to theorize and operationalize face-to-face bureaucratic encounters and the way these encounters create bureaucratic decoupling. Using a specific empirical site to theorize broader political dynamics is nothing new: Sites like the slaughterhouse (Pachirat 2011), the welfare office (Soss 2000, 29), the boxing gym (Wacquant 2004), the ghetto block (A. Goffman 2014; Stuart 2016a), and the school (Cecchini 2018; Khan 2011; Willis 1977) have previously been used as cases to render broader theoretical insights.

This means two things. First, although the theory is empirically grounded, it touches upon broader theoretical dynamics in street-level bureaucracies. This makes the theory applicable to encounters between clients and frontline workers in other street-level bureaucratic organizations. I discuss this further in Chapter 10. Second, it means that I do not present the theory as a set of hypotheses about bureaucratic decoupling. Rather, I present the theory as the final product of an "abductive way" of conducting research as I will explain more in detail in chapter 5.

Based on theorizing my observations, I argue that an "institutional order" governs face-to-face encounters at the activation site. It governs face-to-face encounters through four features. These four features change the behavior of

both the clients and the work supervisors and make them act in ways that cannot be reduced to either the design of the activation scheme or their individual characteristics. These four features are:

1. A proximity between clients and the work supervisors.
2. A "deep" discretion of the work supervisors exercised in "mundane" decisions.
3. The presence of a "public".
4. Time.

The chapter is divided into three parts. As I showed in the previous chapter, existing studies often reduce clients' experiences of frontline workers' decisions to either the power-asymmetry between them or the design of policies. These studies overlook that power asymmetries are often revoked while policies are reinterpreted and reenacted when clients and frontline workers encounter each other face-to-face. This is key to understanding the bureaucratic effect. Therefore, in the first part, I briefly review the existing research on bureaucratic encounters and show that there is potential for further theorizing. In the second part, I define the institutional order of face-to-face bureaucratic encounters. In the third part, I theorize the four features of the institutional order and how these features create bureaucratic decoupling.

4.2. Face-to-face encounters in bureaucratic organizations

Face-to-face encounters have long been subject to scholarly attention. In sociology, Erving Goffman (1961b) for example, defined different forms of encounters, including focused and unfocused encounters, and how these influence the way in which individuals interact and present themselves "front stage" (see e.g. E. Goffman 1967; 1959). Moreover, the symbolic interactionist approach argues that individuals' perceptions and behavior can never be conceptualized a priori (Blumer 1969) but are developed and restructured in and through interactions with others.

Yet, in public administration research, the study of bureaucratic encounters is much more limited, and there is a lack of both theoretical and empirical studies on this subject. This is paradoxical as one of the main characteristics of street-level bureaucrats is their exercise of discretion during face-to-face encounters with clients (Lipsky 1980).

There have been some attempts to conceptualize different forms of bureaucratic encounters. Goodsell (1981) argues that bureaucratic encounters

can vary in terms of whether clients initiate the encounter, whether the encounter involves control, or whether the encounter occurs face-to-face or over the phone. Studies that are more recent have conceptualized how face-to-face encounters influence the behavior of both frontline workers and clients. Bartels (2013, 476) argues that face-to-face encounters are:

> a multifaceted process of interwoven situated performances which enables or disadvantages the actual abilities of public professions and citizens to make claims, influence decisions, and understand each other.

This shows that face-to-face encounters structure how clients perceive and act towards frontline workers. Yet, there is a need for a more systematic theorizing of how face-to-face encounters influence relations between clients and frontline workers. As I will discuss later, this will enable an understanding of the bureaucratic decoupling.

4.3. The institutional order of face-to-face encounters

Broadly speaking, face-to-face encounters can be seen as being governed by an "interaction order" (E. Goffman 1983), where situational norms guide how individuals interact, or a "social order" (Bourdieu 1990), where socio-economic differences between individuals structure how they interact. How are face-to-face encounters in bureaucratic organizations governed? To answer this, Dubois (2019) defines a third type of order: the "institutional order." The institutional order links aspects of the social order to the interaction order through bureaucratic face-to-face encounters as he explains below:

> Institutional encounters depend on pre-existing social structures, crystallized in bureaucratic roles and rules, and interiorized in the habituses of the participants. Conversely, the course of these interactions is not pre-ordained, and their hardly predictable conclusions have a direct impact on the recipients, who may be sanctioned, excluded from welfare benefits, or confirmed as deserving clients. (Dubois 2019, 517)

On the one hand, in the institutional order, bureaucratic face-to-face encounters are informed by the individual characteristics of the participants as well as the design of policies. The policies and rules of bureaucratic organizations define the scope of the encounter and the institutional roles that clients and frontline workers are able to play. They grant frontline workers the discretion to influence clients' life chances by, for example, providing or withdrawing a benefit. Clients are also provided the power to – to a certain extent – influence

these decisions, for example by writing complaints. The ability to play these roles is influenced by their individual characteristics: Some frontline workers are more inclined to help clients while others are more inclined to penalize clients (see e.g. Schram et al. 2009; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Some clients are always more advantaged in terms of influencing bureaucratic decisions, for example if they possess a strong social network (see e.g. Bisgaard 2020; Lens 2009; Dominguez and Watkins-Hayes 2003).

On the other hand, bureaucratic face-to-face encounters also follow informal situational norms, for example that of face-work (E. Goffman 1967). These norms operate autonomously and are irreducible to the design of policies and the characteristics of the participants. This includes, for example, the timing of when clients should present facts about themselves (Mik-Meyer and Silverman 2019; Stax 2003) or the ways in which frontline workers explain their decisions or obtain information from clients (Dubois 2010; 2014). These informal situational dynamics during the encounter often cause the participants to reinterpret policies and redefine their institutional roles. Thus, building upon Dubois' (2019) solution, the aim is to use his notion of an institutional order as a theoretical platform to theorize further about face-to-face encounters between clients and work supervisors at the activation site.

What are the roles of face-to-face encounters at the utility jobs activation site? First, the cash-assistance scheme as an institution influences the encounter between clients and the work supervisors in several ways. For example, the encounters are formalized by rules prescribed by the cash-assistance scheme, such as how long clients should attend activation as well as the consequences for non-compliance. Moreover, deservingness perceptions of cash-assistance recipients (see Hedegaard 2014) have also influenced the design and objective of using utility jobs activation – that is, to counter the passivity of the unemployed and include them in mainstream society (Nielsen 2014).

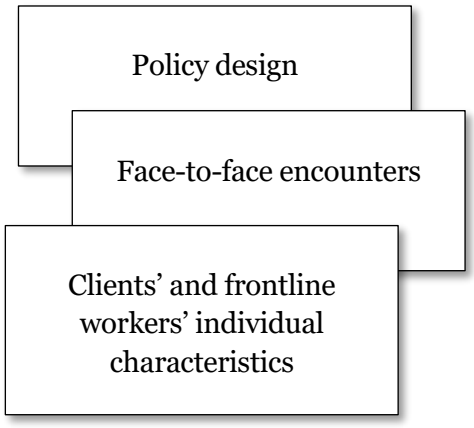
Yet, in the face-to-face encounter, both the clients and the work supervisors often act in ways that are not prescribed or defined by the cash-assistance scheme. For example, why do the work supervisors choose to enforce the rules leniently, and why do they often invoke justifications of their decisions in which they criticize the political objectives of cash-assistance? Moreover, why do the clients make behavioral adjustments that make the work supervisors' jobs as easy as possible, such as avoiding asking questions or working in an inefficient way? These forms of behavior are relevant when analyzing bureaucratic decoupling, but they only make sense, as I will argue further in the next part of the chapter, when looking at the nature of the encounter.

Second, the individual characteristics of clients and frontline workers also influence their face-to-face interactions. The cash-assistance scheme groups together a number of clients with similar life situations, such as the inability

to find a job. Moreover, some of the work supervisors have experienced unemployment themselves and have a precarious and fragmented employment history similar to that of the clients. Yet, it seems paradoxical that socially and economically resourceful clients at the activation site develop a strong bond to the work supervisors, as I will show in the analytical chapters. This only makes sense when we look at the nature of the face-to-face encounters.

In sum, I argue that the nature of face-to-face encounters at the activation site follows situational norms that are informed by, but irreducible to, the individual characteristics of the participants and the political design of the activation site. I illustrate the role of face-to-face encounters at the activation site in figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1. The institutional order of the encounters between clients and frontline workers



As the aim of Dubois' (2019) discussion is to show how the institutional order links the interaction order to the social order, he places less emphasis on systematically specifying the features of face-to-face encounters and how they influence the behavior of clients and frontline workers. In the next part of the chapter, I theorize the particular features of the institutional order and the way these features structure face-to-face encounters in a way that creates bureaucratic decoupling.

4.4. The four features of the institutional order

In this section, I theorize the features of the institutional order and how they cause bureaucratic decoupling. These features are informed by the policy design of the cash-assistance scheme as well as the individual characteristics of

the clients and work supervisors. Yet, they emerge and operate only in the interaction between clients and the work supervisors, and they guide their interaction in a way that leads clients to decouple the work supervisors from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers in the cash-assistance scheme. In theorizing these features, I mainly use examples about clients from welfare-to-work encounters. Yet, as I will discuss later, in Chapter 10, the four features are also applicable to cases such as policing or incarceration.

4.4.1. Feature 1: Proximity between clients and frontline workers

The first feature of the institutional order is a proximity between clients and frontline workers. This "blurs" traditional power asymmetries, and it makes clients perceive frontline workers as individuals who are decoupled from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers. However, traditional welfare encounters "at the desk" at the welfare office (Dubois 2010) are based on the premise of a distance between clients and frontline workers. This distance upholds a power asymmetry between them in a symbolic, administrative, physical, and professional sense. These distances create an impersonalized relationship, which leads clients to view frontline workers as bureaucratic decision-makers and therefore as official representatives of a policy. In this section, I briefly discuss these traditional distances. Afterwards, I theorize how they are "blurred" by a proximity between clients and the work supervisors at the activation site.

Distances between clients and frontline workers. First, there is symbolic distance between clients and frontline workers. For example, social assistance clients in welfare-to-work policies are often portrayed as undeserving of help (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a), and the conditions of receiving assistance are aimed at deterring potential claimants (Piven and Cloward 1971, 3). When clients step into a welfare office, they know from the beginning that their claims are unworthy of occupying the time of frontline workers – a point which is underlined both by the physical architecture of the welfare room (Goodsell 1984) and the short meetings which often last no longer than ten minutes. Moreover, frontline workers are also vested with the power to define clients' situations and thereby impose categories upon the clients with which they might not agree (Dubois 2019). This grants the frontline workers the power to retain or reinforce distances between the clients and other societal groups.

Second, there is an administrative distance between them. This is created by a "system of gaps" (Dubois 2010, 30). For example, social assistance clients' behavior – including unemployment, unstable families, or lack of ability to

handle their finances – often does not fit bureaucratic categories. These categories reward self-sufficiency, short-term unemployment, flexibility, and stable family lives. This creates an administrative distance where clients cannot translate their problems into legitimate claims. Moreover, these clients often do not have the linguistic capital and knowledge of the rules to articulate their problems in a way that persuades frontline workers to change their decisions (Matthews and Hastings 2013).

Third, there exists a physical distance between clients and frontline workers. Frontline workers and clients often remain in physically separate "territories" (E. Goffman 1971, 28). For example, when social assistance clients are scheduled for an appointment, they are seated in a waiting room. These waiting rooms are placed in a physical distance to the consultation rooms where frontline workers are seated (Goodsell 1984). Moreover, to avoid outbursts, clients are not allowed to approach the workers themselves, and they have to remain seated until they are called. The next step is the actual encounter with frontline workers. This often occurs at an administrative desk: The client sits on one side of the desk and the frontline worker on the other side. These separate territories allow frontline workers to retain the "mysticism"[46] of their bureaucratic authority and clients to retain a personal space in which they can hide personal information (Dubois 2010, 158).

Finally, there is a distance between clients and frontline workers because of the frontline workers' professional knowledge (Abbot 1988; Beauchamp and Childress 2001; Parsons 1939). This creates a so-called "functional specificity of the relation" (Parsons 1939, 469, cited in Harrits 2016, 2) between clients and frontline workers: Through formal educational training, frontline workers have gained expertise in exercising their discretion and therefore assessing what is best for the client. The clients, on the other hand, come to the desk because they have problems they cannot solve themselves. Therefore, they have to rely on the expertise of the frontline worker, which creates and reinforces a distance and power asymmetry in their relationship.

Proximities between clients and the work supervisors. These traditional forms of distance and power asymmetries are "blurred" at the activation site. When clients interact with the work supervisors, they get the impression that they are dealing with individuals and private persons who are decoupled from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers.

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[46] In describing welfare clients' perceptions of the bureaucratic system, Dubois (2010, 49) writes: "However, the institution itself, its functioning, and hierarchy remains almost always shrouded in mystery. Many of those perceive the CAF [family welfare scheme in France] as an organization whose workings are unfathomably intricate, and assume it has unbounded powers."

As soon as the clients enter the activation site, they are issued a set of work clothes, a pair of safety boots, and a locker in which they can hang their private clothes. At first, this would reinforce a symbolic distance between the clients and the work supervisors. Two things, however, blur this symbolic distance and push the clients closer towards the work supervisors. First, clients are not the only ones who perform work. They work in the immediate physical presence of the work supervisors who – even though they wear different work clothes – perform the same work assignments, including picking up trash, trimming trees, and cleaning. The clients and the work supervisors now engage on the same "territory" (E. Goffman 1971), conveying the impression to clients that they are "on the same team." During these work encounters, clients now also have almost unlimited time with the work supervisors as they spend five hours together each day for more than three months. This allows clients to see the work supervisors as individuals decoupled from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers.

Second, the administrative distances are blurred. Their "work encounters" are free from any administrative categories or paper work. They are informal, and clients no longer have to translate their "illegitimate problems" into legitimate administrative concerns. They are given the time to talk about their personal problems, especially the reasons why they are unemployed. During these sessions, the work supervisors also remove their "bureaucratic gaze"; they share their own personal stories and problems to which the clients, in many instances, can relate.

Finally, unlike many of the welfare-to-work frontline workers that clients have encountered previously, the majority of the work supervisors are not trained as social workers. Rather, they are hired because of their previous history of working outdoors (e.g. as a gardener, craftsman, or biologist). This causes the work supervisors to use their personal identity and their work trajectory when they engage with clients rather than administrative categories. Moreover, when they engage with the clients, they often draw upon their non-formalized knowledge and interest of nature and working outdoors. This leads clients to see the work supervisors as passionate individuals rather than experts, which creates a professional proximity between them.

In sum, at the activation site, traditional power asymmetries are revoked and replaced by a proximity between clients and the work supervisors. This makes the clients see the work supervisors as individuals who are decoupled from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers.

4.4.2. Feature 2: Deep discretion exercised in mundane decisions

Discretion is the condition that sets street-level bureaucrats apart from other frontline workers in bureaucratic organizations. In their encounters with clients, they use their discretion to determine the nature, amount, and quality of public services (Lipsky 1980, 13). The degree to which workers can exercise their discretion varies considerably. In Lipsky's words, however, "it follows that the greater the degree of discretion, the more salient is analysis in understanding the character of workers' behavior" (15).

Existing studies in the street-level bureaucracy scholarship analyze discretion in "high stake" cases (Bisgaard 2018, 364). In these cases, the decisions of frontline workers have crucial implications for the clients involved. Decisions in high-stake cases include, for example, the decision to grant custody rights over children, to sanction welfare clients, or the decision of a police officer to make a "stop and frisk" on the street. Due to their decisive importance for clients' everyday lives, scholars in the policy feedback scholarship have, therefore, assumed that such high-stake decisions will have a significant impact on clients' broader political views.

The work supervisors, however, do not exercise their discretion in high-stake cases but in mundane cases. They decide when clients are allowed to work, take a break, and leave at the end of the day. Although these decisions are crucial since they structure clients' lives for five hours a day for three months, they are unlikely to put clients on the street or remove them from their families.[47] At first, the "mundane" nature of their decisions would, therefore, lead us to expect that their decisions are irrelevant in terms of understanding bureaucratic decoupling. However, unlike the frontline welfare workers analyzed in the majority of street-level bureaucracy studies, the work supervisors at the activation site hold a "deep discretion"[48] (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a, 230). This means that they have the freedom to manage clients' lives for five hours each day more or less based on their own will. Talking to one of the work supervisors, Ole, about their job, he says:

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[47] It is important to note that if the clients are consistently late or adopt aggressive behavior, the work supervisors can then inform the caseworkers at the activation site, which may lead them to sanction or remove these clients from the site.

[48] Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011a, 230) distinguish between wide and deep discretion: Wide discretion means the authority to make a wide variety of decisions affecting the client, whereas deep discretion means the individual liberty to treat clients as frontline workers would like.

Field note, 09.04.2019

#Ole (work supervisor): You've been out here [to the park where they are working], and you know that we're not busy. Well, yes, if you actually engage yourself with the clients. Otherwise, you could just drive the clients out here, then you could go back, then they could stand out here for four hours, and then we could pick them up and drive them back home. We're not busy, you know.

Why then is this feature relevant for bureaucratic decoupling? First, when the work supervisors exercise their deep discretion in the immediate face-to-face encounters with clients over a period of three months, it puts them in a social dilemma. On the one hand, they cannot disregard all the rules. They are obliged to make sure that clients are in attendance and work throughout the day at the activation site. Moreover, if all the rules are disregarded, clients would come to disrespect the authority of the work supervisors. On the other hand, the work supervisors cannot enforce the rules rigidly. As they interact with the clients physically for several hours each day, the work supervisors are dependent on maintaining a comfortable relationship with the clients. Moreover, as the work assignments can be trivial in nature, including cleaning or picking up trash, a strict enforcement of the rules would damage their relationship with the clients. To solve this dilemma, the work supervisors enforce the rules leniently. On some occasions, they allow clients to leave early, take multiple breaks, or just go for a walk instead of working. On other occasions, they oblige clients to work efficiently and stay until the official end of the workday.

However, this lenient enforcement of the rules can also result in potentially unfair treatment of clients, for example if the work supervisors allow only some of the clients to leave. Therefore, these clients ask for justification of the work supervisors' decisions. As the work supervisors wish to retain an image of themselves as nice individuals, they justify their decisions by deflecting responsibility away from themselves. This often involves disclosing the challenges of their jobs, such as implementing political rules, complying with their management's instructions, or finding enough work assignments for the clients.

This has two implications for clients at the site. First, clients get a strong impression of the work supervisors as decision-makers and witness first-hand some of the challenges of the work supervisors' jobs. This makes it appear as if the work supervisors' otherwise mundane decisions are determined by larger factors "beyond their control." Second, their deep discretion and inconsistent enforcement of the rules also convey an impression to the clients of the work supervisors as individuals who are willing to act on behalf of the clients.

4.4.3. Feature 3: The presence of a public

In the previous section, I argued that clients address the inconsistencies of the work supervisors' decisions by asking for justification. Yet, the spatial-temporal framework of the face-to-face encounter also prompts the clients to ask for justification and the work supervisors to provide some. First, clients do not only ask for justification because they feel unfairly treated but also because they need to present themselves in appropriate ways in front of a large group of other clients – that is, a "public."[49] Likewise, the work supervisors do not only justify their decisions because clients might feel unfairly treated due to their lenient enforcement of the rules but also because the spatial-temporal framework of the face-to-encounter creates an expectation that decisions are justified.

When clients ask for a justification. In a typical one-on-one meeting between a client and a frontline worker, clients rarely address or challenge frontline workers' decisions when they feel that they are unfairly treated (Lens 2007a; Miller 1983). This is both due to a power asymmetry and the inability of the client to speak the "administrative language" in order to correct the frontline worker (Matthews and Hastings 2013). However, in the presence of several other clients, acceptance and resignation are no longer the most viable options for clients. This is due to two reasons.

First, at the activation site, clients find themselves in the immediate presence of fellow clients, both in the park and in the meeting room, for several hours each day. As clients are talking, they realize that they share similar feelings of being unfairly treated. This reinforces their confidence to ask for justification. Second, the presence of a "public" also puts the clients "front stage" (E. Goffman 1959). This gives the bureaucratic encounter a performative aspect that is very different from one-on-one encounters. In the presence of others, clients now have to engage in a form of "face-work" (E. Goffman 1967) where they need to establish a line of action and an image of themselves that is approved by fellow clients. The face of the individual who dares to stand up for themselves and challenge bureaucratic decisions becomes a much more appropriate image to convey than the face of the individual who passively complies.

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[49] I use Dubois' (2010) notion of a "public," which he defines as the group of people, with diverse and heterogeneous demands and histories, who comes to the welfare office (25). I also use the word "public" to signify how the clients in this study are not just an "audience" that passively observes the supervisors and their fellow clients. The clients in this study both observe and participate in their face-to-face encounters with the supervisors, forming relationships, calling out inconsistencies, and asking for justifications.

When the work supervisors provide justification. In one-on-one welfare encounters, two factors reduce the necessity for frontline workers to justify their decisions. First, the majority of frontline workers do not have to rely on maintaining a comfortable relationship with clients over time. In other words, if they refuse to explain their decisions, they will most likely never encounter the client again. Second, there is a tacit agreement between the two parties that the encounter is not a forum in which decisions are justified. It is tacit in the sense that the meeting often has a high-stake nature: If clients appear uncooperative, it will potentially have detrimental consequences for their future lives. It is also tacit in the sense that the encounter is a "father and child" relationship (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a, 23): The power and professional expertise vested in the frontline worker enables them to speak with a certain authority in a way not to be challenged. Third, there is often a physical separation of clients, which reduces their ability to ask for justifications. For example, welfare waiting rooms are always separated from the rooms where frontline workers carry out consultations with clients. The aim of this is to secure that clients in the waiting room do not overhear conversations during the consultations, which they can use afterwards against the frontline worker during their own consultation (Dubois 2010, 42–43).

However, the spatial-temporal framework of the face-to-face encounter at the activation site makes it very difficult for the work supervisors to avoid having to justify their decisions. First, the work supervisors always make decisions in front of a large group of clients in the meeting room. When one of the clients asks for justification or makes a provocation, this might cause other clients to act in the same way. Potentially, this can create chaos in the meeting room where the work supervisors lose their authority and are, therefore, left "out of face" (E. Goffman 1967). As such, the work supervisors are forced to control the situation. One way to do this is to continuously justify their decisions to address clients' demands or feelings of injustice. As the work supervisors encounter clients for several hours each day, their relationship with the clients would soon deteriorate if they refused to justify decisions. Thus, the spatial-temporal framework of the face-to-face encounter forces the work supervisors to enter into a "state of talk" where they have remain "open to one another for purposes of spoken communication and guarantee together to maintain a flow of words" (E. Goffman 1967, 34).

The types of justification that the work supervisors use. In front of a large group of clients, the work supervisors need to provide justifications that touch upon salient images among the clients while simultaneously deflecting responsibility away from themselves in order to retain their image as individuals. In particular, the work supervisors deflect responsibility onto either factors "from above" such as the rules or their managers or factors "from below"

such as the clients themselves. Since the work supervisors do not have any formal training as social workers, they often invoke commonsensical justifications.

First, regarding factors from above, existing studies show that frontline workers can deflect responsibility away from themselves and onto "the system" in general. Standard justifications include "large caseloads" (Soss 1999a, 86), "computer-mistakes," or mistakes made by people in the "back office" (Dubois 2010, 141-142). Frontline workers can also make a "call to order," emphasizing, "that's the rules and that it applies to all" (Dubois 2010, 146). These justifications often touch upon salient images among the clients at the activation site as most of them have experienced delays in the payment of their assistance or rules that suddenly appeared to change.

Second, regarding factors from below, existing studies show that when clients complain, frontline workers can reassert their authority by categorizing clients as "complainers," "letter writers" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 89), or having a "bad attitude" (Miller 1985; Sarat 1990). At the activation site, these justifications are particularly salient among the clients. As clients find themselves in the immediate presence of fellow clients, they directly witness those who complain and how these complaints affect the work supervisors' ability to do their jobs. Moreover, when the work supervisors label clients as either "uncooperative" or having a "bad attitude," this corresponds with cultural stereotypes about social assistance clients (Hedegaard 2014). Research shows that clients on social assistance often use these stereotypes to dissociate themselves from other clients on social assistance and shame them (Chase and Walker 2012; Pultz 2018; Shildrick and MacDonald 2013).

The broader consequences of this. When the work supervisors continuously justify their decisions by deflecting responsibility away from themselves onto salient images of either the "system" or "complaining clients," this can create both behavioral and political consequences.

First, when the work supervisors use justifications that problematize certain types of client behavior, the work supervisors simultaneously establish appropriate ways for clients to act at the site. Due to feature 1 & 2, clients come to perceive the work supervisors as individuals who face multiple challenges in their work. Therefore, they will act in ways that make the jobs of the work supervisors as easy as possible. This, for example, includes asking fewer questions or working less efficiently because this entails that the work supervisors do not have to struggle to find new work assignments. Erving Goffman (1961, 63) conceptualizes such behavioral adjustments as a "conversion" where clients "take over the official or staff view of himself and tries to act out the role of the perfect inmate." Clients who have undergone such conversion will,

therefore, try to accommodate the work supervisors and regulate others' behavior to avoid them posing a burden on the work supervisors.

Second, the work supervisors' continuous deflection of responsibility away from themselves has political consequences. Studies show that clients' images of how bureaucratic organizations will treat them arise from their perception of how frontline workers treat them and decide on matters that influence their daily lives. For example, (Soss 1999a) found that when frontline welfare workers made arbitrary decisions that deviated from the rules in clients' cases, clients used this as evidence to infer that government would also treat them in an arbitrary way.

Yet, what happens when frontline workers have blurred the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients and established themselves as individuals rather than as bureaucratic decision-makers? Then clients do not use their decisions as broader evidence of how bureaucratic organizations will treat them. Instead, clients will use the frontline workers' *justifications of their decisions* – that is, the ways in which frontline workers inform clients how factors beyond their control determine their decisions. Building upon the example of Soss (1999a), this means that although the work supervisors enforce the rules leniently in an often arbitrary way, clients at the activation site will not come to view government as an arbitrary institution. Instead, they will come to view government as a top-down institution that determines the decisions of frontline workers.

4.4.4. Feature 4: Time

At the activation site, clients and work supervisors encounter each other for five hours every day for more than three months. Time then plays a decisive role for the nature of these encounters. In particular, I theorize that time is an important feature in the institutional order in three ways:

1. Time operates a form of control
2. The activation site changes clients' perception of time,
3. The duration of the encounter intensifies the bureaucratic decoupling effect.

Time as a form of control.[50] As the work supervisors decide when clients are supposed to work, take a break, or leave at the end of the day, they often impose waiting time upon clients and thereby control their time. This grants them a specific form of power. Schwartz argues that "to be able to make a person wait is, above all, to possess the capacity to modify his conduct in a manner congruent with one's own interests" (Schwartz 1974, 844). Bourdieu argued,

[50] I elaborate more on the theoretical aspects of this in Paper A.

provokingly, how waiting time is "one of the privileged ways of experiencing the effect of power" (Bourdieu 2000, 228). This structural power asymmetry often makes clients accept that they have to wait (Auyero 2012), because they believe that they are powerless in changing the parameters of waiting time. In Auyero's (2012, 9) words: "habitual exposure to long delays molds a particular submissive set of dispositions among the urban poor."

At the activation site, the work supervisors also have the power to control clients' time and, therefore, make clients accept that they have to wait. Yet, the reason for this acceptance is not the structural power asymmetry between clients and work supervisors as Schwartz (1974) or Bourdieu (2000) assert. By contrast, the acceptance of waiting time among clients is relationally produced (Sorokin and Merton 1937). On the one hand, the work supervisors blur the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients, enabling them to establish trust and a form of loyalty among the clients to support them in their daily work. On the other hand, the work supervisors consistently transpose their power to control clients' time onto factors "beyond their control." The clients therefore accept that they have to wait, often unknowingly of how long, because they believe that the work supervisors are powerless in changing the parameters of waiting time.

A new perception of time. Clients' time in activation is marked by long periods of the day where they work and perform activities that hardly bring them closer to finding employment. Their life in activation is, therefore, characterized by what Gasparini (1995, 31) defines as "interstitial time" – that is, "a temporary or provisional interruption to an individual's action."[51] In consequence, many of the clients arrive at the activation site wishing that time would speed up.

Studies have explored perceptions of "interstitial" waiting time among prison inmates (Armstrong 2015; Matthews 1999), asylum seekers (Griffiths 2014; Turnbull 2015; Rotter 2015; Könönen 2019), migrants (Elliot 2015), and welfare citizens (Auyero 2012; Soss 1999b; Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald 2016; Haikkola 2018). They show how this creates both frustration and feelings of powerlessness. (Soss 1999b, 62), for example, found how clients on social assistance in the US felt frustrated, angry, and degraded when they had to endure long periods of waiting time at the welfare office. They also saw their waiting time as direct evidence of their low status in society. One of his interviewees said, "It is pretty much like they're up here, and you are down there" (59).

However, waiting time has a double dimension according to Dubois (2010, 157): It is both a mark of the clients' powerlessness and a resource because

[51] For a theoretical discussion of different conceptualizations of time and its relevance for sociology and political science, see Cipriani (2013) and Laux (2011).

clients (due to e.g. unemployment) often have the time, unlike other groups, to wait for the outcome of bureaucratic decisions. Moreover, observing asylum seekers in a UK detention center, Rotter (2015) found that asylum seekers used their waiting time to develop future goals about education or employment as well as prepare their asylum cases. Moreover, waiting time also grants individuals the time to socialize. Dubois (2019) argues that the welfare waiting room is also a "place to talk" and an access point to people who will listen to their problems (Dubois 2019, 515).

At the activation site, waiting time also contains positive aspects that change the clients' perception of time. First, they learn that the long periods of interstitial waiting time (Gasparini 1995) allow them to time to reflect upon their lives and use this time as a form of therapy. Second, it allows them time to socialize with other clients while working or waiting to be permitted to leave. Finally, the waiting time also allows clients to engage with the work supervisors who often have input on how to overcome struggles at home or alternative strategies for finding a job. Thus, the presence of interstitial waiting time is somehow transformed into "productive time" (Rotter 2015), which may reduce clients' wishes of leaving the activation site.

Duration. Finally, the duration of the encounter influences the extent to which clients draw broader political lessons from their encounters in activation. The political lessons of clients' activation encounters are bureaucratic decoupling and the perception that frontline workers are outside of the bureaucratic organizations that implement public policy (see Chapter 1).

Two factors, in particular, influence the extent to which clients draw political lessons from their encounters. First, throughout their lives, research shows that clients encounter many different bureaucratic organizations. These experiences influence how they interpret a new encounter with a frontline worker and the lessons they inadvertently draw from this encounter (Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Jacobs and Mettler 2018). Moreover, although a particular encounter may leave a strong impression on the clients, they are simultaneously subjected to many other political lessons, for example from the media (Soss 2005). However, as clients' encounters in activation occur every day for more than three months, this reduces – if not erases – the influence of both prior and conflicting program experiences when they interpret their encounters with the work supervisors. Studies of inmates (Lerman and Weaver 2014; Weaver and Lerman 2010; Sykes 1958) and mental health patients (E. Goffman 1961a; Sellerberg 2008) confirm this.

4.5. Conclusion

Using the activation site, I have theorized the bureaucratic decoupling effect. Rather than solely stressing the policy design or power asymmetries, the theory of bureaucratic decoupling emphasizes the nature of the encounter between clients and frontline workers. The nature of the encounter is governed by an institutional order that contains four features that operate autonomously and are irreducible to both the political and individual level of bureaucratic encounters. These four features constitute (1) a proximity between clients and the work supervisors, a (2) "deep" discretion exercised in mundane decisions, (3) the presence of a "public," and (4) time.

When the power asymmetry between clients and supervisors are blurred, clients come to see the work supervisors as individuals decoupled from their official role as bureaucratic decision-makers. This makes it easy for clients to relate to the work supervisors, and when they consider themselves as being on "the same team," clients establish a sense of loyalty to them. This loyalty is reinforced when clients learn that the work supervisors are willing to compromise the rules for the sake of clients, such as by allowing them to leave early or take multiple breaks throughout the day. However, as the work supervisors continuously justify their decisions by invoking the difficult nature of implementing the rules, complying with managerial decisions, and managing multiple clients at once, clients also get an impression of their role as decision-makers, namely that factors beyond their control determine their decisions. This creates an impression among the clients that the work supervisors are decoupled from the bureaucratic organization in which they are employed.

Chapter 5. Methodology

Field note, 08.03.2019

#Arne [work supervisor]: "Are you the work supervisor today, Lasse?" he asks and laughs.

#Me: "I don't think I'm capable of that at all," I reply, laughing.

#Arne [to a group of clients]: "We're heading back now. We don't want to do any more now. It's bad weather too, you know? Yeah, and it's also Friday, right … So we shouldn't keep at it for too long … But, I mean, you can just drive back when you want to … at like 12 p.m. or something … or you can just leave earlier … at 11:30?"

One of the clients, Pia, comes over and interferes.

#Pia: [to Arne] "But Ole [work supervisor] has said that we should just drive back when you do."

#Arne: "Oh, okay … I see … But wait until 11:30 a.m. because then I can get these guys [his own team] sent home … And then there's Lasse, who's a work supervisor out here, if you recall," he says and laughs.

5.1. Introduction

The field note shows both a theoretical and a methodological point. From a theoretical standpoint, the work supervisor, Arne, blurs the power asymmetry (*feature 1*) between himself and the clients as he de-emphasizes the importance of working and therefore his role as the enforcer of the utility job scheme. Simultaneously, he enforces the rules leniently, allowing clients to leave early (*feature 2*). In doing so, he deflects responsibility onto factors beyond his control, such as the weather and the other team of clients, which another supervisor is managing.

From a methodological standpoint, Arne also deflects responsibility over to me. I am neither a work supervisor nor a client. At the site, however, I am wearing a set of work clothes – the same as the ones worn by the clients. I am doing the same work assignments as the clients. I wait when they wait, I take a break when they take a break, I arrive when they arrive, and I leave the site when they leave the site. I am using my own body as a research instrument to dissect how bureaucratic decoupling works. My presence in the field influ-

ences the face-to-face encounters between the clients and the work supervisors. The aim of this chapter is therefore to discuss how I collected this data, with what purpose, and with what consequences. As I will show, I did not expect to find bureaucratic decoupling when I entered the activation site. I discovered it through an abductive logic of reasoning. Through further data collection and processing, I was able to operationalize it as a theoretical phenomenon.

Overall, this dissertation consists of a combination of interviews, both with clients and frontline workers, as well as participant observations of their interactions. The complete sources of data are illustrated in table 5.1.

Table 5.1. Sources of data for the dissertation

Research subject	Sources	Aim
Clients	42 in-depth interviews (eight of which are follow up) with clients at the activation site	Understanding how clients perceive the decisions of frontline workers and the political lessons they draw from them
Clients	10 interviews (including one follow up) with clients (age <30) at a job-searching course at the job center in the same municipality where the activation site is placed[a)]	Pilot study to test the interview guide and to contextualize the interviews with clients at the activation site
Clients	370 hours of participant observation of clients at the activation site	Understanding how clients behave and act towards frontline workers during face-to-face encounters
Frontline workers	370 hours of participant observation of the work supervisors at the activation site, as well as several observations of caseworkers' and job consultants' (at the activation site) formal meetings with clients	Understanding how frontline workers interact and make decisions during their encounters with clients
Frontline workers	10 interviews with frontline workers,[b)] including five interviews with the work supervisors, three interviews with caseworkers, one interview with a job consultant, and one interview with one of the managers of the utility jobs scheme.	Understanding how frontline workers reflect upon their decisions and behavior during their encounters with clients

a. I do not analyze the perceptions of this group in this dissertation. For a list of the interviewees in this group, see Appendix A3.
b. In Paper A, I mention that I have conducted 9 interviews with members of the staff. However, I was able to interview one of the work supervisors after the publication of paper A.

The chapter is structured in two parts. First, I discuss the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the dissertation. Second, I discus both data generation (participant observations and conducting interviews) and data processing (coding techniques).

5.2. Methodology: Between embodiment, interpretivism, abduction, and criticism

In this section, I discuss the methodology[52] of the dissertation. It consists of a combination of embodiment, interpretivism, abduction, and criticism. They are all interlinked. I place myself in the position of the clients (embodiment) to understand how clients interpret the work supervisors' decisions (interpretivism). I interpret clients' perceptions by continuously adapting my theory of bureaucratic decoupling to my observation points and interview questions (abduction). This enables me to critically deconstruct (criticism) how public policies are delivered in mundane street-level interactions and which broader political lessons they convey.

5.2.1. Embodiment

The ontological premise of an embodied understanding of knowledge is based on two critiques of existing and general notions in the social sciences (Wacquant 2015, 2–3). First, there is an assumption that structures are "outside" of individuals. However, structures are always inscribed upon and unfolded in the bodies. This means that individuals know the world because they are directly "caught up" in its structures (Bourdieu 2000, 143). Second, social sciences is based on a simplistic understanding of knowledge. It is assumed that knowledge is expressed through language and as something located in the mind. Individuals are then perceived "as a sort of monster with the head of a thinker thinking his practice in reflexive and logical fashion mounted on the body of a man of action engaged in action" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 123, cited in Desmond 2006, 7). However, scholars who propose an embodied understanding of knowledge therefore argue that individuals possess a practical

[52] In the discussion of the methodology, I place less emphasis on delineating the differences between an "interpretive" and a "positivist" methodology as this has been discussed consistently elsewhere. For a general discussion of this, see Lincoln and Guba (1985); Maxwell (2012); Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014); Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012). For a further discussion of this in relation to client-frontline workers encounters, see Bisgaard (2020); Brodkin (2017); Cecchini (2018); Soss (2006).

knowledge in which they can, through a set of acquired bodily dispositions, anticipate and understand the social world around them (Bourdieu 2000, 131).

This has informed two choice epistemologies. First, if the social world inscribes itself not only in the minds but also in the bodies of individuals, then it is relevant to study both individuals' perceptions (through interviews) and their actions (through participant observation). Second, this ontology has informed a choice of a specific form of participant observation style. A style defined as "immersive field work" where the "investigator acts out (elements of) the phenomenon" (Wacquant 2015, 5). The aim of this is to "peel away the layers of its invisible properties and to test its operative mechanisms" (5). In consequence, to understand clients' lives in activation, I needed to subject myself to their experiences as far as possible. Therefore, I performed the same work assignments, wore the same clothes as the clients, and came in and left at the same time as the clients.

5.2.2. Interpretivism

While the principle of embodiment guides how I chose to observe clients, interpretivism guides how I analyze both the observations and interviews of this study. Interpretivism, as an ontology, rests upon two central premises. The first premise is that it places individuals' meaning-making at the forefront of analysis (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Soss 2006; Yanow 2006). Yanow (2006, 10) defines meaning-making as:

> The individual is seen as holding membership in a community of meaning, such that his subjective perception and understanding themselves draw on the repertoire of collectively created and sanctioned meanings particular to that community and shared within it by its members.

Researchers therefore need to understand both what is meaningful for the individual and how this form of meaning is generated, expressed, and communicated. The second premise is contextuality. This means that context and the specific situation in which individuals are placed at the moment of the interview or observation matter for how they act and perceive the social world.

These two principles have guided my research in two ways. First, in the interviews and in the informal conversations, I sought to understand how the clients' broader views of the nature of decision-making in the cash-assistance were derived from their micro-level interactions with the work supervisors (see also Soss 2006, 132). In other words, I wanted to explore the extent to which their encounters with the work supervisors became their "repertoire of meaning" to draw broader political lessons. Second, it also meant that I paid

attention to how the context of the encounter mattered for the way in which both the clients and the work supervisors acted towards each other. For example, I focused on whether the clients changed their behavior depending on whether they were in the meeting room surrounded by several other clients or whether they found themselves alone in an encounter with the caseworkers.

5.2.3. Abduction

Theorizing the concept of bureaucratic decoupling was not a linear research process from hypothesis, generated at the research desk, to observation, generated in the "field." It was an abductive process and a result of a continuous adjustment of these elements. Tavory and Timmermans (2014, 4) use the following definition for abduction:

> Abduction occurs when we encounter observations that do not neatly fit existing theories and we find ourselves speculating about what the data plausibly could be a case of. Abduction thus refers to a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence.

Abduction works through formulating expectations and making observations. If these observations and expectations do not fit, researchers can engage in a process of de-familiarization (thinking alternatively about the "fit" between hypothesis and observations) and afterwards revisit the observations with a revised theoretical framework. For the development of the institutional order of face-to-face encounters, this process occurred as explained in the following.

As I theorized in the previous chapter, the encounter between clients and the work supervisors at the utility jobs scheme are governed by an institutional order. This blurs the power asymmetry between the clients and the work supervisors and makes the clients think of the work supervisors as individuals rather than bureaucratic decision-makers. However, this was far from the expectation that I had when I designed the study and began the fieldwork.

Expectations. As I explained in chapter 1, I expected the utility jobs scheme as a most likely case of finding that clients would come to hold a "one big system" perception (Soss 1999a). This expectation was based on four factors. First, considering the policy context of utility jobs (see chapter 2), there was a strong political rhetoric about the undeservingness of cash-assistance recipients leading up to the reform of the scheme in 2014. Utility jobs officially emphasized a reinforcement of work ethics and an inclusion of the individual into work communities (Ministry of Employment 2013). However, the politi-

cal rhetoric in the media leading up to the reform in 2014 portrayed cash-assistance recipients as having immoral behavior because of their lack of will to work (Hedegaard 2014; Esmark and Schoop 2017).[53]

Second, considering the occupational context of the utility jobs scheme, I considered the encounter between work supervisors and the clients as very disciplinary. The work supervisors' core task was to make clients work for their benefits by organizing assignments for clients such as picking up trash or cleaning. I therefore expected that clients would come to hold negative views of the work supervisors due to the nature of their interaction. Studies show that when clients feel degraded and unwelcome in their encounters with front-line workers, they often apply these perceptions to bureaucratic organizations such as government (Soss 1999a; Sarat 1990).

Third, considering the organizational context of the utility jobs scheme, there was an overt form of bureaucratic power at the site. Studies show that in some cases, clients are unsure of which bureaucratic organizations they receive benefits from or interact with.[54] This influences their ability to draw political lessons from their encounters (See e.g. Mettler 2011; Jacobs and Mettler 2018). However, at the utility jobs activation site, clients wear identical work clothes with the municipality's nametag on. They wait for instructions in clearly marked municipal buildings, and they are transported back and forth from the work sites in cars with the municipal's nametag on. This meant that it was highly likely that clients were aware of which bureaucratic organization they were encountering.

Finally, the encounter occurred for a particularly long period. Studies show that when bureaucratic encounters only occur for a short period, clients rarely draw any political lessons from their encounters (see e.g. Soss and Schram 2007; Patashnik and Zelizer 2013; Jacobs and Mettler 2018). However, in the utility jobs scheme, clients are obliged to be at the activation site five days a week for 13 weeks. This long duration of the encounter increased the chance that clients would draw lessons from their encounters.

To explore my research question, I selected a single utility jobs activation site in one of the four largest cities in Denmark (for more information about

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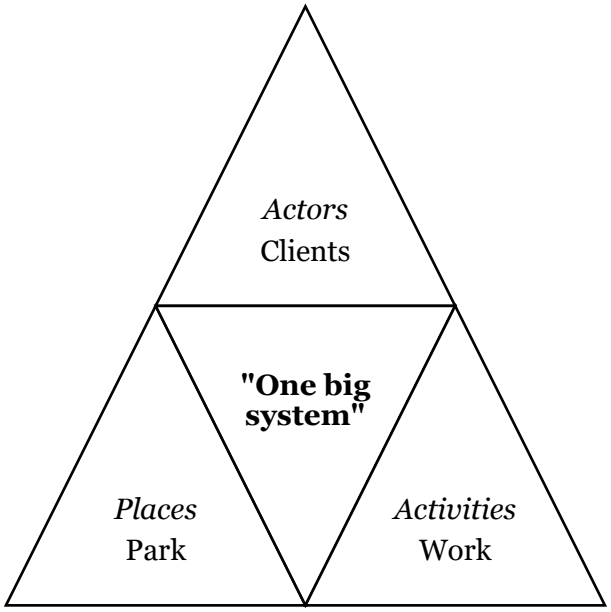
53 The most well-known example of this was the debate about "Lazy Robert" and "Poor Carina," both of which symbolized the behavioral implications of receiving assistance. While the "Lazy Robert" case became a symbol of the lack of obligations of receiving benefits, the "Poor Carina" case became a symbol of the disincentive of accepting paid work (Hedegaard 2014).

54 For example, this is the case for the delivery of health care in the US. Medicare is a federally funded program. However, clients often receive their medical services in private hospitals (Mettler 2011).

the site, see chapter 2). Although focusing solely on one activation site has implications for the possibility of external generalizability as well as comparison to other recipients of cash-assistance groups, it allowed me to follow the same group of clients over a 13 week and then explore how their perceptions changed over time. In other words, while the external validity of the study was low, the internal validity was high.

To explore this, I divided up the activation site into relevant activities, places, and actors (Spradley 1980, 39–40). I show this in figure 5.1:

Figure 5.1. Original points of observation



Like previous studies in the political learning and policy feedback scholarship, I focused solely on the clients (*the actors*) and how they perceived their encounters. Moreover, I expected that the political lessons of their encounters would be most prevalent when clients were working under the supervision of the work supervisors (*the activities*). Therefore, I focused on their work activities, during which they had to pick up trash, trim trees, or clean public areas. That led me to direct my observations at the park (*places*) where they performed work rather than, for example, when they were waiting in the meeting room.

Observations: Arriving at the site, I soon discovered that there was a very lenient enforcement of the rules and that the encounters appeared far from disciplinary. If clients arrived late in the morning, they rarely got a reprimand from the work supervisors. Clients would also wait in the meeting room for a long time, both in the morning before being assigned to work activities and in the afternoon before they were allowed to leave. During this period of waiting

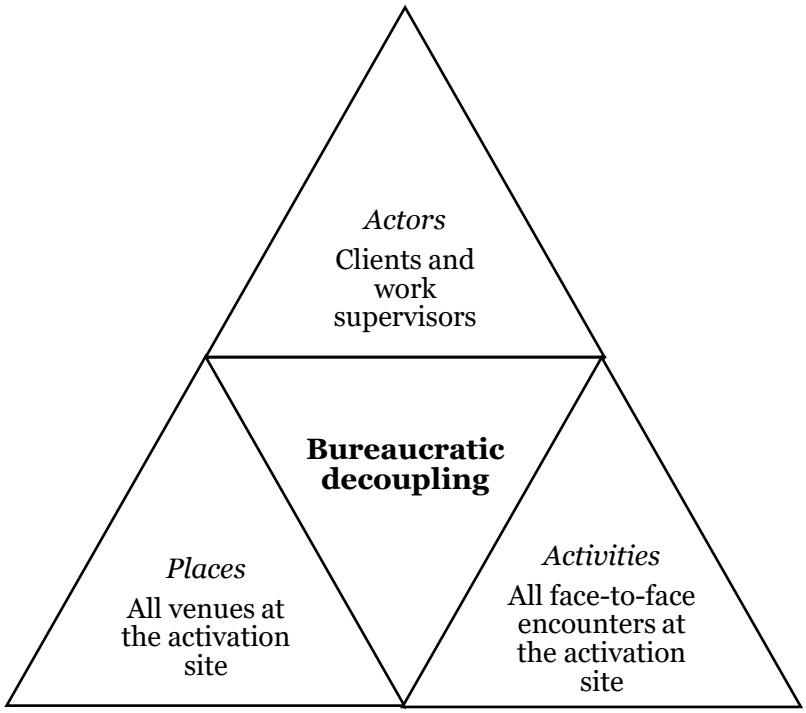
time, the majority waited in patience. This was despite the fact that the supervisors rarely told them how long they were supposed to wait and the fact that the amount of waiting time varied considerably from day to day. In the park, clients also often spent most of the day talking, taking coffee breaks instead of working. I also discovered how the relationships between clients and the supervisors were friendly, highly informal, and power symmetrical. In the interviews, the clients also praised the supervisors for their personal character and viewed them as nice, helpful, and understanding.

De-familiarization part 1. I was puzzled by the fact that the clients held very positive views about the work supervisors and engaged with them in a highly informal way. This was very far from the conclusions drawn by earlier studies of clients' evaluations of frontline workers (Barnes and Henly 2018; Soss 1999a; Sarat 1990). Moreover, I could not understand why clients accepted that they had to wait, often unknowingly of how long. I therefore started to re-read the interview transcripts. Whenever the clients talked about waiting time or the periods in the park spending their time doing nothing rather than working, they were very frustrated. However, they often concluded their reflections with something like "That's how it is."

Refocus of observations part 1. Attempting to solve this puzzle, I refocused my observations and interviews. I broadened my study regarding which actors, activities, and places I focused on. The work supervisors were granted a greater role as actors in the study as their way of engaging with clients seemed to shape clients' acceptance of the state of things at the activation site. Acknowledging the role of the work supervisors, I also broadened my focus on encounters. Rather than solely focusing on their "work encounters," I focused on all of their face-to-face encounters in the meeting room, the staff room, and the park. Finally, this meant that I went from doing the most focused observations in the park to conducting focused observations in multiple venues at the activation site.

Regarding my observations, as I was puzzled by the fact that clients accepted the work supervisors' very lenient and inconsistent enforcement of the rules, I wanted to see how much their decisions actually varied on a daily basis. I therefore systematized my observations of the work supervisors' decisions. I reported the specific time for when they assigned clients to work assignments, for how long they allowed clients to have breaks during the day, and how long they made clients wait to leave. I also focused more on how clients reacted to this, for example with silence or protests.

Figure 5.2. Revised points of observation



Regarding the interviews, I now incorporated more questions about how clients felt about the decisions of the work supervisors, namely why they rarely worked efficiently, why they often had to wait, and why they were often sent home earlier than the official rules dictated. I discovered the same pattern: Clients felt frustrated and demotivated due to the waiting time, passivity, and the place. Yet, they rarely held the work supervisors accountable for these decisions even though their feelings were directly caused by these very decisions. As I was puzzled by the nature of decision-making at the site, I also started to interview the work supervisors, the caseworkers, and the job consultants to explore how they reflected upon their decisions.

De-familiarization part 2. Refocusing both my observations and interviews, I had now documented a consistent pattern. The work supervisors consistently enforced the rules very leniently, which created long periods of waiting time and passivity during the day. The clients were also consistently not holding the work supervisors accountable for their inconsistent decisions. Yet, I was still unable to explain two things. First, why did the work supervisors even enforce the rules leniently? Second, why did clients accept this rather than hold them accountable for it? Existing studies explained this with a reference to the power asymmetry between clients and front line workers (see e.g. Auyero 2012; Schwartz 1974). However, it appeared as if there was no power asymmetry between them: Clients and work supervisors consistently

joked about the work assignments or the importance of clients' official obligations in cash-assistance. Therefore, existing notions of power asymmetry could not explain their relations.

Faced with this puzzle, I looked through my observations and interview transcripts again. In the observations, I found that the work supervisors' decisions were always coupled with a justification: They justified their decisions by deflecting responsibility away from themselves and onto either their management, the weather, the rules, or the clients themselves. Faced with these justifications, the clients often nodded and did not ask further questions. Looking through the interview transcripts, I found that every time I asked clients to evaluate the supervisors' decision-making, they would similarly refer to the rules, the management, other clients, or the weather circumstances.

Refocus of observations part 2. Going back to the field, I refocused my observations again. I attempted to document both how the work supervisors justified their decisions and how clients reacted to this. This exercise allowed me to solve the puzzles I had encountered earlier.

First, I discovered that the work supervisors' decision-making not only allowed them to reduce the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients but also to convey the image that "someone" was observing their decisions. If they allowed the clients to take several breaks or leave early on some of the days, they would face less resistance from the clients. However, they were not able do this every day, as this would convey an image that there were no rules at the site. This would mean that the clients would stop even showing up. As a result, sometimes they had to make clients stay until the official end of the workday or have them work a little harder. Through these observations, I developed the contours of what would become feature 2: "Deep discretion exercised in mundane decisions."

Second, I observed that when clients were dissatisfied and asked for a justification, the work supervisors justified their decisions by deflecting responsibility away from themselves. As I had observed multiple one-on-one consultations between the caseworkers and clients at the site, I knew, however, that the caseworkers and the job consultants rarely provided such justifications and that clients rarely asked for one. However, I discovered that the work supervisors always made decisions in front of multiple clients at once. Unable to physically separate clients to prevent open outbursts (see Dubois 2010, 43), I observed how they were extra careful in justifying their decisions and that their decisions always contained an explanation that would deflect responsibility away from themselves. Moreover, when multiple other clients were present, clients would behave very differently than during their one-on-one encounters. Behaving compliantly with their caseworker would sometimes be replaced with much more "assertive" behavior in the meeting room. Observing

this allowed me to develop the contours of the feature 3: "The presence of a public."

Focusing on the work supervisors' lenient enforcement of the rules, I found another pattern. In making the clients wait and take several breaks, the work supervisors and the clients naturally came to spend a lot of time together. During these breaks, they would talk informally. The clients would have time to present their concerns and their problems beyond what was specifically relevant for their case, and the work supervisors would have time to listen to them. This meant that the work supervisors could decouple themselves from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers and present themselves as attentive individuals. Moreover, during these talks, the work supervisors would engage in a form of credit claiming: They explained how they disagreed with the broader objectives of the cash-assistance scheme and emphasized how their lenient enforcement of the rules was a better alternative. This led me to develop the contours of feature 1: "Proximity between clients and frontline workers."

Finally, I saw that the longevity of the encounters played a significant role. Observing clients from their very first day in activation to their very last day, I saw a significant transition in two ways. Their skepticism of the activation site and the role of the work supervisors was replaced with an altered image of the objective of activation and a more positive perception of the work supervisors. Moreover, their perception of "time" itself changed. In the beginning of their encounters, they emphasized "getting out as fast as possible." For a large group of the clients, this changed, and they came to value their time with other clients and the supervisors, during which they had the opportunity to talk and reflect upon their problems. I was therefore able to develop the contours of feature 4: "Time."

In sum, this shows how important theoretical insights can be rendered in a principled abductive way by continuously going back and forth between theoretical expectations and empirical observations.

5.2.4. Criticism

The final methodological underpinning of this dissertation is "criticism." Even though it is an analytical point, it is important for how I analyzed face-to-face encounters and discovered the bureaucratic decoupling effect.

Ethnographers have been criticized for simply documenting the lived realities of policies without dissecting the social meanings and mechanisms that govern or influence these realities (Wacquant 2002, 1470; see also Wilson and Chaddha 2009). The implication is that ethnographers therefore come to treat research subjects' statements and actions as analytical categories to explain

these exact actions and statements. Another implication is that ethnographers use commonsensical cultural understandings to analyze their research subjects' statements and behavior, which potentially can reproduce societal stereotypes about this group (Wacquant 2002).

To avoid this, I attempt to make, what Dubois (2009) calls, a "critical policy ethnography." This involves an attempt to "deconstruct prevailing categories of understanding and reveal the relations of domination that structure the situations" (223). In developing the concept of bureaucratic decoupling, I had to deconstruct three factors in the cash-assistance scheme.

First, the bureaucratic decoupling effect is partly created by the amount of passivity and inefficiency that prevails at the activation site. This allows the work supervisors and the clients the time to establish a rapport, and it enables the work supervisors to present themselves as "individuals" who are decoupled from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers. When I asked both the work supervisors and their management about the amount of passivity at the site, they explained that it was because of a shortage of work assignments. In my account of the activation site, I do not dispute this at any time. It was obvious on several occasions that the work supervisors had to be creative and "invent" work assignments for the clients. Yet, I argue that we need to take a step back and critically dissect why there is a shortage of work assignments. What would happen if it was another a group than cash-assistance clients who were obligated to perform work for their benefits? More importantly, is it even possible to imagine that another group, except for prison inmates, would perform work assignments like picking up trash or cleaning for the government for a salary well below minimum wage?

These questions are easily answered if we accept the premise that policies are designed based on politicians' perceptions of their "deservingness" in society (Schneider and Ingram 1997). In other words, cash-assistance recipients as a group are simply not viewed as deserving enough to find an adequate amount of work assignments to fill their day. However, this does not mean that politicians strategically plan activation sites where there is a shortage of work assignments. Rather, it is, in Wacquant's words, an "objective convergence of a welter of disparate public policies" (Wacquant 2009, 29). We know, de facto, that groups from the most precarious fractions of society are often those who experience the most delays, the longest hours of waiting, and the heaviest administrative burdens, just to name a few (see Auyero 2012; Christensen et al. 2020; Schwartz, 1974).

In light of this, it is possible to view the shortage of work assignments in a new way. It grants low-level frontline workers, such as the work supervisors, significant amounts of time and freedom to "mold" and shape clients' image

of them – an image in which the work supervisors come to be viewed as "attentive" individuals in an "uncaring" bureaucracy. This would not have been possible if the work assignments were performed efficiently, which would have entailed that informal talks and coffee breaks would have been reduced to a minimum.

Second, the decoupling effect rests upon a "deep" discretion of the work supervisors (*feature 2*). This discretion allows them to adopt a lenient management of clients' lives at the activation site. However, it is important to ask why a group of work supervisors, with very little formal training in handling and communicating with clients, are granted the freedom to govern clients' lives, based almost completely on their own will, for five hours each day for a period of over three months. An explanation that I got from the people working with the activation program argued that it allows the work supervisors to efficiently plan each day's work assignments based on their judgement of the weather, the composition of the group of clients, etc. This is also the scholarly explanation for why frontline workers hold discretion. As Lipsky (1980, 15) explains, "They have discretion because the accepted definitions of their tasks call for sensitive observation and judgment, which are not reducible to programmed formats." In other words, discretion is a necessary organizational device to ensure that frontline workers can adapt their decisions to clients' individual needs.

Yet, again, it is relevant to ask, would the same group of work supervisors have been allowed a similar "deep" discretion if they were dealing with clients from the middle class? Theorizing the decoupling effect, I therefore relied on an alternative view of discretion:

> Discretion if not bureaucratic arbitrariness then are not flaws in the system. They fulfill a general function consisting in demonstrating to welfare recipients that their situation as such is precarious, as opposed to a stable 'entitlement', and that staying on welfare is no longer a 'comfortable' option (if this ever was the case). (Dubois 2019, 517)

In other words, the work supervisors' discretion enables them to adopt a lenient management of clients' lives and simultaneously deflect responsibility away from themselves onto factors beyond their clients. For clients, this demonstrates that their lives are always subject to change at the will of a "system" that the supervisors, through their deep discretion, have constructed as a top-down institution removed of all agency – a perception among the clients, which I will show further in Chapter 9.

Third, and finally, the decoupling effect rests upon an idea that the work supervisors are able to explain their decisions in front of a large group of clients. In these explanations, they invoke commonsensical explanations like

"the economy," "poor management," or "troublesome" clients. In the scholarly literature, these responses are analyzed as coping techniques employed to manage stress from both caseloads and organizational demands (see Tummers et al. 2015). I do not dispute that the work supervisors use such justifications as coping strategies. The interviews with the work supervisors attest to the fact that they felt frustrated and agitated about their management and the rules they had to implement. Moreover, several of the managers of the activation program repeatedly told me, during informal conversations, how today's caseworkers in the cash-assistance scheme are working under severely stressful conditions.

Despite this, I argue that it is relevant to critically deconstruct the conditions for why frontline workers are able to invoke these commonsensical explanations about their jobs. The spatial structure of the encounters enable the work supervisors to invoke these explanations. The activation site is placed in a desolate area, far away from the "back office" (Dubois 2010) and the headquarters where the managers are placed. This allows the work supervisors considerable freedom to create an image of the cash-assistance scheme that will most likely never be corrected by other frontline workers or managers within the cash-assistance scheme.

In sum, thinking critically about these three factors at the activation site enabled me to theorize how bureaucratic decoupling works and its consequences for clients.

5.3. Data generation

In this section, I elaborate on how I generated this dissertation's data in order to understand and theorize the decoupling effect. The section is divided into three parts. First, I discuss how I conducted participant observations, including the role of ethnography in political science, then how I entered the field, established a rapport, and wrote field notes. Second, I discuss why I combine participant observations with interviews. Third, I discuss how I conducted interviews, including the interview sample and the interview guide.

5.3.1. Participant observation

This dissertation provides an ethnographic account of clients in activation using participant observations. An ethnographic account can be defined as:

> social research based on the close-up, on-the-ground observation of people and institutions in real time and space, in which the investigator embeds herself near (or within) the phenomenon so as to detect how and why agents on the scene act, think and feel the way they do. (Wacquant 2003, 5)

The aim of my ethnographic account is to detect how clients think and feel during their encounters with frontline workers, how they understand their decisions, and how this potentially teaches them something about bureaucratic organizations more generally.

For long a time, ethnography was used as a tool primarily by anthropologists and later by sociologists (Pachirat 2018). In recent years, however, the ethnographic approach has gained footing as a tool in political science, and it has been recognized as a method for exploring political phenomena (see e.g. Auyero 2006; Brodkin 2017; Pachirat, 2018; Schatz 2009). In Auyero's (2006, 257) words, ethnography is well "suited to explain why political actors behave the way they do and to identify the causes, processes and outcomes that are part and parcel of political life."

In particular, participant observations were made the criterion of conducting a "political ethnography" (Schatz 2009, 5). Participant observation involves:

> Subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or ethnic situation, or whatever. So that you are close to them while they are responding to what life does to them (E. Goffman 1989, 125).

Although the ethnographic approach is used in various studies in public administration studying how frontline workers decide on which clients to penalize (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a), their coping strategies (Brodkin 2011), or how they invoke their identities in their encounters with clients (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Watkins-Hayes 2009), participant observation is rarely used. According to Schatz (2009), however, participant observation in political ethnography is pivotal. It assures both an immersion into the everyday political context in which people act and a scholarly "sensibility" to the meanings and understandings that individuals attribute to this political context.

Conducting participant observations involves a process of entering the field, choosing a role and establishing a rapport, reflecting upon positionality and ethics, and generating data through the writing of field notes. I will elaborate on each element below.

5.3.1.1. Access to the field

Gaining access to a field site is often described as a difficult and time-consuming process (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Access to clients in welfare administrations involves getting by "gatekeepers," such as managers and frontline workers, who have a considerable stake in protecting the image of the administration and their way of managing their caseloads (Dubois 2017). Paradoxically, I faced none of these gatekeeper difficulties when I attempted to gain access to the activation site.

I originally went to the site for one day to interview clients during the collection of data for my master's thesis. I wrote an email to the manager of the utility jobs activation scheme in the municipality who directly forwarded me to Torsten – a job consultant at the activation site. He told me to come by and that he would find me some clients I could interview. Arriving there, I was allowed to just put on the same work clothes as the clients, go out with them, and work and interview them at the same time. A year and a half later, I wrote an email to the manager, who again forwarded me to Torsten. We scheduled a meeting at the activation site, which took no more than 15 minutes. I explained that I planned to observe clients for 13 weeks in order to follow one group of clients from their first day of arrival to the day their activation ended. To my surprise, I gained permission immediately. I went home, and one week later, I arrived at the activation site, ready to observe.

Gaining access this easily can mean three things. First, they wanted to support the independent role of research and my objective to observe bureaucratic encounters at activation sites. Second, they were indifferent to whether I was there or not. Third, they wanted to use my research as a communication channel to achieve a greater awareness of their work, both among other frontline workers in the cash-assistance administration and in the public. I believe it was a combination of all three. At no point in time did they try to influence my interpretations or obstruct the research. However, they often confided in me. They told me that no one – not their manager, the other employees in the cash-assistance scheme, nor the public – understood the difficult task they were hired to do. Finally, I often had the feeling that my presence did not change their way of working or making decisions. I sensed that it was partly because they felt they had "nothing to hide" and partly because they often forgot I was there.

5.3.1.2. Choosing a role and establishing a rapport in the field

Before entering the field, I was aware that it was not sufficient to merely observe from a distance and subsequently interview clients about their experiences. I expected that the majority of the clients had been asked to participate

in a survey or in an interview by a journalist, a researcher, or the job center. For this very reason, I wanted to assure them that I was not yet another person attempting to understand the lived experiences of receiving cash-assistance benefits through a survey or a single interview.

I therefore adopted the role as a "participant-as-observer" (Gold 1958, 220): I wanted to participate equally alongside clients but simultaneously reveal my identity as a researcher to avoid being covert or deceptive.[55] The objective was to use my body as a research instrument and way of experiencing the world (Wacquant 2004; 2005; 2015) as well as an instrument with which to build a rapport with the clients. I asked the work supervisors if they could issue me a set of work clothes and a locker to store my private clothes. I informed them that I wanted to be part of the eight o'clock team and their daily round of conducting work assignments.[56] I always made sure to be on time, dressed in my work clothes in the meeting room, and ready to work at 8 a.m. When we were out working, I always made sure to offer my help, letting them know that I wanted to do the same work assignments. However, despite wearing the same work clothes and participating in the same activities, my role as a researcher was not credible. Clients were reluctant to participate in an interview with me, and some of them tried to discredit my project. This was particularly evident in the first weeks of conducting observations.

On my first day, I get the chance to explain my project to all of the clients in the meeting room. As I take a seat, a man, probably in his sixties, asks me in what field I am doing my PhD. When I disclose that it is political science, he says, "Then I know exactly what the project is all about." He then looks straight away and the conversations stops. I encounter him several times in the following days, during which he continuously tries to discredit my research. On my fourth day of fieldwork, he says, "I cannot believe that anyone would finance a PhD like that." The next week, we are out working together. I ask him whether he would be willing to do an interview. He declines and explains that I am too young to understand the life trajectories of the people at the site despite the fact that I am trying to subject myself to their experiences.

This skepticism rendered several insights. First, when he heard that I was studying political science, the man somehow saw me as a representative of government. Thus, although dressed as one of the clients, the objective of my research – in his view – was still aligned with the government policy of cash-assistance. Second, I believe his statements reflect how the majority of clients

[55] For a discussion of this, see Pachirat (2018).

[56] I later changed to the nine o'clock team, and then I occasionally shuffled back and forth between these two teams.

experience receiving cash-assistance, namely that almost no one tries to understand their individual life trajectories and how these trajectories influence their ability to find a job. This is also explains why clients attach themselves to the work supervisors who deemphasize the importance of clients' official obligations and allow for an exchange of personal stories.

As it has been emphasized strongly that when doing participant observations, it is important to manage one's personal characteristics in such a way that we, as researchers, come to appear as our research subjects (Tewksbury and Gagné 1997, see also Wacquant 2004; A. Goffman 2014), I was puzzled by this resistance from the clients. I discovered, however, that my attempt to appear as if I were on cash-assistance was misplaced. Despite my insistence on doing the same things as them, my life came nothing close to being on cash-assistance. I shared none of their frustrations, material hardships, or lack of self-worth for not having a job.

As a result, I changed my researcher role from a researcher "disguised as a client" to being a researcher participating alongside the clients. Although I did not change the way I conducted participant observations, my role as a researcher became more pronounced. On the one hand, this gave clients the impression that I attempted to understand their life on cash-assistance and took that attempt seriously. On the other hand, it gave them the feeling that they had a voice and an agency. I would listen to their stories, but I would also give them my opinion as a researcher on their arguments and views when they asked for it. The latter – just as much as me doing all of the work assignments – conveyed an image that I participated on an equal footing with them.

5.3.1.3. Positionality and reflexivity

Reflecting upon one's positionality is relevant in all ethnographic accounts, but it is particularly relevant when the account is based on the active involvement and participation of the researcher. This form of participation somehow always obstructs and influences clients' daily routines at the activation site. This creates an atmosphere that is different from the atmosphere exempt from the researcher's presence.

The researchers' presence in the field is often relegated into the realm of methodological limitations (Stuart 2018). A common challenge is having a white skin color when attempting to study people with a black skin color. However, Stuart (2018) argues that researchers should think of how the way in which their personal characteristics influence their findings could be an exercise of "abductive reflexivity." This involves that ethnographers should use their presence in the field as a starting point for a process of theorizing. In this section, I therefore provide an example of where my own positionality in the

field lead me to understand why clients decouple frontline workers from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers.

> *Field note, 27.03.2019*
>
> I arrive at the site at 7:58 a.m. and go upstairs to change. At 8:04 a.m., I go downstairs to the meeting room, which is completely packed. I count 18 clients who have divided themselves among all three tables. Sebastian [work supervisor], Arne [work supervisor], and Uffe [work supervisor/job consultant] are all present in the room. When I pass Arne, he says,
>
> #Arne: "Shall I check you off, Lasse?"
>
> #Me: "Yeah, you better because otherwise I'll get sanctioned," I answer and laugh.
>
> #Arne: "Well, I can't find you on this list."
>
> #Me: "No … I know. I've called the social benefit office five times and told them that, but nothing happens."
>
> Arne laughs.
>
> #Me: "I think you should do something about it, Arne!"
>
> #Arne: "Well then, we'll have to do something about it," he says and laughs.
>
> I walk over to the third table where I find an empty seat. Before I even sit down, a man comes over to me. He has a fur hat on his head and has already changed [into work clothes]. He seems stressed, and his eyes wander.
>
> #Man: "Can't you give me the number?"
>
> I look at him in confusion, and at first, I think he's asking for my private number so that we can do an interview later.
>
> #Me: "What number?"
>
> #Man: "Yeah, the number for the social benefit office! You just said you've called them five times??? I need to get in touch with them!!!"
>
> #Me: "Oh, okay … Well, the number is up there on the yellow board," I say and point to the yellow board behind Sebastian's desk.
>
> The man hurries over to it. He looks up at the yellow board, types the number into his phone, and calls.

In this situation, my role as a researcher obviously caused the man significant emotional distress. This is ethically questionable because if I had just smiled or refrained from making a joke with Arne, the situation never would have occurred. Acknowledging this, the situation also shows two relevant theoretical insights.

First, it shows how clients perceive the social benefit office that administers clients' benefits. The man who comes over to me is obviously stressed. Most likely, he needed to get in contact with the welfare office to inform them that they had made a mistake in terms of how they registered his fulfillment of his obligations. This shows that the social benefit office exerts considerable power over clients' lives even though clients rarely, if ever, encounter frontline workers at the social benefit office face-to-face (see also Chapter 2). Second, it also shows how the work supervisors create an alternative bureaucratic reality with a blurred power asymmetry (*feature 1*). There are 18 clients present in the meeting room who observe that somehow mocking the social benefit office is permitted. Although Arne is joking with me in the scene, I observed similar exchanges between the clients and the work supervisors.

5.3.1.4. Ethics

It is important to make an additional comment about the ethical aspects of the participant observations.

I always made sure to protect their privacy and do as little harm as possible (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 212–17). First, I always attempted to make sure that I had made an informed consent of the participants in the study. In the meeting room, I put up several posters to inform the clients of my research and of who I was. When I did an interview with clients, they also signed a consent form.[57] In the consent form, they were informed that their names and private information would be anonymized, that data would be stored safely, and that they could always withdraw their consent. I also made sure that if I engaged in conversations with clients, I would always disclose my identity, especially in situations where they told me sensitive or personal matters.

5.3.1.5. Writing field notes

Writing field notes was the main method of reporting my participant observations. In the beginning of my fieldwork, I brought my field diary to the park where we were working. Whenever I had the time, I made "jottings" of my observations, consisting of short sentences that captured what occurred at the site. Yet, as my style of participation involved working alongside the clients, I found myself with precious little time to write notes. In addition, I prioritized being at the site for as long as possible during the day. This meant that I was exhausted when I finally came home. Therefore, I found myself writing about the observations that I could remember and attempting to reconstruct them from the few notes I had.

[57] To see the entire consent form, see Appendix E.

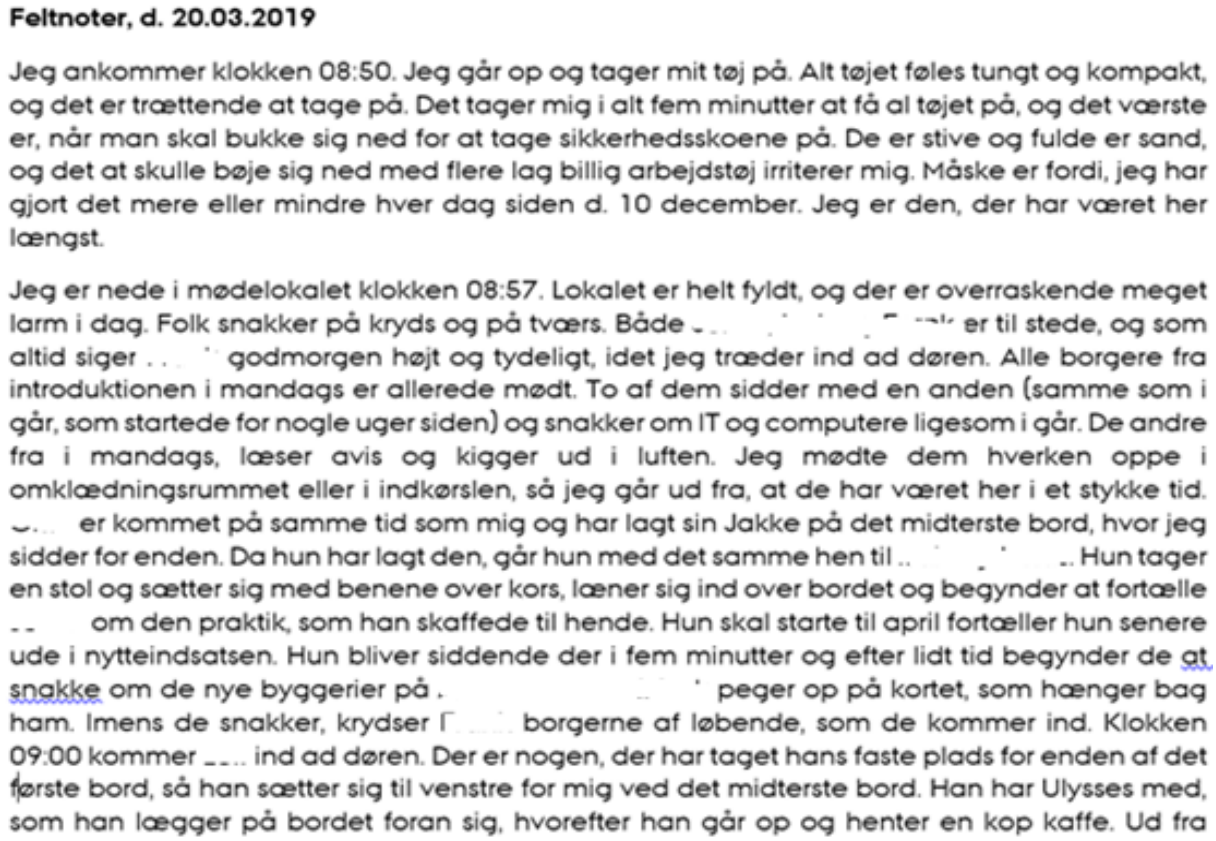
I solved this problem by using my iPhone to take notes instead. Below, I illustrate how I made so-called jottings on my phone to produce a condensed account and then produce an expanded account later at my computer[58] (Emerson et al. 2011; Spradley 1980).

Figure 5.3. Condensed account of field notes

Writing field notes on my iPhone solved many of the issues I faced. As it was common for the clients and the work supervisors to use their phones throughout the day, it was not regarded as controversial. I was, therefore, able to write down notes continuously while we were working, taking a break, or when we were in the meeting room. Moreover, as no one took notice of me writing notes, I was able to write down conversations in such a way that I could reproduce them almost word-for-word in the condensed account. Additionally, I developed a consistent and systematic way of making jottings. I knew that particular jottings meant particular situations, phrases, etc. I could, therefore, capture the complexity of situations and observations by using relatively few jottings, which I could later expand at my desk.

[58] The field notes are in Danish to preserve their original meaning. For example, many of the jottings are difficult to translate into English, and they only make sense for the author himself.

Figure 5.4. Expanded account of field notes



Feltnoter, d. 20.03.2019

Jeg ankommer klokken 08:50. Jeg går op og tager mit tøj på. Alt tøjet føles tungt og kompakt, og det er trættende at tage på. Det tager mig i alt fem minutter at få al tøjet på, og det værste er, når man skal bukke sig ned for at tage sikkerhedsskoene på. De er stive og fulde er sand, og det at skulle bøje sig ned med flere lag billig arbejdstøj irriterer mig. Måske er fordi, jeg har gjort det mere eller mindre hver dag siden d. 10 december. Jeg er den, der har været her længst.

Jeg er nede i mødelokalet klokken 08:57. Lokalet er helt fyldt, og der er overraskende meget larm i dag. Folk snakker på kryds og på tværs. Både [illegible] er til stede, og som altid siger [illegible] godmorgen højt og tydeligt, idet jeg træder ind ad døren. Alle borgere fra introduktionen i mandags er allerede mødt. To af dem sidder med en anden (samme som i går, som startede for nogle uger siden) og snakker om IT og computere ligesom i går. De andre fra i mandags, læser avis og kigger ud i luften. Jeg mødte dem hverken oppe i omklædningsrummet eller i indkørslen, så jeg går ud fra, at de har været her i et stykke tid. [illegible] er kommet på samme tid som mig og har lagt sin Jakke på det midterste bord, hvor jeg sidder for enden. Da hun har lagt den, går hun med det samme hen til [illegible]. Hun tager en stol og sætter sig med benene over kors, læner sig ind over bordet og begynder at fortælle [illegible] om den praktik, som han skaffede til hende. Hun skal starte til april fortæller hun senere ude i nytteindsatsen. Hun bliver siddende der i fem minutter og efter lidt tid begynder de at snakke om de nye byggerier på [illegible] peger op på kortet, som hænger bag ham. Imens de snakker, krydser [illegible] borgerne af løbende, som de kommer ind. Klokken 09:00 kommer [illegible] ind ad døren. Der er nogen, der har taget hans faste plads for enden af det første bord, så han sætter sig til venstre for mig ved det midterste bord. Han har Ulysses med, som han lægger på bordet foran sig, hvorefter han går op og henter en kop kaffe. Ud fra

5.3.2. Combining interviews with participant observations

I combine these participant observations with in-depth semi-structured interviews. In this part of the chapter, I discuss why it is relevant to combine participant observations with interviews as well as how I conducted the interviews.

Jerolmack and Khan (2014) criticize scholars for often using interviews as a predictor of how individuals will act. They characterize this as an "attitudinal fallacy": "the error of inferring situated behavior from verbal accounts" (180). They argue that individuals' accounts are always situational. This means that individuals' feelings, beliefs, and perceptions are not always produced prior to the interview setting; they are produced in and through the interaction with the interviewer. Moreover, they argue that our perceptions often exist below the level of consciousness and most often appear in interactions with other people (see also Blumer 1969; Holstein et al. 1995). Defending the interview tradition, however, Lamont & Swidler (2014) argue that interviews allow individuals to elaborate on how they act and enable researchers to gain a more in-depth understanding of individuals' perceptions and emotions.

Informed by this methodological debate, I argue that there is an advantage to combining both. Consistently conducting participant observations enables

me to explore the nature of the encounter between clients and the work supervisors. For example, I can then observe how the work supervisors blur the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients by making jokes or delegitimizing the objectives of cash-assistance. It also enables me to observe how clients react to this, for example by making the jobs of the work supervisors as easy as possible, as I will explore in Chapter 8.

Yet, most of these ways of reacting are often tacit and are rarely articulated (Wacquant 2015). Therefore, the interviews can be used to make clients reflect upon why they react to the work supervisors' decisions in the way that they do. The interviews also allow me to explore further how clients perceive the work supervisors as well as other frontline workers in the cash-assistance scheme. Finally, the interviews enable me to compare perceptions across interviewees. I can, therefore, explore how factors such as age, education, or length of time receiving assistance vary across interviewees.

5.3.3. Interviews

The interview material for the dissertation consists of both recorded interviews as well informal interviews generated through a method of "interviewing by comment".

5.3.3.1. Interviewing by comment

Although I collected a number of recorded, semi-structured interviews, I also conducted hundreds of informal, un-recorded conversations with the clients during the day, which I later paraphrased in my field notes. These conversations enabled me to not only get the clients to elaborate on some of the perceptions they expressed in the formal interviews but also document the perceptions of other clients at the site whom I was unable to interview.

During these conversations, I used an "interviewing by comment technique"(Snow, Zurcher, and Sjoberg 1982). This can be defined as "an attempt to elicit information from a respondent verbally, by making a statement rather than by asking a question" (287). It involves making comments such as "puzzlements" ("I don't understand that") or more focused comments ("I think we have been waiting for a while"). Typically, in a fixed interview situation, the interviewer asks a question that naturally delimits the boundaries of the answer that the interviewee can provide (289). Yet, by using an interviewing by comment method, it allows respondents to define their response in alignment with their own frame of reference.

For example, I often made a comment about how long clients had waited while they were waiting. Their answers provided me with an idea of how they

felt about the waiting time as well as whether waiting time was a salient issue to explore further in the recorded interviews.

5.3.3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Consistent with the interpretive ontology, the recorded interviews had a phenomenological scope and were aimed at exploring the clients' life worlds. This included how they reflected upon their face-to-face encounters in activation and how these encounters conveyed broader political lessons (Soss 2006; Yanow 2006). Conducting semi-structured interviews involves sampling and getting into contact with clients, constructing an interview guide, and asking questions during an interview.

I conducted 42 recorded interviews with clients at the activation site,[59] with an average length of 1.5 hours, and 10 recorded interviews with members of the staff.[60]All of the clients I interviewed were registered at the activation site while I conducted participant observations. I relied primarily on a purposive sampling strategy, meaning that I attempted to get an interview sample consisting of an equal share of men and women and diversity in terms of age, educational background, and length of time they had received social assistance.

However, as the some of the clients were difficult to approach, I also had to rely on a convenience strategy, sampling those clients who were more willing to be interviewed. The implication of this is that some segments of the client group, including the non-ethnic Danes, the long-term unemployed, and people with psychological disabilities, are underrepresented in the interview sample.[61] Moreover, there is a larger percentage of men in the interview group. This, however, is representative of the overall distribution of men and women in the utility jobs scheme.[62] Despite this, there is a large diversity in terms of the clients' age, ranging from 24 to 67. Their educational background ranges from clients who are unskilled to those with master's degrees. Moreover, the

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[59] For a list of the interviewees in this group, see Appendix A1

[60] For a list of the interviewees in this group, see Appendix A2. I have not attached an interview guide for this group, as this was a pilot study.

[61] There is also an underrepresentation of clients under the age of 30. However, this is because clients under the age of 30 is often categorized as "education ready". Although this group officially can be obliged to be activated in the utility jobs scheme, they most often are offered other activation courses, such as job searching courses or "education cafés" where they receive help to find an education.

[62] This gender bias is present across all municipalities. In terms of the "job ready" group in utility jobs as of 2014, 71 percent are men, while 29 percent are women (Danish Agency for Labor Market and Recruitment 2015, 17).

length of which they had received assistance ranged from 12 years to only a couple of months.

To be allowed to interview them, I approached them through the poster in the meeting room with my contact information. None of the clients, however, responded to this poster. Instead, I often asked clients if they would be willing to do an interview while were out working. As we would often spend considerable time together in the park, I got the chance to familiarize myself with the clients and sense whether or not they would agree to participate in an interview. I worked with some for weeks, during which I established a trusting relationship with them, before I asked them to participate in an interview.

I mainly worked alongside clients on the nine o'clock team[63]. However, in order to achieve the largest diversity in terms of client characteristics, I would also occasionally shuffle between different teams, working alongside the eight o'clock team for a couple of days and then with the clients on the nine o'clock team. Within these teams, I would shuffle between the group of clients that primarily picked up trash and the group that worked in the park trimming trees. In that way, I was able to build a rapport with many different groups of clients at the site and ask them to participate in an interview.

The interview guide[64] used for the clients at the activation site originally consisted of five broad main themes:

1. Their background
2. Their everyday life at the activation site
3. Their relationship with the staff at the activation site
4. Their perceptions of the rules of the cash-assistance scheme
5. Their broader perceptions of political efficacy.[65]

The aim was to see whether clients' broader reflections about politics, in particular their external efficacy, were connected to their experiences in activation, similar to policy feedback- and political learning studies. To capture this, I used questions inspired by the work of Soss (1999a; 2006) such as "What is the first thing you think of when I say the word 'politics'?"[66] Yet, when the

[63] In the beginning, I found that it was very difficult to approach and establish rapport with the clients on the eight o'clock team. Therefore, after a couple of weeks into my field work, I decided to mainly focus on the nine o'clock team.

[64] For the complete interview guide, see Appendix B1.

[65] In paper A, I mention that this question is part of the interview guide. However, I referred to the original interview guide for the study.

[66] Soss (1999a, 369) used this question, among others, to capture social assistance clients' perception of external efficacy, i.e. their belief about governmental responsiveness.

clients reflected upon this, they rarely, if ever, drew upon their experiences in activation.

Instead, based on my abductive logic of reasoning, I found that when we talked about the work supervisors' decisions, for example about waiting time, they also talked about the cash-assistance scheme, its rules, and its broader objectives. Therefore, their activation encounters did not influence their perceptions of political efficacy, but the encounters led them to form diffuse and fragmented images of the cash-assistance scheme. I will show this in Chapter 9. Thus, I decided to drop theme five in the interview guide and include more questions about clients' perceptions of the work supervisors' decision-making as well as the other groups of staff's decision-making. This enabled me to further explore how clients' micro-level interactions with frontline workers were connected to their broader views on the nature of decision-making in the cash-assistance scheme.

I then began the interview by making them describe a regular day in activation, including the work assignments and their interactions with other clients. I also asked them to define their relationship with the work supervisors in order for them to describe their perception of the work supervisors' individual characters. To make them reflect upon the work supervisors' decision-making,[67] I often made them reflect upon a situation that we had experienced together. This could be a situation where the work supervisors had made us wait or one where they had allowed us to leave early. This ensured that their decision-making practices were a salient issue for the clients.

To make the clients reflect further upon the work supervisors' decision-making[68] practices I asked them multiple times during the interview: "Why do you think that is?" This could, for example, be why they thought the work supervisors made us wait. Through this question, they often reflected upon the factors that determined the work supervisors' decisions, for example the rules, managers, or troublesome clients. I had also prepared questions such as: "Do you think they face any challenges in their work" as well as other probes such as "Do you think that it is difficult for them, if they have to handle many clients at a time?" or "Do you think that they are subject to many rules?"[69]

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[67] Although with small variations, I used the same interview questions regarding the clients' perception of the caseworkers and the job consultants. This means that I also asked clients to define their relationship with the caseworkers and job consultants, after which we talked about their decision-making. As clients often also described the factors that influenced their decision-making, I also used the probe "Why do you think it is like that?" to make them reflect further upon their decision-making.

[68] I elaborate more on this technique in Chapter 7.

[69] For the clients who talked extensively about the two groups of frontline workers' decision-making, I could more or less steer the entire interview using mainly the

Based on their answers, I often asked them once again: "Why do you think that is?" For instance, this could be why they thought the work supervisors were subject to many rules. This line of probing then made them reflect upon the nature of decision-making in the cash-assistance scheme[70], for example the objectives of the rules or the power of managers. I combined these questions with questions about their knowledge of the rules in the cash-assistance scheme as well as their experiences regarding writing complaints. Based on these questions, they began to describe the cash-assistance scheme as, for example, a system with several hidden objectives, such as serving the interests of frontline workers rather than clients. I will show this in-depth in Chapter 9.

The interviews with the work supervisors, caseworkers, and job consultants[71] were also recorded and semi-structured based on an interview guide.[72] The interview guide consisted of themes such as their background, reflections about their work, their interaction with clients, reflections on the utility jobs scheme, as well as reflections about their discretion.

5.4. Data processing

This section outlines the data processing involved in the transcription of the interviews and the coding of both field notes and interviews.

5.4.1. Coding of interviews

Four student assistants transcribed all 62 interviews. To ensure that the transcriptions followed the same format and to increase the descriptive validity, I made a transcription guide.[73] Before starting the transcription process, I carefully instructed the student assistants, and they were issued a transcription guide. I then re-read the first transcriptions and gave the student assistants feedback in order to ensure consistency. I tried to ensure both a high intra-coding reliability and inter-coder agreement (Campbell et al. 2013, 297) by recoding the majority of the interview material, that were most relevant for my analysis, twice myself (i.e. intra-coding reliability) while one of the student

probe "why do you think it is like that". For clients who did not talk as extensively about their decision-making practices, I used more of the questions and probes in the interview guide, see Appendix B1.

[70] I elaborate more on this technique in Chapter 9

[71] For the complete interview guide, see Appendix B2

[72] I used one interview guide for all the members of staff. However, for the questions to be relevant regarding their job tasks, I changed some of the questions depending on whether I, for example, interviewed the work supervisors or the caseworkers.

[73] For the transcription guide, see Appendix C.

assistants re-read these codes afterwards to check for accuracy and potential inconsistencies (i.e. inter-coder agreement).

The 42 interviews[74] with clients at the activation site were coded using a "flexible coding strategy" (Deterding and Waters 2018). This strategy is particularly suitable for studies where the number of interviews exceeds 30. Rather than doing line-by-line coding first and then later aggregating these codes into theoretical codes, I did the aggregated coding first, and afterwards, I did a more in-depth coding. In other words, flexible coding is the inverse of line-by-line coding in grounded theory[75] (Charmaz 2006).

The flexible coding technique involved two steps. First, I conducted an across-case reading of all the interviews where I sorted large chunks of the interview transcripts into broad index codes. These index codes were informed by the themes in the interview guide, the observations in the field notes, and my abductive logic of theorizing about bureaucratic decoupling. As I had more than 1200 pages of interview transcripts, this coding process allowed me to organize and get an overview of the material, enabling subsequent in-depth analysis. For example, the index codes included "relationships with the work supervisors" and "perception of the nature of decision-making in the cash-assistance bureaucracy." In the process of index coding, I created respondent-level memos noting reflections about each client, as well as across-case memos noting theoretical reflections. Moreover, I coded "aha" codes where respondents were particularly concise and articulate or where a theme was expressed especially clearly (Deterding and Waters 2018, 20).[76]

After this, I re-read all text within each index code and applied analytical codes. I applied analytical codes such as "clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as individuals" and "clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as decision-makers." Afterwards, I did an in-depth reading of all text in the analytical codes and developed further sub-codes. This resulted in a coding hier-

[74] For the complete coding scheme of the interviews with the clients at the activation site, see Appendix D1.

[75] In paper A, I write that I coded clients' perceptions of waiting time using grounded theory guidelines (Hansen 2020, 8). The reason for this is that I had very little space to elaborate on the flexible coding method and the different analytical steps it involved. Therefore, in that paper, "using grounded theory guidelines" simply means that once I had sorted all text related to clients' experiences about waiting time, I coded these experiences in an in-depth and detailed way.

[76] I acknowledge that memos are closely associated with grounded theory guidelines for coding (Charmaz 2006). However, Deterding and Waters (2018, 15) also recommend writing memos to both develop and refine theoretical perspectives as well as note down reflections about each interviewee.

archy: "Relationships with work supervisors" (index code) → "clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as 'decision-makers'" (analytical code) → "clients' perceptions of factors from below that influence the work supervisors' decision-making" (sub-code) → "many clients to handle" (detailed sub-code).

The interviews with clients at the job café as well as the interviews with the work supervisors, caseworkers, and job consultants[77,78] at the activation site were coded in a manner closer to the grounded theory guidelines (Charmaz 2006). Contrary to the index coding technique, this meant that I did a more detailed coding first, which later resulted in broader and more abstract codes. The primary reason for this was that the number of interviews was significantly lower compared to the dataset with clients at the activation site.

I did an initial coding of all three data sets. One could argue that one common coding list could have been applied for all members of staff. However, since their work differs and they face different challenges at their jobs, I found it important to do an initial coding of each group separately to make sure I did not overlook important empirical tendencies. During the initial coding, I had the ambition of staying close to the data while being open to new, undiscovered, or unexpected themes (Charmaz 2006; Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). However, my coding was also informed by both the interviews with the clients and my theoretical reflections on bureaucratic decoupling.

My coding strategy was to code the data material "incident to incident" – that is, coding several sentences or "incidents" instead of coding line-by-line. I did this to preserve the context and meaning of the data. I used this strategy throughout all three steps as it made it easier to apply and compare the analytical codes in the subsequent analysis. Thus, in this phase, I developed 315 codes. During the initial coding, I noted my reflections in memos. These reflections concerned, for example, whether the work supervisors' reflections on their decision-making corresponded with their actual decision-making reported in the field notes.

Based on the initial coding and my reflections reported in the memos, I did an axial coding. Here, I organized the initial codes into broader categories (Charmaz 2006, 60). The axial coding process resulted in a coding list with a code hierarchy. This is an example from the work supervisors at the activation site: "The work supervisors' enforcement of rules at the activation site" (code) → "Rules that not are enforced" (sub-code), "Rules that are enforced" (sub-

[77] As I only analyze the interviews with the work supervisors in Chapter 6, I have only included the final coding scheme for the work supervisors in the appendix (see Appendix D2). The other two coding schemes can be viewed upon request.

[78] For the complete coding scheme of the interviews with the work supervisors, see Appendix D2.

code), and "The work supervisors' general reflections on rules at the activation site" (sub-code). Based on this coding list, I did a "closed" coding of the interviews where I used the axial coding list to systematically code the interviews again.

5.4.2. Coding of field notes

The field notes for each day comprised 3–5 pages, and the number of pages of field notes totaled approximately 350 pages. As field notes have a very different character than interview material, it has been discussed to what extent these need to be systematically coded similarly to interviews.[79] In this study, the aim of the field notes is not merely to contextualize the interview statements made by the clients and members of staff. The field notes possess an independent analytical value showing both the work supervisors' decision-making practice and how clients act upon this. To capture this more systematically, I therefore imported the field notes into NVivo. Moreover, this also enabled me to get a better overview of the observational data reported in the field notes.

I then coded[80] them in a three-step process, which resembles the coding strategy for the work supervisors, the job consultants, the caseworkers, and the clients at the job café, but adapted to the different nature of the field note material. First, I did an initial coding of the field notes. I had the ambition of staying close to the data, and I therefore developed more than 150 codes that captured what went on in the material. Yet, the coding process was also informed by the interviews and theoretical reflections regarding bureaucratic decoupling. For the work supervisors, the initial codes captured the various

[79] This was a discussion in the Ph.D. course *Analysis of Qualitative Dat*a offered at Copenhagen Business School (CBS), September 9–12, 2019. Course coordinator Nanna Mik-Meyer argued that because field notes are the observer's observations and reflections, field notes cannot be subjected to systematic coding. For example, some ethnographies can be characterized as "confessional tales" (Maanen 2011). The central focus in the field notes is, therefore, to document the observer's reflections and feelings regarding conducting observations. Therefore, the focus is more in favor of *the observer* than *the observed*. In such cases, it is more difficult to code field notes. Although I reported reflections about my positionality, as I have already described in this chapter, the main focus in the field notes was the interactions between clients and the work supervisors. For example, a central focus was documenting how the work supervisors' decisions vary (e.g. their decisions regarding when clients are allowed to leave at the end of the day) and how they justified these decisions. As I systematically registered the specific time when clients were sent to work or sent home, this made it easier to code these observations systematically.

[80] For the complete coding scheme, see Appendix D3.

ways they justified their decisions. For the clients, the codes captured how they reacted to the work supervisors' decisions, for example ways in which they taught others how to behave at the site. During this process, I also developed further theoretical notions, which I reported in memos in NVivo. Afterwards, I selected the initial codes that I wanted to work with further and placed them under three broader codes: "Work supervisors," "Clients," and "My positionality." I then used this coding list to do a closed coding of the field notes again.

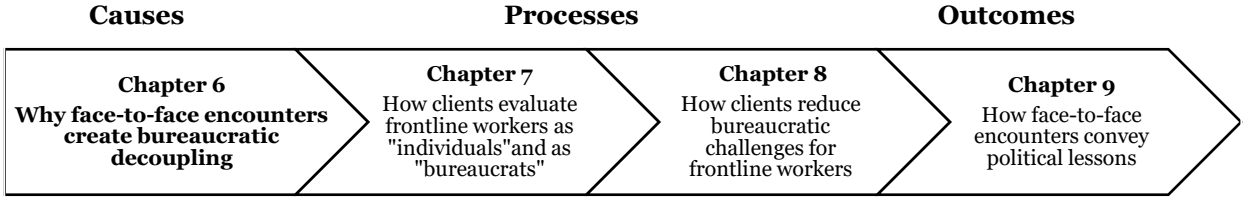
Part III
Analyzing Bureaucratic Decoupling

Chapter 6.
Why Face-to-Face Encounters Create Bureaucratic Decoupling

6.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze the causes of bureaucratic decoupling. I explore how each of the four features of the institutional order creates a face-to-face encounter that enables the work supervisors to: (a) present themselves as individuals decoupled from their official role as bureaucratic decision-makers, and (b) convey the idea to clients that their decisions are determined by matters beyond their control.

Figure 6.1. Structure of the analytical chapters



In the following three analytical chapters, I analyze how clients come to perceive the work supervisors (Chapter 7), how they adapt themselves to this perception (Chapter 8), and the political lessons of this (Chapter 9).

6.2. Structure of the chapter and analytical strategy

The chapter is divided into four parts, with each part focusing on one of the four features of the institutional order. The analysis is based on an in-depth reading and coding of the field notes, as well as the interviews with the work supervisors. With the exception of the final part of the chapter, the analysis of the field notes is skewed in favor of the work supervisors. The aim of this analytical focus is to show how the work supervisors' actions create a unique face-to-face encounter that enables them to convey an image of themselves both as individuals and as decision-makers.

Regarding the field notes, I coded[81] instances and situations that encapsulated the features of the institutional order. For feature 1, I focused on instances, for example where the work supervisors downplayed the importance of clients fulfilling their official obligations such as applying for jobs (administrative proximity) or instances where the work supervisors exchanged personal stories with clients (symbolic proximity). For feature 2, I coded how their decisions varied on a day-to-day basis in order to explore how deep their discretion was. As I was able to register and report the exact time each day for when they allowed clients to leave, I coded whether these decisions varied across time, number of clients at the site, and weather conditions. Moreover, I coded how the clients reacted to these decisions – for example, whether they argued with the work supervisors or complied – and then how the work supervisors reacted to this.

For feature 3, I focused on how the work supervisors justified their decisions when they were in front of a large group of clients as well as how clients behaved during these encounters. I compare this with clients' one-on-one encounters with the caseworkers and job consultants to show how clients' need to ask for justification changes when the nature of the encounter changes. Analyzing feature 4 entailed a change in analytical perspective, focusing on the clients rather than the work supervisors. I re-read the field notes focusing on the clients that I was able to follow for the longest period. I then focused on how they changed their attitudes towards activation (e.g. wishing to write job applications vs. working in the park) as well as their way of interacting with the work supervisors. I combine these analyses of field notes with interviews with the work supervisors to show how they reflect upon their decisions as well as their relations with clients.

6.3. Feature 1: Proximities between clients and work supervisors

In most bureaucratic organizations, such as welfare encounters, the encounter between a client and a frontline welfare worker is characterized by a large power asymmetry (Handler 1992; Hasenfeld 1987). First, this power asymmetry not only rests upon the decision-making power of the frontline worker but also upon the anonymity of the encounter. Personal stories are not exchanged because it would make it difficult for the frontline worker to make crucial decisions about clients' lives, for exampling issuing a financial sanction. Second, there is also a "system of gaps" (Dubois 2010, 30) where the two

[81] See Appendix D3 for the complete coding scheme.

parties "speak different languages." Clients, from the lower fractions of society are often unable translate their problems into legitimate claims. However, at the activation site, these power structures are blurred as the work supervisors establish a proximity to clients in four different ways.

6.3.1. Administrative proximity

First, the work supervisors establish an administrative proximity to clients by distinguishing themselves and their job from the caseworkers and the job consultants at the activation site. Unlike the work supervisors, the caseworkers and the job consultants are in charge of keeping track of clients' job searches and attendance at the activation site, a task that is more rule-bound and involves paperwork (see also Chapter 2). In February 2019, for example, I inform Ole (work supervisor) that I am observing consultations between clients and caseworkers in the staff room. He responds laughingly:

> *Field note, 27.02.2019*
>
> #Ole: "You're going bore yourself to death. You know that, right?"
>
> #Me: "Yeah, I know …" I say and smile.
>
> #Ole: "You're going to get sick of it in this weather when the rest of us are out in the field …"

Ole creates a distinction between what goes on "outdoors" and "indoors": Indoors, clients talk about their obligations and job searches with the caseworkers, which he labels as "boring", whereas outdoors, by contrast, is where the fun occurs and where the work supervisors exempt clients from thinking and talking about the official matters of their cash-assistance benefits.

The work supervisors also create an administrative proximity to clients by focusing less on clients' fulfillment of their obligations. Officially, there are few rules the work supervisors are responsible for enforcing. They have to direct the work assignments and include the clients in "meaningful work communities" (Ministry of Employment 2013). They have to make sure that clients are on time, dressed in their work clothes, and leave at either 12:30 p.m. or 1:30 p.m. However, in their everyday encounters with clients, the work supervisors actively downplay clients' official obligations in activation such as working efficiently, being on time and dressed in work clothes, and applying for jobs. By doing so, they decouple themselves from their official role as bureaucratic decision-makers in the utility jobs scheme.

In the park, the work supervisors rarely enforce an efficient work schedule but encourage working inefficiently, taking a walk, or talking instead of working. In the example below, Ole directly tells a group of nine clients that their working too fast is problem.

Field notes, 01.04.2019

#Ole: "This is going WAY, WAY, WAY too fast. Soon we'll be done trimming the whole common … and then I have to start finding work for us. And I don't want to do that!"

In the scene, he directly calls upon clients to slow down while simultaneously disclosing some of the challenges of his work: finding enough work assignments to fill a whole day of work. As a result, he asks two clients to take a walk and pick up trash even though there is hardly any in the area. One of the clients in the remaining group asks Ole jokingly if they should steal some of the cookies from the eight o'clock team.

Field notes, 01.04.2019 (continued)

#Ole: "That probably won't do," he says and smiles.

Ole stands and thinks a little, and at 11.34 a.m., he asks:

#Ole: "Shall I drive to the supermarket for some oat cookies?"

#Tobias [client]: "Can you buy the ones with chocolate instead?"

#Ole: "You prefer chocolate?"

#Tobias: "Definitely prefer chocolate," he says and laughs.

#Ole: "Then I'll drive over and get some chocolate cookies for you … But don't finish up while I'm gone. Or else we'll just have to go some other place."

The work supervisors also made fun of the obligations of wearing work clothes and clients' wish to apply for jobs. In late April 2019, Pia, one of the clients, is registering her job searches online in the meeting room, an obligation that clients must fulfill to show that they are actively seeking jobs. She is still wearing her own clothes. Ole comes over to her.

#Ole: "Why are you wearing such odd clothes, Pia?"

#Pia: "I have to register my résumé on the job blog."[82]

#Ole: "But shouldn't we just get going [to the park and work]?"

[82] A device that caseworkers at the social benefit office use to track whether clients' actively apply for jobs.

#Pia: “But I have to get this stuff registered,” she says insistently. “But I might come outside a bit later.”

Ole: “Alright, alright,” he says and moves on.

Ole reinforces the distinction again between being “indoors” and “outdoors”: In Ole’s words, they should “get going,” which indicates that searching for jobs, even though it prevents clients from receiving a sanction, is unimportant. Instead, in his view, she should go change into her work clothes so that they can go outside and work.

The work supervisors also rarely pointed out if clients were late. Instead, they made light of it if clients apologized for being a couple of minutes late or asked if they could go grab cigarette in the morning before work. At one point, I observed that the work supervisors turned registering clients in the morning into a game. In April 2019, at 08:10 a.m., a man on the eight o’clock team comes into the meeting room. It is obvious that he knows that he is late. Arne (work supervisor) sees him and says immediately, in a casual tone of voice, “You’ve been checked off, Mathias.” This reassures clients that the work supervisors “have got their back”: The supervisors remember their names and make sure that they are registered even though they are late. Arne then tells everyone in the meeting room that he and Sebastian (work supervisor) often joke about whether it is Mathias (a client at the site) or another man (I was unable to report his name) who come in first. At 08:13 a.m., the other man enters the meeting room. Sebastian presses one of the buttons on his keyboard (indicating that he has now registered the man’s attendance):

Field notes, 01.04.2019

#Arne: [to Sebastian] “You were quick there.”

Sebastian smiles.

#Sebastian: “Yeah, I was.”

In the meeting room, the work supervisors would also publicly talk about how they wanted to be somewhere else rather than making sure that clients were in attendance at the activation site. This indicates to clients that that they somehow disliked their role as the ones who have to keep an eye on the clients.

This is also evident in their way of allowing clients to leave. They would use a number of expressions, which I summarize in table 6.1, that indicate how they attempt to distance themselves from their role as the enforcers of the activation scheme.

Table 6.1. Expressions that the work supervisors use when they allow clients to leave at the end of the day

	Examples
Expressions that supervisors use when they allow clients to leave at the end of the day	"Why don't we get changed into more festive weekend clothes?" (01.02.2019)
	"Let's just say 'have a good weekend,' alright?" (03.05.2019)
	"Let's throw in the towel and call it a day, why don't we?" (05.03.2019)
	"Why don't we say that was it for today?" (11.02.2019)
	"The eight o'clock team can go home … You can also stick around until 3 p.m. and drink coffee." (29.01.2019)
	"Why don't we call it a day so that you can get away from the activation site and go enjoy the sunshine instead? These trees aren't going anywhere, so we can just carry on where we left off tomorrow." (18.02.2019).
	"Why don't we stop for today? It's pouring outside anyway." (07.03.2019)

First, the expressions indicate that activation is only something that clients should endure for a couple of hours and not the official 25 hours a week (e.g. "Let's throw in the towel and call it a day, why don't we?"). Second, it indicates that clients can spend their time in a more valuable way outside of the activation site (e.g. "Why don't we call it a day so that you can get away from the activation site and go enjoy the sunshine instead?"). Finally, it shows that the work supervisors ridicule those clients who obey the rules and stay until the official end of the day (e.g. "You can also stick around until 3 p.m. and drink coffee").

In sum, by distancing themselves from the caseworkers' paperwork tasks while downplaying the official obligations of activation, the work supervisors create an administrative proximity to the clients. The activation site then becomes a space in which clients are allowed to speak about matters beyond cash-assistance and with a group of work supervisors who appear more as individuals rather than bureaucratic decision-makers.

6.3.2. Professional proximity

While the work supervisors distanced themselves from their role as decision-makers, they actively embraced their informal knowledge of the nature and local area. As Arne (work supervisor) explains in an interview:

> I'm no expert in what goes on in those offices there [the caseworkers and job consultants' offices at the site]. It's more what goes on out here [outdoors in the park] that's – how should I put it? – my specialty, you know?

Arne is both unaware and appears disinterested regarding the caseworkers and the job consultants' job tasks when he says, "[…] what goes on in those offices there." Yet, when they were outdoors, the work supervisors conveyed an image of themselves as passionate individuals who cared about the local nature. For example, even though the work supervisors did not encourage clients to work efficiently, they encouraged them to be creative and think of ways that their work could contribute to the local area.

At one point, they encouraged clients to make natural fences made of wood branches. The only criterion was that the clients should think about how the fences could attract people from the local area, for example when they are on picnics or taking a walk. As Ole said when explaining the assignment, "It's both the aesthetic and a really good place for the insects […]." In another project where we were trimming trees near the harbor, Ole talks about our work in a visionary way: "My dream is sort of that people walk by and want to sit down next to the trees." This conveys an image of Ole as a person with a passion for working outdoors rather than making sure that clients fulfill their obligations.

The work supervisors also included clients in the project of improving outdoor areas. In early April 2019, just before we go to the park, Arne explains to his team that they have received a complaint from people in the local area because they, in his words, "take up too much space." He is clearly upset while he explains, "I mean, there are a lot of posts there [in a Facebook group for locals in the area], but I haven't had time to look at them. But, well, they don't know shit about what nature management is!" One of the clients then suggests that they bring a sign with them that says that they are doing nature perseveration. "Oh, that's a really good idea," Arne responds. This shows how the goal of improving outdoor areas becomes a project that clients participate in just as much as the work supervisors do.

In sum, the work supervisors establish themselves as individuals with a passion for improving outdoor areas. By also including clients in this project, they blur the power asymmetry between them because it appears as if they are working on the same team.

6.3.3. Physical and symbolic proximity

In traditional encounters, clients and frontline workers do not share personal stories or information unless they regard the clients' cases. This reinforces the symbolic difference between the status of being a frontline worker and a client. However, when both parties exchange personal information, they dissolve the

symbolic differences between them. As a result, the individual and private person behind the label of "client" and "bureaucratic decision-maker" appears.

When new clients arrived, the work supervisors would place their hands on the clients' shoulders to reassure them that they will remember their names.

> *Field notes, 18.02.2019*
>
> Sebastian [work supervisor] places his hand on him [a new client] and asks:
>
> #Sebastian: "What was your name again?"
>
> #Tristan: "Tristan,"
>
> #Sebastian: "Tomorrow, I'll remember," Sebastian replies in a friendly way.
>
> Tristan nods.
>
> #Sebastian: "There was something about an interview [with the caseworkers], right?"
>
> #Tristan: "Yeah, a job interview."

Placing one hand on the man can be regarded both as a way of caring for and protecting clients (Fredriksson 1999; Routasalo 1999): caring because the work supervisors show that they have not forgotten the man and that they will accommodate his wish for a consultation with one of the caseworkers; and protection because by putting a hand on his shoulder, they show that they have everything in control and that the man can feel safe in their presence.

The work supervisors also establish a symbolic proximity to the man by revoking the anonymity of the encounter. Sebastian reassures him that he will remember his name and give him that which he has asked for (a conversation with one of the job consultants). I frequently observed that the work supervisors would remind clients of consultations. They also approached clients if they had forgotten to register themselves in the morning. To clients, this shows that the work supervisors act on behalf of clients by making sure that they do not receive a financial sanction.

For some clients, this reassurance worked non-verbally. In the morning, some of the clients would open the door to the meeting room only slightly. Then they made eye contact with the work supervisors who would proceed to register them. This practice shows how the work supervisors know their names and that clients trust the work supervisors to "have their back". By contrast, new clients would, in the beginning of their activation, go directly to the work supervisors' desk and say their name loudly to make sure that the work supervisors would register them.

The work supervisors also established a symbolic proximity to clients by allowing them influence on their decisions. For example, Ole (work supervisor) asked one of the clients, Tanja, what she wants to do today:

> #Ole: [To me, as I asked him of his plan for today] "I'll probably drive somewhere with Rasmus and Tanja … Tanja, what would you like to do?"
>
> #Tanja: "What would I like?" she asks, surprised, and smiles.
>
> #Ole: "Yeah??"
>
> #Tanja: "Can I choose exactly what I want to do?"
>
> #Ole: "Yeah!"

Ole establishes himself as an equal to Tanja as he dissolves the differences between being a work supervisor (i.e. the one who decides) and a client (i.e. the one who complies). The work supervisors would also talk about their personal histories. Arne (work supervisor) regularly talked about his own previous unemployment, while Ole shared stories about his family life.

6.3.4. When clients violate the community

The institutional order is also dependent upon clients who accept the informal norms at the activation site, for example the norm of taking multiple breaks or working at an inefficient pace. However, there were some clients who continuously criticized the work supervisors and their decisions throughout their entire activation period.

In the interviews, the work supervisors labeled those clients as "heavy clients," as "difficult," or as "clients who make trouble." The work supervisors isolated those clients from the rest by sending them down to the harbor to work alone instead of working in groups in the park[83]. For example, one day, in the staff room with Ole (work supervisor) and Sebastian (work supervisor), Amina (caseworker) comes in and tells us that one of her clients has informed her how they are forming a group to revolt against the staff at the site. Ole then responds:

> *Field notes, 27.03.2019*
>
> #Ole: "Well, then they'll just get a grabber [to collect trash with] and a bag and be sent down to the harbor. Then they can work there alone just like Lauritz [one of the clients who causes trouble]. It's no problem."

[83] In chapter 8, I analyze how clients therefore, over time, criticize or contest the work supervisors' authority more indirectly, for example using secondary adjustments (E. Goffman 1961a) such as hiding tools.

Summarizing feature 1, as the work supervisors downplay the official aspects of activation, they blur their role as bureaucrats. Simultaneously, they display the individual and personal aspects of themselves, for example by remembering information about clients. In the next part of this chapter, I analyze how the work supervisors convey an image of themselves as decision-makers who face bureaucratic challenges beyond their control.

6.4. Feature 2: Deep discretion in mundane decisions

Studies emphasize that frontline workers' decision-making practices largely reflect a way of coping with performance pressures or political rules (see e.g. Brodkin 2011; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a). By contrast, I find that when frontline workers hold a "deep discretion" – that is, a discretion that is largely unregulated – their decision-making practices reflect an attempt to establish a comfortable relationship with clients.

This is because their deep discretion places them in a social dilemma: If they enforce the rules rigidly, they lose the support and loyalty from clients. Therefore, they enforce the rules leniently to retain an image among the clients as "nice". However, this lenient approach also lead to inconsistent decisions while it also convey an impression among the clients that there are no rules. Therefore, the work supervisors occasionally enforce the rules rigidly. However, to retain their image as nice, they deflect responsibility away from themselves on to factors beyond their control.

6.4.1. Enforcing the rules leniently

In an interview with Sebastian (work supervisor), I ask him whether it is challenging not to have any fixed production targets regarding clients' work assignments:

> Well, I find it easier in some ways but also 'looser' in another way, you know, because I guess you can say that it's hard to tell people that they have to show up at this and this time and stay until this time, I think.

This shows that they enforce the rules very leniently because it could otherwise potentially upset their relationship with clients. This was also expressed by Ole in an interview regarding whether he could make the clients work efficiently in the park. If he decides to report their unwillingness to work to the caseworkers, who then sanction the clients, he does not become "the most popular fellow" among clients:

> Then you can start sanctioning people and say, "Well, I'm going to take your cash-assistance from you" or something like that. But it's – it's … it seems completely absurd in some ways […]. Because there's that fine line again, like, yeah, you could pull the sanction card, but then you won't be the most popular fellow in a few days.

As a result, the work supervisors enforced the rules leniently in mundane matters such as when clients are allowed to leave or change back into their private clothes. As I carefully reported in my field notes when clients left each day, I was able to record how their decisions varied from day-to-day and thus the degree of their deep discretion. I illustrate this in table 6.2.

Table 6.2 illustrates observations for the nine o'clock team only, which I followed most closely. Occasionally, I observed the eight o'clock team, and the times they left also varied inconsistently. I coded days where they "leave late" as instances when they left after 1:00 p.m., and days where they "leave early" as instances when they left before 1:00 p.m. The nine-o'clock team was officially allowed to leave at 1:30 p.m. However, I only observed that they stayed until the official time on five occasions. This was either because the work supervisors forgot to allow the clients to leave or because the clients actually needed to finish a work assignment. This means that leaving at the official time, at 1:30 p.m., was considered late both by the staff and the citizens. The observations in table 6.2 shows that when clients had to stay longer than 1:00 p.m., frustrations among clients started to spread in the meeting room. "Poor weather conditions" were coded as instances where it was either raining or when the temperature was below the freezing point. "Good weather conditions" were coded as instances where it was not raining or when the temperature was above the freezing point. I codes days where there were "many clients" as instances when there were 15 or more people on the nine o'clock team at the site, and instances where there were "few clients" when there were fewer than 15 people. I also paid attention to whether the atmosphere was hectic and chaotic due to the amount of people present. As there was only one supervisor per team, the supervisors expressed that it became difficult to manage clients if there were more than 15 people on each team. All the days I was unable to detect these variations are not included in the table (Hansen 2020, 19–20).

Table 6.2. Time for leaving across weather conditions and caseload

Decisions	Counts	Examples
Clients leave early		
Supervisors allow clients to leave early when the weather conditions are poor	10	March 5, 2019 At 09:33 a.m. in the meeting room, Ole says to people from the nine o'clock team, "Let's throw in the towel and call it a day, why don't we? I guess we have to admit that it won't stop raining today."
Supervisors allow clients to leave early when the weather conditions are good	24	February 18, 2019 At 12:00 p.m. in the park, while we are working, Ole appears and says to a group from the nine o'clock team, "Why don't we call it a day so that you can get away from the activation site and go enjoy the sunshine instead?"
Supervisors allow clients to leave early when there are many clients at the site	19	April 11, 2019 Outside the meeting room at approximately 09:10 a.m., I observe how the entire area is filled with people. There are several groups of people standing in different places at the site. It is chaos, and everyone is just waiting to be put to work. The same day at 12:00 p.m., clients from both teams are allowed to leave.
Supervisors allow clients to leave early when there are few clients at the site	15	February 1, 2019 At 11:50 a.m., four people from the nine o'clock team are sitting inside the meeting room. At 12:00 p.m., Ole says, "Why don't we get changed into more festive weekend clothes?"

Clients leave late		
Supervisors make clients stay late when the weather conditions are poor	4	April 25, 2019 At 09:05 a.m., it begins to rain heavily. Two clients from the nine o'clock team ask Ole whether they will be sent out to work. "If I were you guys, I would put on a rain coat," he says, implying that they will not be sent home. We work until 1:29 p.m., at which point one of the men asks Sebastian, "Are we allowed to leave now?" "Well, it's the first time you've stayed this late," Sebastian says while he laughs and puts his hand on the man's shoulder.
Supervisors make clients stay late when the weather conditions are good	24	April 29, 2019 At 08:48 a.m., the sun is shining, and the weather forecast reads 18°C. At 1:23 p.m., the nine o'clock team is allowed to leave.
Supervisors make clients stay late when there are many clients at the site	15	May 2, 2019 Today, there are 19 people at the site from the nine o'clock team. There is a lot of noise, and I only know half of the clients present. At 09:12 a.m., Ole tries to get people out of the meeting room, saying, "We just need you to go outside so we can get an overview." At 1:33 p.m., Ole allows the nine o'clock team to leave.
Supervisors make clients stay late when there few clients at the site	13	February 11, 2019 At 12:57 p.m., nine people are in the meeting room. They have been waiting for an hour to be allowed to leave since they came back from the park. One of women is frustrated and asks Torben [work supervisor], "Are we allowed to leave?" "Not until 1:30 p.m.," he answers. "Nooo!" the woman yells in a frustrated tone of voice. At 1:17 p.m., Ole [work supervisor] appears in the meeting room and asks, "Should we call it a day?"

Source: Hansen (2020 10–11).

6.4.2. Deflection of responsibility

Table 6.2 shows that decisions regarding the clients' workday are largely based on either the work supervisors' will or their general mood at the site. As this is a highly lenient and inconsistent management of clients' time in activation, the question is then how the work supervisors prevent criticism from clients. I find that they do so in two ways: (a) either they remove clients' ability to hold them accountable or (b) they deflect responsibility away from themselves and onto factors beyond their control.

Regarding the first way, they often waited for clients to take action themselves when they were waiting. I observed several times that the work supervisors would leave the clients alone in the meeting room and then wait until the clients decided to leave themselves. This creates an uncertainty among clients of whether or not they have misunderstood the work supervisors' decisions: Have they already allowed us to leave or do we still have to wait?

Regarding the second way, as I analyzed earlier, the work supervisors somehow engaged in forms of "credit claiming": By putting less emphasis on the official obligations of receiving assistance while involving clients in their decisions, they received a lot of credit for being "nice." In Chapter 7, I analyze how this is the central attribute used by clients to characterize the work supervisors. However, the work supervisors also engaged in forms of "blame avoidance":[84] Whenever they made decisions that could, somehow, make clients criticize them, they deflected responsibility away from themselves onto factors beyond their control. This allows them to retain their image as "nice" individuals and the image of themselves as decision-makers facing multiple challenges beyond their control. I illustrate this in table 6.3.

[84] I acknowledge that the concept "blame avoidance" is associated with the literature on how politicians design strategies to avoid blame for unpopular decisions, for example for poor economic performance (Weaver 1986). However, I treat it more as a micro-level concept of how the work supervisors avoid blame for unpopular decisions about, for example, waiting time.

Table 6.3. The work supervisors' deflection of responsibility

The work supervisors deflect responsibility upwards	
The rules	February 19, 2019 #Woman [client]: "Then why do we have to sit here and wait?!" She is clearly frustrated with having to wait to get a meeting with one of the caseworkers. #Sebastian [work supervisor]: "You're not off work until 1.30 p.m., so technically, you're already off early."
The system	March 27, 2019 A client [man] is apparently going to start a degree in April 2019 and is displeased with having to apply for two jobs a week. When I walk past, I can hear Sebastian saying: #Sebastian [work supervisor]: "We're not the ones saying you have to apply for two jobs a week. It's the system that says so."
The political objective of utility jobs	January 3, 2019 One of the clients is complaining about things not going fast enough when we are working. #Arne [work supervisor]:: "This here is the utility job scheme. We're not supposed to accomplish anything; we're supposed to keep people occupied. That's the point of utility work."
Their management	March 25, 2019 There are a lot of clients from the eight o'clock team who have just returned from the park with Arne [work supervisor]. Several of them are on their way upstairs [to the locker room] to change, while the others are locking up their bicycles. #Arne: "You can't go home yet!" Arne says with a clear seriousness to his voice. Most of the clients stop and look at Arne. #Arne: "You can't go home yet. If my boss were to come by and see that you've all left, I would be in a heap of trouble." The clients nod and quietly make their way back to the meeting room.

The weather	March 5, 2019 One of the new clients who had gone over to fetch some clothes comes in the door [to the meeting room]. He is carrying his new work clothes under his arm. #New client: "Are we free to go?" he asks the moment he comes in and sees that the others have left. #Sebastian [work supervisor]: "Yeah, because of the weather, you've got the day off today." The new client nods.
The work supervisors deflect responsibility downwards	
The number of clients at the site	April 9, 2019 Tonny, one of the new clients, gets up from his seat at the first table and asks Uffe [job consultant/work supervisor]: #Tonny [client] "Are we going outside [to work] or what?" He started yesterday and has waited about 10 minutes in the meeting room since he arrived. Uffe gives him a puzzled look. Then he smiles and says, #Uffe: "Oh, right, you're the new kid in class. Ole [work supervisor] is the one who makes the call, but it's simply because we are such an insanely big group right now that we haven't gotten started yet." Tonny nods and sits back down.
Clients do not understand the work supervisors' decisions	January 14, 2019 Ole [work supervisor] is walking back and forth observing our work. He is clearly displeased with the way we've pruned the trees. #Lauritz [client]: "Then you should have said so." #Ole: "I believe it's been said on a regular basis, and you do have the possibility of asking."
Clients complain	January 14, 2019 Several of the clients are complaining to Ole and telling him that it is much too cold to work in this weather. #Ole [work supervisor]: "All you talk about is getting sick. Everything makes you sick. Fresh air makes you sick," he says and laughs irritably.

Clients are lazy	April 25, 2019 It is not until 1.29 p.m. that we are done. #Edward [client]: “Now may we leave?” #Sebastian [work supervisor]: “It’s the first time you’ve stayed this long.”
The work supervisors directly hand over responsibility to clients	April 26, 2019 #Ole [work supervisor]: “The others have left, so you can just drive back and pick up the tools and the others, and then that’s it for today.” #Svend [client]: “It’s up to you, Ole.” #Ole: “No, it’s a choice that I’m giving you. So if you want, you can pick up another load and come back […].

Table 6.3 shows, for example, that the work supervisors invoke their management and inform clients that they will be penalized if their management finds out that they have allowed clients to leave early. They also inform clients that they are unable to reduce the waiting time because of the number of clients at the site. The table also shows that these ways of deflecting responsibility occur across time (*feature 4*). Finally, it shows that many of the questions and criticisms of the work supervisors' authority are coming from newly arrived clients. In chapter 8, I analyze clients over the course of their activation period downplay these direct criticisms, and use more indirect ways of criticizing or contesting the decisions of the work supervisors.

In sum, while the work supervisors attempt to create an image of themselves as equals to clients, they also convey an image of themselves as decision-makers. They have deep discretion, which they use to compromise the rules for the sake of clients. Yet, as this may cause injustices, they invoke the rules, their management, or the amount of clients as justification of their decisions. This informs clients of the multiple challenges that they face as bureaucratic decision-makers.

6.5. Feature 3: The presence of a public

In this part of the chapter, I analyze first how the constant presence of multiple other clients, both in the meeting room and in the park, creates a setting in which clients need to present themselves in ways that challenge the work supervisors' decision-making. Second, I analyze how these presentations prompt the supervisors to react and to justify their decisions by deflecting responsibility away from themselves. Third, in order to show the performative nature of clients' challenges of the work supervisors' decision-making, I illustrate how the same clients who complain loudly in the meeting room are much more compliant during one-on-one meetings with job consultants and caseworkers even though these encounters also occur at the activation site.

6.5.1. Clients' presentations of themselves in front of a public of clients

Clients' tendency to present themselves as autonomous individuals who dare to challenge frontline workers' decisions begins already before they arrive at the activation site. One week before they arrive at the activation site, they attend an information meeting at the job center. At the information meeting, two of the job consultants and one of the caseworkers at the site present the utility jobs scheme. During the presentation, a woman next to me, Emily, who

I later learn is a long-term unemployed client,[85] starts asking a number of questions. The situation shows that when clients contest their authority, the work supervisors essentially try to maintain a nice atmosphere in the room.

Field note, 04.01.2019

#Emily: "Do you have a union representative?"

Carsten [job consultant] looks at Uffe [job consultant/work supervisor[86]], who is sitting down, with a surprised and enquiring expression.

#Uffe: "Uh, yes, we do? Yeah, we have a representative from [x] union."

#Emily: "It was just regarding the work environment and stuff."

#Uffe: "Yeah, well, it's a representative for us as work supervisors."

#Emily: "What's his name?"

Uffe looks at her and waits a little before replying.

#Uffe: "His name is Alfred."

#Emily: "Alfred what?"

Uffe waits again.

#Uffe: "He's just called "Alfred from [x] union."

#Emily: "Okay, Alfred."

After a while, a woman at the first table says:

#Woman at the first table: "This here is community service," and laughs.

No one hears her, so she repeats:

#Woman at the first table: "This is community service."

Carsten [job consultant] hears what she's saying now. He doesn't respond but simply smiles back.

Emily's continuous questioning about the union representative creates a tense atmosphere. Talking about employment rights proves Emily's autonomy to

[85] One week later, Emily came to the activation site. At the end of February 2019, weeks before her activation ended, the caseworkers re-categorized her from "job ready" to "activity ready." The reason was twofold: (a) that she could get help attuned to her special needs, and (b) that her coming back to the activation site could be avoided.

[86] At the activation site, Uffe acted officially both as a work supervisor and a job consultant. This meant that if the other work supervisors needed helped, he could step in. Otherwise, he acted as a job consultant and carried out consultations with clients about their job searches and internships.

other clients and that she is unwilling to submit to the job consultants' commands. It is clear that both Carsten and Uffe do not want the conversation to escalate into an open argument in front of a large group of clients. This is illustrated by Carsten's reluctance to answer Emily's question at the beginning of the meeting. However, they also want to retain their authority. When Emily asks for the union representative's last name, Uffe ends the discussion by answering, "He's just called "Alfred."

Moments later, another woman contests their authority again by claiming that the utility job scheme is only another form of community service, and she repeats herself to make sure that the other clients hear her. This time, however, Carsten chooses to ignore her, which prevents the situation from escalating.

At the activation site, these provocations continued on a regular basis. Often, they appeared as an attempt to leave the work supervisors "out of face,"[87] for example by making jokes about the work supervisors' jobs or about their individual characteristics. In late March 2019, for example, one of the new clients overheard that Sebastian had to leave for a couple of hours to go to the doctor. When Sebastian came back, the man – in front of multiple other clients in the meeting room – asked him how his doctor's appointment had gone. Sebastian just smiled and said, "Well, that's a long story".

This also occurred when the work supervisors were not present. When clients were waiting to be allowed to leave, they would pressure each other to "dare" to be the first to leave without permission. The amount of time clients wait for bureaucratic authorities can be seen as a direct measure of the power asymmetry between them (Schwartz 1974). This means that when clients are exposed to each other's scrutiny, the decision to get up and leave shows one's autonomy. By contrast, the decision to remain seated and wait for the supervisors to allow them to leave shows one's submissiveness.

In early May 2019, at 1:12 p.m., there 19 clients in the meeting room. Two clients, Johannes and Lucas, are tired of waiting:

Field note, 02.05.2019

#Johannes: [to Lucas] "Well, shall we go upstairs and change?"

Lucas seems surprised and answers cautiously:

#Lucas: "We can?"

[87] According to Goffman, "A person may be said to be out of face when he participates in a contact with others without having ready a line of the kind participants in such situations are expected to take" (E. Goffman 1967, 8).

Johannes explains that it takes him five minutes to change clothes, so he might as well go upstairs [to the locker room] and change now instead of waiting. Johannes walks out the door, and Lucas remains seated. When Johannes leaves the room, three or four clients follow. Two clients sitting at the table in the center start discussing whether they should also go and change.

#Man: "If he [Johannes] does it, then I'm doing it too," he says and points out that one of the other clients has also left without permission.

When Johannes gets up and says, "Well, shall we go upstairs and change?", he clearly establishes an image of himself as a person who will not let others dictate his actions. The other clients now need to respond to convey the same image of themselves. This is illustrated when the others in the room say, "If he does it, then I'm doing it too."

6.5.2. When the work supervisors react to clients' provocations and justify their decisions

In situations where clients' outbursts question the nature and objective of the utility jobs scheme in front of a large crowd of other clients, then the work supervisors are forced to react.

One day in early February 2019, for example, the work supervisors are talking about a job-searching event at the job center, in which clients are allowed to participate each month. There are ten clients and two supervisors present in the room. Two clients, Emily and John, are talking loudly in the room, criticizing the event.

Field note, 05.02.2019

#John: "They shove these butt-fucking jobs down your throat," he says, referring to the jobs that are advertised at the job center.

#Emily: "Butt-fucking jobs … that's an interesting expression."

John goes on about how the hourly wage [for the jobs presented at the job-searching event] is too low and that he can get a much higher salary if he applied for a job in construction, where he has prior experience.

When the conversation finally becomes very loud, Ole [work supervisor] gets up.

#Ole: [to John] "There is no doubt that if you've been unemployed for 10 or 12 years, you can't expect to get a job that pays 250 kroner an hour."

#John: "So should we just go apply for a job that pays 103 or 105 kroner [the minimum wage in Denmark] an hour in Silvan [hardware store]?" he asks from the other end of the room.

#Ole: "Yeah, if you've been unemployed for as many years as you have, you should. When you apply for a job in construction, they choose someone who's only been unemployed for a year, six months, or just a month."

John keeps protesting while Ole talks.

#Ole: "You want to stand here arguing with me and keep staying out here in the utility jobs scheme for 75 kroner an hour instead of taking a job in Silvan for 105 kroner an hour"

#Emily: "Are the jobs they advertise at the job center, and which you recommend, are they on a union settlement?"

#Ole: "Of course, they are. We're not damned well arranging moonlighting gigs," Ole says, clearly annoyed.

Emily continues protesting, and Ole has now become so irritated that he leaves the meeting room. On his way out, he says three times:

#Ole: "That right there is so pathetic, Emily"

First, two clients (Emily and John), both of whom are long-term unemployed, claim that accepting a low-paid job is below their standard. John loudly characterizes these jobs as "butt-fucking jobs." Second, as this creates a tense atmosphere in the room, it forces one of work supervisors, Ole, to react. He then invokes the cultural stereotype about "the lazy welfare client," blaming John for his unwillingness to accept a low-wage job offer. He also uses John's stubbornness as an example to the other clients of what might happen to them if they act in a similar way.

Third, the lack of official training in social work and communication also leads Ole to become frustrated to the point where he has to leave in anger, calling Emily "pathetic." To the other clients in the room, they are provided an immediate glimpse of the challenges of making decisions as a work supervisor and the difficult task of handling clients who are troublesome and ungrateful of their work. Finally, the scene shows that these spectacles are, for some of the clients, deliberately designed for an audience. Right after Ole leaves the room, John and Emily talk loudly that if they continue protesting, they will give Ole a heart attack. Then, they address Lauritz:

Field note, 05.02.2019 (continued)

#John: "Did you hear that, Lauritz? If we just keep going, we'll give him a heart attack."

#Lauritz: "Uh, what? I wasn't really listening."

John repeats what he said.

#Lauritz: "Well, he's not here right now."

Lauritz's casual comment "Well, he's not here right now" indicates that he is only willing to put on these spectacles if it can leave the work supervisors out of face in front of the other clients. As both Emily, John, and Lauritz continuously argued with the work supervisors, they were excluded from the larger group of clients and sent to the harbor to work by themselves.

6.5.3. When face work is suspended in one-on-one meetings

One could ask whether clients also acted this way during one-on-one meetings with caseworkers or job consultants in the staff room. As I observed several of these meetings, I found that clients in general acted much more compliantly and in a friendly way.

One case, in particular, illustrates this point. In the scene above, John is the obvious instigator of chaos. A month later, I interview him and right after, I am allowed to observe one of his consultations with Uffe (job consultant/work supervisor). The meeting unfolds in a very different way than the encounter in the meeting room. In this meeting, John's presentation of himself as a person who is "too good" to accept a low-wage job in the meeting room cracks and is used against him during the one-on-one meeting with Uffe.

> *Field note, 12.03.2019*
>
> We [John and I] go in [to the staff room] together at 11.29 a.m. Usually, the clients wait [in the meeting room] for the staff to come and get them, but in this case, John just walks right in.
>
> #John: "So, Uffe [job consultant], have you got some permanent work for me for 185 kroner an hour?" John smiles.
>
> Uffe is looking at the computer and is in the middle of opening a few programs to find John's case.
>
> #Uffe: "You're an intelligent man, John," he says, inferring that John can find a job on his own.
>
> #John: "So you unfortunately don't?" John is still smiling. […]
>
> #Uffe: "How about that staircase cleaning job? What do you say to that?"
>
> #John: "Staircase cleaning job?"
>
> #Uffe: "Yes, this morning, I gave an incendiary speech [ironically] about a job as a staircase cleaner."
>
> #John: "How much does it pay?"
>
> #Uffe: "More than you get here?"
>
> #John: "Oh?" He looks into thin air, and it seems he doesn't know quite what to say. […]

#John: “But they [those who clean staircases] get paid peanuts?”

#Uffe: “Look, I’ve heard your speeches about salary in the meeting room and such … but it’s a little dangerous to be conservative about salary. Employers don’t really care for it … They would prefer that you’ve done something because that shows that you’re willing to work and reach out. It looks better than being able to see on your résumé that you’ve been unemployed. If I were an employer, that’s how I’d think in any case.”

#John: “But when I look at positions like staircase cleaner, then I don’t have the experience you need to have.” […]

First, the scene illustrates that as John enters the staff room, he still attempts to assert himself: He walks right into the staff room without knocking. When he gets into the room alone with Uffe, John arrogantly asks if he has a well-paid job ready for him. However, Uffe easily dismisses his point with a sarcastic comment. Uffe then suggests that he applies for a job cleaning staircases. John then asks about the salary, and Uffe answers that it is more than he receives on social assistance, which thereby discredits his comments about salary. John then tries again, but Uffe uses John’s presentation in the meeting room against him and explains to him that this behavior will get him nowhere if he wants to find a job. John then backs down and admits that he has no work experience. Later in the meeting, John also explains how he has difficulty even writing job applications.

6.6. Feature 4: Time

The fourth feature of the institutional order is more difficult to show empirically. Until now, I have analyzed how the work supervisors’ decisions as well as how they control clients’ time change over time (see tables 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3.). I also explore this in-depth in Paper A. Moreover, in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, I show that the duration of the encounter reinforces decoupling. I analyze how both clients’ perceptions of the work supervisors (Chapter 7) as well as their behavior towards the work supervisors (Chapter 8) change over the course of their encounters. Chapter 7 shows that over the course of the 13 weeks in activation, clients develop a sense of loyalty to the work supervisors while they deflect responsibility away from their decisions (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 shows that this loyalty leads clients to act in ways that reduce the challenges of the work supervisors’ decision-making.

Yet, the activation encounter also creates a new sense of time among clients. To show this, it entails a slight change of analytical perspective in the remaining part of this chapter, going from focusing mainly on the actions of the work supervisors to focusing on the clients. Therefore, I conduct an in-

depth analysis of one of the clients at the site, Monica (age 53). I was able to follow her very closely over a period of three months, interviewing her twice from the point of entering the site to the point where she left. Although she had previously been on cash assistance for a short while, she has worked for many years as an independent salesperson. She also has a background as a tailor and a bachelor's degree in media studies. She has a long-term boyfriend, a daughter, and a large network. Monica therefore can be seen as a *least likely case* of finding that face-to-face encounters at the activation site change clients' perception of time. If it occurs in her case, it is likely that it could occur for other clients at the activation site or clients at other utility jobs activation sites.

In particular, Monica's story shows three important things. First, at the beginning of her activation, she is very skeptical of the utility jobs scheme scheme and how the work supervisors organize the work assignments. However, over time, she becomes very positive towards the activation scheme: Rather than prioritizing measures that could increase her chances of finding a job, she prioritizes working in the park along with the work supervisors and fellow clients. Second, the analysis shows a change in her perception of time. In the beginning, she wishes to leave the activation site as soon as possible while simultaneously feeling that time moves very slowly. Over time, however, she wishes to stay at the activation site because she values her close relationship with the work supervisors. Yet, she starts to feel that time moves very quickly and that she is caught up in an empty interlude where "time [is] standing still but passing away" (Armstrong 2015, 134).

Third, the analysis shows that the change in her perception of time operates in tandem with her change of perception regarding the work supervisors. In the beginning, she openly criticizes their way of directing work assignments: "Are we going or what?" she says in an irritated tone of voice to underline the work supervisors' poor time management. However, as time passes, she begins to show her dissatisfactions through "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990) like rolling her eyes when the work supervisors are not watching. Yet, towards the end, she establishes a close, confidential relationship with the work supervisors. In this relationship, she learns how to present herself, for example being assertive about her own goals but without complaining about the nature of the utility jobs scheme.

Below, I show Monica's change in her sense of time over the course of three months. I illustrate this using both extracts from field notes and interviews. This combination enables me to show how she continuously behaves according to her views expressed in the interviews (see Jerolmack and Khan 2014).

Table 6.4. Monica's change in her sense of time, January-March 2019

Date	Source of data	Observation	Change
11.01.2019	Field notes	There is a presentation in the meeting room. Torben [work supervisor] is talking loudly, and Ole [work supervisor] walks over to him. Ole also talks loudly, and suddenly, they're having an ordinary conversation. #Monica [to Torben and Ole]: "Can't you be quiet? We can't hear anything with you talking!"	At this early stage of her activation, Monica is clearly able to assert herself, and she expects a form of professionalism from the work supervisors, such as keeping quiet during a presentation.
18.01.2019	First interview	I don't want to run around out there [the park where clients are working] and do nothing. It's driving me crazy. I mean, I'll work my butt off, and then maybe I'll be done a little faster [...] But you're told that you have to be here for 13 weeks. That's three months. That's a long time. Um, I get how people can lose their ... spark, right?	This shows how she wants to carry out the work assignments according to an efficient time schedule, to which she is accustomed. Furthermore, it illustrates that she is very aware of how her moral can change over the course of three months.
18.01.2019	Field notes	After the interview, we're driven out to the park. A group of clients are taking a break, and Monica says to Ole [work supervisor]: #Monica: "Aren't we supposed to do something or what?" #Ole: "Calm down already."	This shows how she is not willing to spend her time in activation taking long breaks. "Aren't we supposed to do something or what?" indicates that she expects efficient time management from the work supervisors like she is used to from the labor market.
29.01.2019	Field notes	Monica says she has been sick for a few days and that she had a minor breakdown. She says that the "can-do attitude" she's had gets harder to muster up each day. As such, she says that the only reason she's able to do it is because she constantly has small deadlines no further than two weeks ahead, like coffee meetings with companies.	This shows that she uses "time tactics" such as scheduling short deadlines to get through the three months of activation. However, as she is not making any progress in terms of finding a job, this gets more difficult each day.

22.02.2019	Field notes	In the meeting room, there is a presentation, during which the work supervisors are talking loudly and disruptively. I catch Monica's eye as she is sitting right next to me. She points [at the work supervisors] and shakes her head repeatedly while looking at me to signal how much they are disrupting the presentation.	In contrast to the presentation on 11.01.2019, Monica now shakes her head to indicate her dissatisfaction with the work supervisors instead of addressing the work supervisors directly.
08.03.2019	Second interview	"Well, when I started her, what was it, January 7, right? And time passes so fast, it does … Um, well, the ACTUAL project isn't as horrible as I thought. I think there's a massive receptiveness from Sebastian and Ole [work supervisors]. It's mainly them I've spoken to since. […] And I've actually spent a few days out there and thought: 'This is really cool,' you know? […] And I would so much rather be here, as I said to Ole [work supervisor] the other day […] And then okay, and what if…one could apply for permission to stay here if I'm unfortunate enough not to have a job in three weeks."	The interview shows a radical change in her perception of time. Whereas she, in the first interview, emphasized that she wanted to leave the site as soon as possible, she is now planning to stay at the activation site longer than she is officially obliged to. Her perception of time itself has also changed. She now feels that time is moving very quickly. This indicates how she is also enjoying her time in activation. Finally, it illustrates how she has developed a close relationship with the work supervisors as she appreciates their attentiveness.
08.03.2019	Field notes	#Monica: "Sebastian [work supervisor], should I also go out to the park [to work] or can I stay here and write that application?" #Sebastian: "No, you need to get that application finished?" Monica nods and smiles. […] When I come downstairs, I see Monica come running with some clothes in hand. #Monica: [to me] "I want to go out in the field too. Then I can finish that application later."	The scene displays a change from prioritizing writing job applications to appreciating being outdoors in the park although it does not get her any closer to finding a job. It also shows, as in the interview, that she has developed a more positive relationship with the supervisors. They now allow her to stay in the meeting room even though she is officially obliged to work in the park.

20.03.2019	Field notes	Monica has arrived the same time as me and has left her jacket on the center table [in the meeting room], at the end of which I'm sitting. Once she's placed it, she goes over to Ole [work supervisor] and Uffe [work supervisor/job consultant] right away. She grabs a chair and sits down with her legs crossed, leans over the table, and starts telling Uffe about the internship he got her [...]. She stays seated there for five minutes, and after a while, they start talking about the new buildings in the park.	This shows her close relationship with the work supervisors. As she takes a chair, sits down, and crosses her legs, it is evident that she feels equal to the work supervisors and that there is a low power asymmetry between them.
20.03.2019	Field notes	#Me [to Monica]: Do you feel that you receive more help [from the work supervisors] if you have a positive attitude and if you reach out to them [for help regarding job searches] #Monica: "Definitely! You get a lot more understanding and a lot more leeway and help"	This shows that Monica is aware that if you behave willingly and without criticizing the work supervisors, you receive certain privileges.

Note: I have not included all field notes of observations of her, but only the most telling ones that illustrate the change in her perception of time.

6.7. Conclusion

I this chapter, I have analyzed the causes of bureaucratic decoupling. I summarize the main findings of this chapter in table 6.5.

Table 6.5. Summary of findings for Chapter 6

Focus	Findings
Feature 1: A blurred power asymmetry	The work supervisors blur traditionally understood power asymmetries in frontline work encounters by establishing a proximity to clients in four ways. *Administrative proximity:* The work supervisors create an administrative proximity to clients by de-emphasizing the importance that clients fulfill their official obligations. *Professional proximity:* The work supervisors use their informal knowledge of working outdoors and present their work in a passionate way. *Physical proximity:* The work supervisors remove physical barriers between themselves and the clients by working side-by-side with clients as well as regularly touching clients to assure them that they know their names and cases. *Symbolic proximity:* The work supervisors remove the symbolic demarcation between the "client" and the "bureaucrat" by including the clients in their decision-making practices as well as by engaging the clients in their own personal lives.
Feature 2: Deep discretion in mundane decisions	The work supervisors use their deep discretion to adopt a very lenient enforcement of the rules, allowing clients to occasionally leave earlier than the official end of day (table 6.2). This allows them to retain an image as "nice." However, as this also creates inconsistencies and dissatisfactions, they either remove clients' ability to hold them accountable or deflect responsibility away from themselves (table 6.3) onto the rules, the system, or the clients at the site. This conveys an impression to clients that they are nice individuals but that their decisions are determined by factors beyond their control.
Feature 3: The presence of a public	Compared to their one-on-one meetings with job consultants and caseworkers, as the analysis of the meeting between John and Uffe shows, clients are much more assertive and provocative in the meeting room where they are surrounded by a public of multiple other clients. However, as these outbursts potentially discredit the work supervisors' authority, the work supervisors react by blaming the clients themselves for their laziness. To other clients in the room, this shows the complicated nature of the work supervisors' job of dealing with "heavy clients" on a daily basis.

Feature 4: Time	Spending more than three months in activation changes clients' perceptions of time itself. The story of Monica illustrates that clients expect efficient time management from the work supervisors in the beginning of their activation. However, towards the end, clients accept their lenient time management. Moreover, in the beginning, clients prioritize being indoors writing job applications as it allows them to leave the activation site as soon as possible. However, towards the end of their activation, they prioritize working outdoors along with fellow clients and the work supervisors. In the case of Monica, these changes occur in tandem with the change in her perception of the work supervisors, going from publicly arguing with them in the meeting room to establishing a close and equal relationship with them, sharing stories of childhood and residence.

By analyzing how each of the four features of the institutional order operates at the activation site, it is possible to understand the causes of bureaucratic decoupling. The four features of the institutional order create a unique face-to-face encounter where the work supervisors are able to embrace their individual side – being nice, funny, and empathetic – and simultaneously decouple themselves from their official role as bureaucratic decision-makers.

The work supervisors blur the power asymmetries between themselves and the clients by reducing both the administrative and symbolic differences between being a client and being a work supervisor. The work supervisors dissolve these differences by remembering clients' names, engaging them in their private lives, and by granting them significant influence on their decisions. As this occurs for more than three months, unlike many of the other bureaucratic encounters, this enables the clients to see the work supervisors as decoupled from their official role as bureaucratic decision-makers. The analysis of Monica illustrates, among other things, how this image of the work supervisors evolves over time.

Moreover, by enforcing the rules leniently such as by allowing clients to leave early and take multiple breaks, the work supervisors also engage in forms of credit claiming. This conveys the image that they act on behalf of clients and in opposition to the rules and objectives of the cash-assistance scheme. In Chapter 9, I analyze clients' perceptions of the nature of decision-making in the cash-assistance scheme and how their interactions with the work supervisors lead them to form alternative and fragmented images of the objective and rules of cash-assistance.

The work supervisors also convey an image of themselves as decision-makers. The clients often argue or protest over what they perceive as unfair decisions in front of a large group of clients in the meeting room. For example,

Emily and John try to discredit a job-searching event in front of a large "public" of other clients in the meeting room. To retain their authority and deescalate such situations, the work supervisors deflect responsibility away from themselves and onto something beyond their control. This includes their management, the rules, the weather, or the clients' laziness, such as in John's case. This enables the work supervisors to retain the image of themselves as "nice" individuals while showing clients that something beyond them determines their decisions.

In Chapter 7, I analyze how this leads clients to establish a sense of loyalty to the work supervisors where they refrain from both criticizing them and holding them accountable for their decisions. In Chapter 8, I analyze how this makes clients behave in ways that make the work supervisors' job as easy as possible.

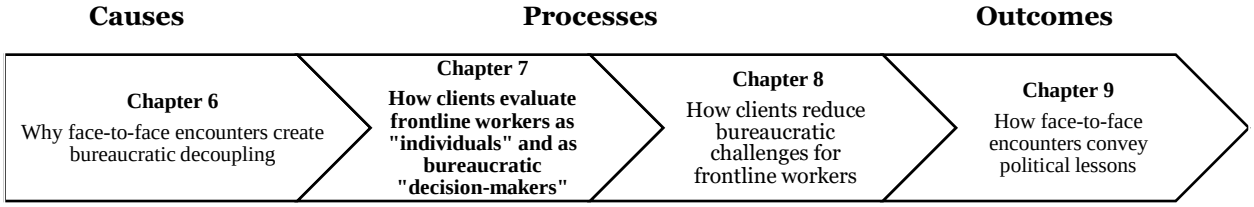
Chapter 7. How Clients Evaluate Frontline Workers both as Individuals and as Bureaucratic Decision-Makers

7.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze the first process of bureaucratic decoupling: How clients evaluate frontline workers as individuals and as decision-makers. This perceptual distinction is a step towards viewing them outside of and decoupled from the bureaucratic organization. As one of the clients, Peter (age 30s), said in a follow-up interview:

> So, I don't think they [work supervisors] consider them as representatives of an employment scheme. As far as I know, they are not a part of the Employment Administration.

Figure 7.1. Structure of the analytical chapters



The design of policies often informs clients' evaluations of frontline workers. If there is a high degree of stigmatization and conditionality, clients explain how they feel degraded and humiliated in their encounters with frontline workers (Soss 1999b, 77). This means that clients do not evaluate frontline workers as separate from their role as ground-level policy-makers.

However, in this chapter, I analyze how the nature of the face-to-face encounter informs clients' evaluations of frontline workers. Based on the design of utility jobs, I expected that clients similarly would come to feel degraded in their relationship with the work supervisors and consider them as the enforcers of the policies of the cash-assistance scheme. After all, they are responsible for assigning them identical work clothes and putting them to work. However, as I showed in the previous chapter, the work supervisors blur the power asymmetry between them and the clients (*feature 1*) while also disclosing the bureaucratic challenges (*feature 2 and 3*) that influence their jobs.

As I will show in this chapter, when clients are treated as equals, they identify the individual and private person behind the official bureaucratic role of the work supervisor. This means that they evaluate the work supervisors as nice, fun, and helpful. When clients simultaneously witness how the work supervisors face multiple challenges in their daily work, they also form an impression of them as decision-makers, namely that they face challenges that are beyond their individual control and determine their decisions. In consequence, clients do not consider them as ground-level policy-makers and, therefore, they do not hold the work supervisors accountable for their bureaucratic decisions.

I compare clients' evaluations of the work supervisors to their evaluations of the caseworkers and job consultants[88] at the activation site. The aim is not to conduct a Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) analysis but to show that when the nature of the encounter changes, clients' perceptions of frontline workers also change.[89] Encounters with the job consultants and the caseworkers also occur face-to-face at the activation site but in a very different way. In contrast to the encounters with the work supervisors (see Chapter 6), there is clear power asymmetry (*feature 1*): The caseworkers and the job consultants determine the structure of the meeting and define the script of what can be

[88] For an overview of the job tasks of both the work supervisors and the job consultants and caseworkers, see chapter 2.

[89] It would be easy to suggest that clients evaluate the two groups of employees differently because of their different job tasks. For example, clients evaluate the work supervisors positively because the work supervisors are unable to penalize clients with financial sanctions and because the work supervisors enforce the rules "leniently." Two points, however, suggest otherwise. First, focusing only on the job position of the work supervisors, one would expect that clients would come to hold negative evaluations of them. The official job task of the work supervisors is to enforce manual, non-skilled work, such as trimming trees or picking up trash. Moreover, the work supervisors are not only responsible for handing over work uniforms, but they also decide when clients are allowed to change back into their own clothes. Although it assures work safety, working in similar uniforms can be regarded as so-called degradation "ceremonies" (Garfinkel 1956). Second, focusing only on the job position of the caseworkers and job consultants, one could also expect that the clients would come to hold positive views of them. As they advise them regarding job searches, résumés, and plan internships for them, they possess the tools that can actually improve clients' employability and enable them to gain employment. By contrast, the work supervisors have no such tools. Their official job tasks consist of directing work assignments five hours each day. These work activities do not bring clients closer to regaining employment, and these activities actually take time away from job-related activities such as writing job applications or phoning possible employers

expressed by the client. Their decisions are consistent with the rules, and clients do not witness their bureaucratic challenges (*feature 2 & 3*). Moreover, the meeting often lasts no longer than 30 minutes (*feature 4*). Therefore, clients are unable to distinguish between them as individuals/private persons and as bureaucratic decision-makers. As a result, clients hold them accountable for their bureaucratic decisions.

7.2. Structure of the chapter and analytical strategy

The chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, I analyze clients' evaluations of the caseworkers and job consultants at the site. In the second part, I analyze clients' perceptions of the work supervisors.

The analytical strategy is based on an in-depth reading of the semi-structured interviews with clients.[90] To understand how they thought of the staff as "individuals," I asked each client:[91] "Can you describe your relationship with the work supervisors/caseworkers?" The aim of this question was to let the clients express how they viewed them as private persons. To understand how they viewed the staff as "decision-makers", I asked questions like: "What do you think their opinion is on the utility jobs activation?", "Do you think that they are subject to many rules?, "Why do you think that is?" This enabled them to reflect upon the nature of the staff's decision-making. I display this questioning technique below.

Table 7.1. Example of interview technique for exploring clients' perceptions of the work supervisors and their decision-making

#I: "How would you – if you had to put it into words – express your relationship with the work supervisors? Can you try to explain it?"
#R: "Hmm … I think they are very nice. I don't have any problems with them" [laughs] […]
#I: "What do you think their opinion is on the utility job activation here?"
#R: "Hmm … my guess is that they would've preferred people [the clients] who worked for a salary so that they didn't have so many people here that they couldn't find … find any tasks for. So, uh … there's not much they can do about that. They're not the ones in charge of who's supposed to be here, so my guess is that they would prefer … about a third as many out here, where people could then get a proper wage for being here" (From an interview with Franz, age 50s)

[90] See appendix D1 for the final coding scheme.

[91] As the data for this chapter consists solely of the interviews with the clients, I use the term "client" rather than "interviewee" when I analyze their perceptions.

I then analyzed the interviews through a flexible coding strategy (see Chapter 5). This involved three steps. First, I did an across case reading of all the interviews. In this process, I coded all text that related to clients' descriptions of the staff at the activation site into two broad index codes "perceptions of the work supervisors" and "perceptions of caseworkers/job consultants at the site." Second, I did a round of analytical coding of the statements in the two index codes. In this process, I focused on whether and how clients had different evaluations of the staff depending on whether they talked about them as individuals or as decision-makers. Therefore, I created two analytical codes within each of the two index codes: "clients' perceptions of them as individuals," and "clients' perceptions of them as decision-makers." Third, I did an in-depth coding of these statements. In this process, I attempted to stay close to the data while asking analytical questions of the data focusing especially on (a) the attributes clients used to describe the staff as individuals, and (b) the factors that they believed influenced the staff's decision-making. Categorizing these factors, I had both concepts from the street-level bureaucracy scholarship, the work supervisors' use of responsibility deflection, and the clients' views in mind.

For example, based on the example in table 7.1, I coded the statement, "Hmm … I think they are very nice" into the analytical code "clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as individuals" and then, in the in-depth coding phase, I developed a further in-vivo-based sub-code "nice". Moreover, I coded the statement, "my guess is that they would've preferred people who worked for a salary so that they didn't have so many people here that they couldn't find any tasks for", into the analytical code "clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as decision-makers". In the in-depth coding phase, I then developed the sub-code "many clients to handle".

Regarding the presentation of the interview data, I use quotations and displays, which is "a visual format that presents information systematically so the user can draw valid conclusions and take needed action" (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014, 108). In the displays, I show examples of quotes in their original form (translated from Danish to English) as well as the number of cases and references.[92] This both creates an overview of the data, and assures greater transparency regarding how the data are coded (Dahler-Larsen 2002).

[92] One can argue that it is problematic to summarize the number of cases and references in displays, since the part of the interview guide relating to clients' perceptions of frontline workers as decision-makers evolved slightly over time (see Deterding and Waters 2018, 27), as I explained in Chapter 5. However, even though I did not ask the interviewees, in the very first interviews, directly about the challenges regarding the staff's decision-making, they still frequently talked about their decision-

To situate these perceptions of the members of staff in clients' daily encounters with them at the activation site, I also use field notes from my observations. These observations detail clients' face-to-face interactions with the staff and serve to substantiate how their perceptions of the staff are rooted in these encounters.

7.3. Clients' perceptions of the caseworkers and the job consultants

This part of the chapter is divided into three sections. First, I analyze how the nature of face-to-face encounters between clients and caseworkers is very different from their encounters with the work supervisors. Second, I analyze clients' perceptions of the caseworkers and job consultants as individuals. Third, I analyze their perception of them as decision-makers.

7.3.1. Face-to-face encounters between clients and caseworkers

Here, I analyze an encounter between one of the female caseworkers, Amina, and a man in his early fifties, Ivan. The meeting is not representative or a "typical" case of encounters between clients and caseworkers. The encounter shows that Ivan possibly suffers from depression. This means that he does not fit the official category of the "job-ready" cash-assistance recipient, which the utility jobs scheme is targeted. Instead, I argue that the encounter is a "least likely case": [93] It shows that even when clients consistently try to evade the official script of the meeting, the caseworkers still adhere to their official bureaucratic role as decision-makers. Ivan consistently appeals to Amina's emotions. By invoking his past in Yugoslavia during the civil war, he moves outside of the clearly defined script for the meeting and tries to win Amina's empathy. However, rather than responding to this by showing herself as an empathetic "individual," she consistently reasserts her authority and only allows her bureaucratic role to prevail in the meeting. This leaves Ivan unable distinguish between Amina as an individual/private person and as a bureaucratic decision-maker.

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making in the interviews. Moreover, one of the main advantages of using semi-structured interviews is the ability to adjust questions to explore and find salient issues (Lamont and Swidler 2014).

[93] Flyvbjerg (2006, 231) defines "most likely cases" and "least likely cases" as "cases likely to either clearly confirm or irrefutably falsify propositions and hypotheses". In particular, least likely cases are most appropriate to test for verification (31).

I argue that this is because the nature of the encounter is very different from clients' encounters with the work supervisors. This meeting displays a direct power asymmetry between Ivan and Amina (*feature 1*): Amina clearly asserts herself as the person in authority: she sets the tone of the meeting and attempts to steer the focus on Ivan's employability. The meeting concerns a high-stake case (Bisgaard 2018) and the decision of whether or not to issue a financial penalty (*feature 2*). There is no audience (*feature 3*) to back up Ivan's outbursts and frustrations regarding the "system," and the meeting lasts less than 30 minutes (*feature 4*).

The encounter between Amina and Ivan. The meeting begins. Ivan has been called to the meeting because he has been absent due to sickness, which he has not reported to the work supervisors. Before his meeting begins, he seems uncomfortable. Outside of the meeting room at the activation site, he looks restless, and he stretches his back to relieve some back pain, which he reveals he suffers from during the meeting. He is from the former Yugoslavia, and his Danish is, at times during the meeting, difficult to understand.

The meeting begins in a very formal manner. As Ivan sits down, Amina says, "I'm your caseworker, and I have called you to a meeting because you have too much sickness absence." This establishes a power asymmetry between the two and makes it clear that Amina is the person in the position of authority. Ivan explains that he suffers from back pain. Amina immediately starts asking questions to figure out whether it stems from an accident related to his work at the activation site. If so, he has to apply for injury compensation, as she reminds him. While Amina explains this, Ivan interrupts her and raises his voice:

> *Field notes, 21.03.2019*
>
> #Ivan: "I do the job really well out in the field. I work hard and do the work of five men … I really think I'm doing the best I can."

Ivan is trying to justify his sickness absence by informing Amina of his hard work. Amina does not respond to this. Instead, she asks whether he has been to the doctor with the aim of still determining whether he will have to apply for injury benefits at the municipality. Ivan explains that he does not like doctors or taking pills, but he feels guilty every time he does not show up at the activation site. From this point, as I will show below, the conversation takes a detour. Amina continuously tries to get the meeting back on track and talk about his sickness absence as well as his official obligations as a cash-assistance recipient. However, Ivan answers vaguely and starts criticizing the "system":

Field notes, 21.03.2019 (continued)

#Ivan: "But I don't know what it is with me … I think I've lived in a little bit of a dream world since back then … I did flee from the civil war, and I've been in an orphanage … I don't know if I want to keep working."

#Amina: "I've read your case."

Ivan continues his story, but Amina interrupts him:

#Amina: "You are in activation, so I must inform you about the 225-hour rule. That means that if you haven't worked 225 hours in the span of one year, you will be docked 1500 kroner from your cash-assistance benefits.

#Ivan: "Yeah, I know … They just punish people … And you can see all these banks that evade millions in taxes … and us little people, we're the ones who get punished."

#Amina: "Let's not talk politics."

#Ivan: "I do want to work."

#Amina: "Where do you want to work?"

#Ivan: "Somewhere with gardening work … I like that."

#Amina: "Would you be interested in an internship?"

Amina scrolls down on the computer and looks at his competences while they talk. Ivan starts rambling again and explains the previous jobs he has had that he hasn't been fond of. He mumbles a lot while talking.

Amina interrupts him.

#Amina: "I recommend that you take an internship so that you can try it out."

Ivan hangs his head a little.

#Ivan: "It's tough … I don't really know what to say … I'm a little tired, and I haven't slept more than 3 hours last night."

Amina points out again that he has to make an appointment with his doctor and send her a doctor's certificate. Ivan sighs and looks down at the ground.

#Ivan: "You just get stuck in this system because there's no one that can help you."

Ivan continues criticizing the system, while Amina changes the topic. […] Ivan continues talking and returns to his experiences during the civil war and at the orphanage. Amina says yet again that she has read his casefile and he doesn't need to tell her more. At last, Amina asks him once again to make an appointment with the doctor and try to find an internship. Then they will process his case and send him over to one of the job consultants. Amina gets up, and Ivan follows suit.

#Ivan: "So can I tell my parents I passed the exam?" he asks with a smile.

#Amina: "This isn't an exam. This is a meeting at a job center,"[94] she replies with a strained smile.

Ivan walks out the door. As soon as the door closes, Amina exhales and rolls her eyes.

#Amina: [to me] "Well, we could have continued a little longer because we have half an hour, but I just had to stop him because we're not going to get anywhere with him rambling so much."

#Me: "Yes, he rambled a lot."

#Amina: "And there has to be something psychological involved with him saying that stuff about his parents and the exam. It makes no sense."

I nod, but in reality, I took Ivan's comment to be a joke.

#Amina: "And that thing where they want to complain and talk politics … I mean, I'm a representative for the political system. But that's the way the system is built, and there's nothing to do about it."

First, the meeting shows a "system of gaps" (Dubois 2010, 30), as Ivan is unable to express his feelings in a language that fits the administrative categories of cash-assistance. In the beginning, it appears as if Ivan suffers from exhaustion and slight depression. It also appears as if he has given up trying to get a job when he says, "I don't know if I want to keep working." However, it is clear that Ivan is unable to express his need for help in a way that Amina understands and can use to find an official way of helping him. When Ivan expresses that he has given up applying for jobs, Amina reacts by reminding him of the 225-hour rule. Through this remark, she clearly asserts her authority to enforce the law and her ability to penalize Ivan if he fails to comply. Ivan answers by criticizing the system, how it only punishes people, and how this is linked to tax evasion in the banking world. This appears as another way for Ivan to express that he is unable to comply with the 225-hour rule. However, Amina says, "Let's not talk politics." Thereby, she dismisses Ivan's point, indirectly saying that it is irrelevant for his case. Ivan also tries to give Amina some background information that might justify his inability to apply for jobs when he explains how he escaped the civil war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s. To avoid discussing this, as it is irrelevant for his current job search, Amina answers quickly that she has already read his case.

Second, and unlike clients' encounters with the work supervisors, jokes and irony are considered inappropriate.[95] When the meeting ends, Ivan says

[94] The meeting still takes place at the utility jobs activation site

[95] For other meetings I observed between clients and caseworkers, this was not necessarily considered a problem. However, for those meetings, clients complied with

sarcastically, “So can I tell my parents I passed the exam?” The sarcastic comment can be interpreted as a way of indirectly criticizing the cash-assistance scheme for being an “exam” to pass rather than a tool to help clients. Amina, however, does not respond to Ivan’s sarcasm, replying, “This isn’t an exam. This is a meeting at a job center.” By the end of the meeting, Amina is clearly upset by Ivan’s behavior. She tells me that Ivan’s jokes are annoying and a sign of psychological issues. Finally, I observe that Amina cuts the meeting short as she believes they are not making progress with regards to clarifying Ivan’s employability. This is in stark contrast to clients’ meetings with the work supervisors where there is seemingly no time limits to their conversations.

7.3.2. Clients’ perceptions of the caseworkers and job consultants as “individuals”

The structure of these encounters, as shown above, clearly influenced clients’ evaluations of the caseworkers and job consultants. The short length of the meetings, which only occurred two or three times during clients’ time in activation, meant that it was difficult for clients to even form an image of them as individuals and as private persons. For example, as Randi (age 30s), who has a bachelor in language and business communication and have been unemployed for a couple of years, explained, they were somehow “invisible”:

> I barely know them. I mean … They’re not very visible … They sit in their offices … um … and we barely see them. And we’re also in different places, you know? Like physically, right? Because those of us who show up at 8 o’clock barely get to meet them unless we’re completely determined to do so […].

Nicklas (age 30s), who has a background in the fashion industry, but has struggled with unemployment for a year or so, compared this invisibility to his relationship with the work supervisors. “Personally, I think I have a very, very good collaboration with the work supervisors, and then I think that there is an invisibility regarding the job consultants and the caseworkers.”

As the caseworkers and the job consultants focused solely on clients’ employability but without listening to clients’ own wishes, others portrayed them as unhelpful in regaining employment. Johannes (age 40s, follow-up interview), who has been unemployed for a couple of months, is unskilled and has been working as a sound engineer, for example, got the impression that he is cheating:

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the official and administrative objectives of the meeting and presented their problems with a focus on their employability.

> And it's kind of like, well, we know that in the cash-assistance system, they're already mad at you from day one, right? Because we're coming here and mooching or something, you know? And they [the caseworkers] do everything to make it suck, right? The whole thing is unpleasant. We're supposed to suffer in this. That's not … They do everything to make it kind of unwelcoming.

This shows that the clients' evaluations of the caseworkers and job consultants' are informed by the objective of cash-assistance. As the objective is, from the clients' point of view, to deter claimants from applying for assistance, then they evaluate the caseworkers in this light and see the meetings with them as an instance where they should feel unwelcome and able to help themselves.

The feeling that they could not get any help from the caseworkers or the job consultants led many of the clients not to expect anything from their meetings. Tanja (age 40s), who has been unemployed for a couple of months, unskilled, and previously worked as a cashier in a supermarket, explained how she expects "absolutely nothing" from the meeting. She only focuses on one thing during the meeting: "It's more like what they might come up with … […] It's them who decide, right?" Others described them as incompetent, such as Lisbeth (age 50s): "They are completely incompetent, the ones who sit there. They're of no use to us." Finally, some of the clients described them as patronizing and condescending.[96] As Lauritz, (age 60s), who has a degree in media studies and have been unemployed for six years, says:

> Yeah. They're a little more condescending out here, I think. […] They're a little more like: 'Yeah, yeah, as if. But now you have to start this utility job here.' That's what it's about here, you know?

Clients' low expectations regarding the help they can receive also are also caused by the short and formal nature of their encounters with the caseworkers and job consultants. One of the clients, Johnny (age 60s), who had been unemployed for nine years at the time of the interview, compared his meetings with a play that he just needed to get through:

> It's a routine meeting. They have to inform you of this and that and that and that and that, and then they have to say, 'Remember to check if there are other options, have you considered…?' Nothing new comes of it. It's just the same. More of the same.

[96] A small share of the clients also held positive views. Some described them as "understanding," "helpful," "nice," and "attentive." However, these descriptions were mainly in regard to job consultants who had helped some of the clients find a job within the gardening industry. Moreover, many of the same clients also described their relationship with them negatively.

In sum, when the clients describe their personalities, they simultaneously describe the caseworkers' and job consultants' bureaucratic role in the cash-assistance scheme. This indicates that the clients are unable to distinguish between them as individuals/private persons and as bureaucratic decision-makers.

7.3.3. Clients' perceptions of the caseworkers and job consultants as "decision-makers"

In table 7.2 and table 7.3, I summarize the most used expressions by clients, in the interviews, to describe the caseworkers' and job consultants' decision-making. Two main findings emerge.

First, clients are aware of the bureaucratic factors[97] that influence their decision-making. These factors include the rules, the lack of resources, and the clients at the activation site. Second, clients find it difficult, however, to distinguish between them as individuals/private persons and as bureaucratic decision-makers. This means that although they are aware of factors that challenge their work, they do not deflect responsibility away from the individual caseworker or job consultant onto something beyond their control.

[97] I acknowledge that these factors are not mutually exclusive. However, the aim is to show that clients are aware of the multiplicity of factors that influence the staff's decision-making at the activation site.

Table 7.2. Clients' perceptions of factors from "above" that influence the caseworkers' and the job consultants' decision-making

Factors	Examples	No. of cases	No. of ref.
Rules	#R: "Well, I think that they're the ones who can't keep up, and there are so many rules … And there are so many new rules or clauses, so they can't keep up themselves." #I: "So you don't think it's because they just quickly review your case, but it's simply because they are under pressure or because there are some rules that they need to follow at all times?" #R: "Yeah I think so […].[a)] Those two fools [caseworkers], they just can't figure anything out. Plus, they're just so young and inexperienced … There is no back and forth with them. They don't have … Well, they're not the type who think outside the box." (Lisbeth, follow-up interview, age 50s)	28	61
The system[b)]	#R: "There was this time where there was a job where I thought, um, if I could take this course or something, you know, and this course starts in three days or two or four days or something, right? Then I would be able to get a job or something like that. The problem is just that it's the kind of thing where you have to send in [a request to the job consultants] and write and everything. It took ten days before they answered. Well, I missed the chance, you fucking idiots. That's what I mean, you know? They aren't proactive. They don't want to be proactive either." #I: "And why do you think this system is so slow? And so troublesomely bureaucratic?" #R: "Because it's a system within a system within a system. That's why." #I: And can you elaborate? #R: Yeah. But it is a system, you know, and … it deprives the individual employee of the ability to think outside the box. (Johannes, age 40s)	23	56
Lack of resources	#R: "If I'm going to have a chance at being a janitor, then I need to take some courses […] And so I bring this list [to a meeting with a job consultant] with these jobs, um, or these courses I want to take."[c)]	17	28

	#I: "But you can't get those courses?" #R: "Well, the job centers, they're like Scrooge McDuck, and no money can get through if they can help it; the pockets are sewn SHUT." (John, age 50s)		
Politics[d)]	#I: Why do you think they [caseworkers] have to follow a script like that? Why couldn't it be a more…? #R: Because it's been decided politically that that's the way it is. We have to go through this and that and that. That's what I'm saying: We're performing a little play every time. So they say this, and I say that, and then they answer this … That's what people mean when they say the job centers aren't 'job centers' but 'control centers'. (Johnny, age 60s).	16	34
Their management	#I: "And do you generally think that the people who are hired by the Employment Administration, are they under a lot of pressure from upper management? Is that why they [caseworkers]?" sometimes are, for example [interrupted] #R: "Yeah, I think so. I don't think there's any doubt. In this municipality, you're in- what's it called … there's just a lot of the caseworkers who are just assholes, they just ARE. There are also a lot of them who are good, but the good ones don't last long." (Edward, age 50s)	14	23
Lack of professionalism	"I think that many of them are newly qualified and don't have a lot of experience working with people, and they're just following the rule book." (Pia, age 30s)	11	21

a. In the passage that is left out, she is explaining how one of the other clients at the site was exempted, by one of the caseworkers, from participating in a mandatory job-searching course. Lisbeth wants to get a similar exemption, but as she explains, it is impossible for her to talk to the caseworkers at the site because they are "fools" who are "not the type who think outside the box."
b. When coding the clients' perceptions, they often invoked specifically "the system" when they talked about both the work supervisors' and the job consultants' decision-making, but without clarifying what they meant. In chapter 6, I also showed that this is a term that the work supervisors often used to justify their decisions. In this table and table 7.4, I, therefore, treat it as a category used by the clients themselves. In chapter 9, by contrast, I use the "the system" as an analytical category to describe how the clients view the cash-assistance scheme, in general, as a diffuse and fragmented bureaucratic organization, which they place the work supervisors outside of.
c. In the passage cut out, he elaborates on the different kinds of courses he can take and where in order to become a janitor.
d. Includes references to politics, for example, political decision-making procedures or politicians' perceptions of cash-assistance recipients.

Table 7.3. Clients' perceptions of factors from "below" that influence the caseworkers' and job consultants' decision-making

Factors	Examples	No. of cases	No. of ref.
Clients complain	#R: [interrupts me] "Well, I've had a meeting with Uffe [job consultant] … I didn't get a damn out of it! NOTHING! It just sucked." […] #I: "And if you don't get anything out of it, why do you think you need to have these meetings?" #R: "No, but they might also be here because people [the clients] can't work even if they are ready to." #I: "Can you elaborate on that?" #R: "Well, a lot of the people [the clients] who are here can't be in the workplace … It wouldn't take more than five minutes for them to start complaining [during meetings with the job consultants). And then they [the clients] would start talking about rules and stuff. And there's a lot of those right now." (Tanja, follow up interview, age 40s)	7	8
Clients break the rules	And another thing is that you meet both good and less good people [caseworkers], and there are some who shouldn't be sitting in there in general. Like, seriously. Who have absolutely no business being in there. Like the first one [meeting with a caseworker] I was in with, for example. Super arrogant. Super demeaning. I was talking to her, and she just looked away and started writing something. I could just feel that for her, it's like she talks to the same people every day, who make the same lame excuses." (Svend, age 30s)	6	7
Many clients to manage	#I: "Can you try to explain your relationship with them [the caseworkers]?" #R: Yeah … There's this guy, what's his name … Is it Uffe? I can't remember. […] Yeah, then there are the caseworkers who're also here. Yeah … I'm not sure how often the caseworkers are here. I haven't really spoken to them that much actually. But they probably have a lot of people to keep track of." (Rasmus, age 20s, follow-up interview)	5	8

First, even though clients understand the complicated and constrained nature of the workers' decision-making, they still hold them accountable for their decisions. For example, even though Lisbeth acknowledges the rule-bound nature of the caseworkers' job, she still calls them "fools." As another example, Johannes blames one of the job consultants for being an "idiot" because the job consultant processed his case slowly.

Second, clients find it difficult to separate the individual frontline worker from their bureaucratic role as decision-makers. For example, when Johnny (age 60s) elaborated on his belief that caseworkers only follow a script during the meetings, he said:

> #I: Do you think that sometimes the caseworkers actually WANT to put on another play … or deviate from this script, um, if they maybe COULD? What do you think?
>
> #R: It's hard to say, it's hard to say. Precisely because you're putting on a play. So you don't really- I mean, I don't have any impression of the kind of person behind this. It's just how it is. [gesticulates to show that it's completely anonymous].

This shows that clients' encounters with the caseworkers leave them unable to distinguish between them as individuals/private persons and as bureaucratic decision-makers. In other words, the caseworkers as "individuals" and as "decision-makers" become perceptually inseparable. Sofie (age 50s) also expressed that in order to survive as a caseworker, you have to change your personality and become an "ice-cold asshole." In addition, when the clients talked about the caseworkers and job consultants at the activation site, they also immediately talked about other caseworkers and job consultants at the job center. This is the case for Edward for example. This also indicates that clients do not think of them as individuals, but only in terms of their roles as bureaucratic decision-makers in the cash-assistance scheme.

Third, it also appeared as if the clients believed that their bureaucratic challenges were not real but a façade they could use to control clients. Later on in the interview with Johannes, he explains how the workers deliberately hide themselves behind abstract justifications like "lack of resources," "administration," etc.

> I'm so convinced that there are so many – I mean, there's a conscious strategy about how to run it. But in order to keep it in the dark, that it's conscious, well, you hide behind words like 'administration' and um … 'IT errors' and 'we're busy, busy at the moment.' That's their favorite thing to say: 'We're busy at the moment. We hope you understand.'

In sum, it is clear that clients are aware of the caseworkers' and the job consultants' difficult work environment and the bureaucratic challenges that constrain their ability to attend to clients' individual needs. However, they still find it difficult to spot the private person behind this role, which means that they hold them accountable for their decisions.

7.4. Clients' perception of the work supervisors

This section is divided into three parts. In the first part, I analyze clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as individuals. In the second part, I analyze how these perceptions lead the clients to develop a sense of loyalty to the work supervisors where they refrain from criticizing them. In the final part, I analyze clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as decision-makers and how they describe the work supervisors' decisions as determined by factors beyond their control.

7.4.1. Clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as "individuals"

In contrast to encounters with the caseworkers, the informal nature of clients' encounters that occurred for more than three months with the supervisors enables the clients to distinguish between the work supervisors as individuals/private persons and as bureaucratic decision-makers.

One of most prevalent ways of describing the work supervisors was that they are "nice".[98] For example, Tonny (age 50s) previously participated in other activation courses in the cash-assistance scheme. He explains how he became depressed from this because he was badly treated. However, being at the activation site was a completely different experience due to the work supervisors:

> Out here [at the activation site], I don't feel poorly treated. I think they are nice [the work supervisors]. You can feel that they're good people, you know? One of them at least, that guy Ole, you can feel that … he wants to … He's not a caseworker, but he wants to be a good person to us. He wants to help other people, you know?

[98] A small share of the clients also described their relationship with the work supervisors negatively. They used expressions like "not helpful," "not attentive," and "condescending."

Describing people as "nice" often occurs if one feels that others do not impose a specific self upon them (Davis and Schmidt 1977). As I showed in Chapter 6, the nature of the encounter rarely involves situations where the work supervisors impose a specific self upon the clients. The political framework of the utility jobs scheme (see Chapter 2) imposes an image upon clients that they have to work for their benefits. However, the work supervisors create a face-to-face encounter exempted from legal and administrative categories that define clients' situations in ways they might disagree with. Instead, the work supervisors blur the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients (*feature 1*) by working alongside the clients, allowing jokes, and giving clients the opportunity to speak of matters beyond their employability.

Since the work supervisors blur the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients, the latter feel like equals. As Bo (age 30s), who has a degree in computer programming, but have been unemployed on and off for approximately four years, expresses when he talks about Sebastian, one of the work supervisors: "He seems a lot like … down on our level, so I think he's a cool guy." Others described them as "fun" and appreciated the fact that they were able to joke around – in contrast to the meeting with Amina (see section 7.3.1.) where sarcastic comments about the cash-assistance scheme were considered inappropriate. However, during clients' encounters with the work supervisors, these sarcastic comments are a part of the everyday jargon. As Peter (age 30s), who has a graduate degree in Philosophy and been unemployed for three years, describes:

> you joke a little with them and say that it's kind of useless that we're walking around with these loppers, cutting off branches, like what's the point? That way, yeah, it creates this ironic distance, you know, um …

Others described the work supervisors as very understanding and empathetic, as Randi (age 30s), for example, expressed:

> Yeah, but well … I think, um … Well, for example, someone like Arne [work supervisor], he's … very human. Um … he has like this understanding that 'Yeah, alright, it's not that great to hang around here.' But that's just the way it is.

The expression "he's very 'human'" shows how the physical gestures exchanged during the face-to-face encounters allow clients to judge the work supervisors personal qualities and acknowledge that they and not just bureaucratic decision-makers.

The face-to-face encounters with the work supervisors also allow clients to develop a personal relationship with them. One of the men, Christopher (age

40s), who is a former pedagogue and been unemployed for a couple years, describes how he does not consider meetings with caseworkers as a place in which you express your personal feelings. "Then you should go to a doctor or a psychiatrist or your friends," as he expresses. However, this is different with regards to the work supervisors:

> But it's also because I don't … it's for the caseworkers who sit in their offices, and you only see them at meetings, right? Well, you can feel that I have- I've begun having, or it actually went pretty fast with Sebastian [work supervisor] that it became kind of a relationship, and I think he's a pretty cool guy actually.

In the interview, Christopher explains how he has tried several times to explain to the caseworkers that his health is poor, which has caused him to be absent from activation. He describes how the caseworkers are indifferent and always try to steer the conversation away from those subjects. As a result, he has stopped talking about this during their meetings. However, he describes how the daily encounters with the work supervisors allow him to build a personal relationship with them. Through this relationship, he observes the work supervisors' personal and individual qualities. "He's a pretty cool guy actually," as he expresses. This shows that he not only likes the supervisors but also appreciates them and thinks of them as role models.

Finally, clients also developed a more positive impression of the work supervisors over time (*feature 4*). For example, Lisbeth (age 50s), who has been unemployed for a couple of months and previously studied political science and later worked with communication, expressed in the first interview: "I think some of them are downright patronizing in how they treat people." Two months later, in a follow up interview, she said, "I've gotten a better impression of the supervisors along the way because I thought they were pretty tough in the beginning." Others, like Tanja (age 40s), did not necessarily have a bad relationship with the work supervisors. Her description of them in the first interview was very neutral, as if she had not yet formed an impression of them as individuals:

> And I'm out here, and then … I change and make sure I've been checked off the list. Then I usually eat my breakfast. Two cheese sandwiches. […] And, um, then what happens next varies a little. There are … there's a guy called Arne [work supervisor], and there's one called Ole [work supervisor], and I'm usually with Ole because he runs the 'nine o'clock' team, which I'm on.

When I interviewed her again two and half months later, she had developed a much closer personal relationship with the work supervisors. She describes how they are very empathetic and "talk people up," and now they crack jokes

back and forth about her eating cheese sandwiches in the mornings in the meeting room:

> #I: "can you try to describe how your relationship to the work supervisors has generally been while you've been here?"
>
> #R: "I really think that it's been very positive. I think, um … Ole [work supervisor], was a little mad at me in the beginning, but it's, uh … passed."
>
> #I: "How can that be?"
>
> #R: "I just think … he thought I was a different kind of person." [laughs] "No … I think it's nice to come in the morning … nice people … I also like the way they speak to other people."
>
> #I: "Can you try to elaborate on the part about how they speak to others?"
>
> #R: "Uh … They talk people up, I feel … If people are down, they sort of get them back on their feet again a little."
>
> #I: "Have they also done that with you?"
>
> #R: "Yes, they have. Uh … it was something about a meeting with someone from the job center. I mean, she was just so stupid! I think. And then I came back [to the activation site] and was upset and pissed off, and then I got some support, you know … And she was the one who didn't know what she was doing, they [the work supervisors] said."
>
> #I: "Yeah, okay, so they say that she's the one who doesn't know what she's doing?"
>
> #R: "Yeah, yeah! And 'Now you're out in the park [where they are working] … and the sun is shining today. [laughs] Have some coffee and eat your jam sandwiches' and stuff like that."
>
> (Tanja, age 40s, follow-up interview)

This also shows how the work supervisors establish themselves in contrast to the caseworkers (as I also showed in Chapter 6). They present themselves as very caring and empathetic people who "talk people up". This reinforces clients' negative perceptions of the caseworkers whom Tanja describes in a very anonymous way as "someone from the job center" who is "so stupid" .

7.4.2. "I feel a little like a 'backstabber'": Clients' loyalty to the work supervisors

Previously in this chapter, I showed that the clients largely hold the caseworkers and job consultants accountable for their decisions. By contrast, the clients' positive perceptions of the work supervisors lead them to develop a sense

of loyalty which stopped them from criticizing the work supervisors. In chapter 8, I analyze how clients act upon this perception by making the work supervisors' job as easy as possible.

For example, in January 2019, I interviewed Andi (age 30s) who had been at the activation site for a month. He has a master's degree in business communication. He previously received social security (in Danish, *dagpenge*) for two years. When his entitlement to social security expired, he applied for cash-assistance. At the activation site, I talked to him daily. He expressed several times that he was very critical of the fact that they were not allowed to spend more time applying for jobs. When he came home from activation, he was often exhausted and had to spend his weekends applying for jobs. In the interview, I ask him to describe his relationship with the work supervisors. It is clear that he is very critical of the utility jobs scheme. However, he tries his best not to target his criticism towards the work supervisors. Instead, he deflects his criticism "upwards" towards the system:

> But it's not like … there's a good enough relationship with the work supervisors. They're basically- I mean, you have a good enough relationship with them, and they will … Well, they'll … they help you if you have a … problem or something. There isn't exactly a bad relationship with them. But then again, the only thing … Well, the only little problem with the work supervisors sometimes is this thing with … Yeah, well, the problem with the work supervisors is … I mean, it's nothing PERSONAL against them. The problem with the work supervisors … it's … or it's more like the whole thing … maybe this whole circus with the cash-assistance system, because it's kind of hard to say if the work supervisors have been ordered from above. And that is that you don't really get to do anything other than come out here and do some work, unless there's nothing to do. And then you just sit here twiddling your thumbs.

In the interview, he weighs his words carefully. He wants to criticize the work supervisors for both their inefficient management of clients' time and that they often have to wait around without being able to apply for jobs. However, as he presents his critique, he underlines that it is not a "personal problem." Rather, he directs his critique upwards by blaming the problems on "this whole circus with the cash-assistance system" and that the work supervisors are probably receiving orders from "above." In Chapter 6, however, I showed that the work supervisors' decisions about waiting time were largely based on their own will. Yet, this does not appear like that to the clients. Clients clearly separate the work supervisors from their decisions. Their decisions are determined by something from "above," a higher officialdom, while the work supervisors are helpful "if you have a problem," as Andi explains.

This was also the case for Morten (age 30s) who had been at the activation site for about a month by the time of the interview. He lives with his girlfriend and he has previously suffered from depression. Approximately four months prior to entering the activation site, he received his master degree in media studies and only few days after the interview, he leaves the activation site, because he is hired as an intern at a communication company. In the interview, we talk first about how he feels about the waiting time at the site. He explains how he is very "positive about this place." Yet, while he has to wait, he explains that he "transforms himself" and becomes:

> one of those people who contributes to creating a negative atmosphere. And says, "But why are we waiting? Is there no point to being here?" I also feel that in that way, I kind of … talk myself into a bad mood, you know? And I probably also talk others into a bad mood.

He feels guilty, and he acknowledges that he ruins the atmosphere at the place and puts the others in a bad mood as well. Later in the interview, we talk about his feelings about waiting time again. He then describes that he feels like a "backstabber" when he criticizes the work supervisors along with the other clients:

> I really do like the supervisors out here. And I like them in many respects. I feel a little like a "backstabber" when I start bad-mouthing it all while I'm standing here waiting, you know?

This shows that it is legitimate to direct criticism at the cash-assistance; however, if clients target their criticism at the work supervisors, they feel like backstabbers. This loyalty arise from the features of the face-to-face encounter with the work supervisor. Due to the blurred power asymmetry between them (*feature 1*), clients feel like equals with the work supervisors, and they regard the work supervisors a "one of them", as Bo (age 30s) explained earlier on. This means that if clients criticize them, they almost betray the work supervisors.

Other signs of clients' loyalty towards the work supervisors included an unwillingness to leave early. According to Simon (age 30s), who is has a degree in computer science, and have been unemployed for two and a half years; this would result in a "reprimand" from the work supervisors' management. Therefore, he wants to help the work supervisors avoid that because they already, in his words, have a "thankless" job:

> If you [the management] come out here, and they [the work supervisors] are supposed to know where we are, and they're looking around like, "Well, I don't actually know where these people are." That's like … then they'll probably get … I don't know what they'll get. They'll probably get a reprimand or something.

> Then you could say it was their own fault because they don't actually keep track of us, but it's … I assume they're paid a relatively low salary, so I don't think you should be too hard on them.

Simon acknowledges that it is indeed the work supervisors' responsibility to prevent clients from leaving early. However, he imagines himself having a job like them and being badly paid. These structural circumstances make it difficult for the work supervisors to do their job. In consequence, he wants to help them so that they can avoid getting a reprimand from their management. In Chapter 8, I analyze how clients act upon this perception. For example, rather than leaving early, clients stay in the park, so it appears – from the management's point of view – that the work supervisors are putting them to work.

7.4.3. Clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as "decision-makers"

In the previous section, I showed how the clients understood the difficult challenges of the caseworkers' and job consultants' jobs. Yet, they were simultaneously unable able to distinguish between them as individuals/private persons and as bureaucratic decision-makers. This is different for the clients' perceptions of the work supervisors. The clients separate the work supervisors clearly from their official role in the cash-assistance scheme, and they consider the work supervisors' decisions to be determined by factors beyond their control.

In Chapter 6, I showed how the nature of the face-to-face encounter between the clients and the work supervisors creates the causes for bureaucratic decoupling. Therefore, I begin by showing how clients directly draw upon these encounters when they talk about the work supervisors' decision-making. In particular, I analyze an interview with Tonny (age 50s). Two of the work supervisors (Ole and Uffe) interrupt the interview for a couple of minutes. During these few minutes, they give instructions while telling jokes and criticizing their management. Afterwards, we resume the interview. Tonny now uses the encounter with Uffe and Ole as direct evidence that the work supervisors are "nice." However, he acknowledges that they have to make decisions within a system of "layers," "managers," and "rules," all of which prohibit them from engaging with clients and doing their job.

In 2014, Tonny had surgery. Due to complications, he suffered from PTSD and anxiety afterwards. When his savings ran out, he applied for cash-assistance. Due to his psychological diagnosis, he was categorized as "activity ready," and he, as a part of his activation obligations, has to participate in meetings with clients with similar problems. During this time, he has had several bad experiences dealing with caseworkers. He feels over and over again that he does not receive the help that he believes will enable him to regain his

employability: “Well, I’ve had one who was an asshole for a long time, and because I was sick, I was exhausted, and I didn’t have the strength to put my foot down.” After two–three years, he has recovered slightly. He has now been re-categorized as “job ready” and has been sent to utility activation.

We carry out the interview outside. Tonny picks up trash while I walk next to him and interview him. After one hour and fifty minutes, Ole and Uffe interrupt the interview. They have a meeting later that afternoon. They inform us that we will be allowed to leave at 12:00 p.m. today even though we are not officially allowed to leave until 1:30 p.m. They instruct us to go back to a meeting point (back to the sheep[99]) where we started working earlier that day. Below, I show the conversation that takes place between Tonny, Ole, Uffe, and I. Right after that, the interview continues. Tonny then directly draws upon his conversation with Ole and Uffe to depict them as individuals and as decision-makers.

#Tonny: [to Ole] “Should we just continue walking and picking up [trash] a bit?”

#Ole: “Well, Arne [work supervisor] should come and get you … You shouldn’t get home much later than 12 … because the rest of us [work superviors], we’re going out … and there’s this meeting and all kinds of…nonsense … But you shouldn’t start walking home on the busy street, so I’ll just make sure Ibrahim [the driver] is here before 12.”

#Uffe: “They can’t see you when you come walking down the street, you know?” [Referring to the green work uniform we’re wearing]

#Tonny: “No, that’s the thing.” [laughs out loud]

#Ole: “So can’t we agree that you’ll be up by the fold by 12?”

#Tonny: “I’ll set my alarm.”

#Me: “So we’ll meet by the sheep?”

#Ole: “No, you’ll meet by Rasmus [another client on our team] over by the sheep.” [Tonny laughs]

#Tonny: [to Ole] “Shall we tell Rasmus too? Sorry, Ole?!” [He’s far away and doesn’t hear Tonny’s question] “Shall we tell Rasmus too?”

#Ole: “Yeah, that would be a very good … Nah, just let him go…”

#Tonny: “Yeah, we’ll just let him go.” [laughs loudly]

#Ole: “He’ll figure it out at some point.”

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[99] One minor work assignment in the utility jobs scheme was to feed a group of sheep. Sheep are used as part of the utility jobs scheme in some municipalities, because they eat invasive plants such as hogweed (*in Danish* “bjørneklo”).

From this short conversation, two things show the process of face-to-face encounters at the activation site creating bureaucratic decoupling. First, the encounter provides an image of the work supervisors as decision-makers: Ole makes an inconsistent decision while deflecting responsibility away from himself (*feature 2*). He allows Tonny and I to leave early, but he holds his management, who has called them to a meeting, accountable for this decision. A meeting, which he informs me (and not Tonny) later, that does not take place until 14:00 p.m. As he explains this to Tonny and I, he also tries to distance himself from his management, saying "and there's this meeting and all kinds of…nonsense…". Second, both Uffe and Ole provide an image of themselves as individuals. Uffe makes a joke about the yellow work uniforms, and Ole says ironically that we can just leave Rasmus, the other client, by himself. This blurs the power asymmetry and creates the perception that Tonny is an equal in his relationship with the work supervisors (*feature 1*).

When the interview resumes, Tonny talks about the work supervisors' decisions and how they are controlled by factors beyond their control:

> #I: "I don't think I have too many questions left."
>
> #R: "What was the last thing we were talking about?"
>
> #I: "Well, we were talking about your illness…"
>
> #R: "That was in regards to something else … Well, it's probably it, or else we'll have to catch up. It was important to me to say the more general things … This stuff with the structural things that restrain you. What happens is a restraining. It's not … All of this … Well, as I said, they're damn nice guys, these fellows [the work supervisors]. Why the hell can't we just … why don't we get offered this as a job? Why does this have to be a punishment? It's just brain dead. It's rude to them, the people [the clients] who are put through this. And it's also rude to the job that they [the work supervisors] clearly enjoy doing, you know … and helping people … It's weird, it's a weird way to do this … you know?"
>
> #I: "So, you think it's rude to the work supervisors?"
>
> #R: "Yes, yes! Right, something like that, you know? It's like this typical top-down way of thinking, you know? The whole system uses this top-down line of thought. You know, centralizing, centralizing … […]"
>
> #I: "But why do you think it's rude to the supervisors? They must have applied for the job here?"
>
> #R: "Yes, yes, they have, but you can feel it, that they want to … that it's not because they like going around being angry assholes and … what do you call it … ordering us around. Or punishing us with their work! Right … Like, Ole clearly enjoys walking around in nature out here and doing things from scratch, and the others [the other work supervisors] do too "

#I: “Do you think they’re under a lot of strict rules?”

#R: “They are most surely under all kinds of rules! There are all these people above them, dictating how they should run their … like all other places … ”

On the one hand, Tonny describes the work supervisors as “damn nice guys.” This is based on earlier encounters with them at the activation site and the interaction during the interview where they joke around. The interview also illustrates his loyalty towards the work supervisors, and he considers the rules of the utility jobs scheme as being “rude” to them. He can feel, as he describes, that the work supervisors do not like being “angry assholes” who boss clients around. Rather, they enjoy working in nature along with the clients (*feature 1*). On the other hand, he views their decisions as determined by a “top-down” way of thinking in society.

In what follows, I show systematically how the clients perceive the factors of the work supervisors’ decisions.

Table 7.4. Clients' perceptions of factors from "above" that influence the work supervisors' decision-making.

Factors	Examples	No. of cases	No. of ref.
The system	#R: It's not at all … um … the supervisors out here … who have any influence over how long they have to wait […] That [the waiting time] can be shorter or longer, but it's impossible to avoid. And it's because the system is what it is […] (Franz, age 50s).	20	58
Organization of the utility jobs scheme[a)]	#I: Why do you think that they [the work supervisors] don't just do it [plan the work activities better]? #R: [Takes deep breath] Because they're in limbo themselves, and because they can't take their job seriously, and because they don't know either how long this needs to go on for, and planning far ahead is, maybe, difficult for them too. (Monica, age 50s, follow-up interview)	19	53
Their management	#I: "And how much wiggle room do they [the work supervisors] have to make things better? Do they have the freedom to do what they want or do you think they are very restricted by certain conditions?" #R: "I think they are VERY restricted. Um … by the people upstairs, someone further up, well, by their bosses. (Tinna, age 50s)	19	46
Politics	"They [the work supervisors] are … undergeared and have to, um … take account of some rules that we … that are politically decided. So they're locked … in their work." (Hanne, age 60s)	19	32
Rules	"If we're going to talk about being of use out here … The people [the work supervisors] are nice and kind, the people do what they have to, and the people do what they can, and that is in and of itself fine. You can also sense that maybe the employees or the staff [referring to the work supervisors] out here have some guidelines from the municipality about how this shouldn't be fun; this should preferably be 'unfun.'" (Verner, age 40s)	17	49

Lack of resources	#I: And what you're saying about that it's hard to avoid the waiting time in one way or another, but it can't be done any other way, can you try to elaborate on that? #R: Um … it could be that they should get a few more cars … And there is a financial barrier, limit, or something somewhere. It could be that the municipality isn't allowed to or don't think they have the budget for it, so they can't buy too many, if you get me. (Sofie, age 50s)	9	13
The weather	#I: Can you describe how it feels when you are sometimes made to wait for a while? For a period of time where you don't quite know for how long? #R: Well, the waiting time is … probably the most annoying. Um, because it's a period where you just sit and stare into thin air. I do get it from the work supervisors' point of view. That they can't control the weather. (Nicklas, age 30s)	6	8

a. Includes references to the organization of the utility jobs scheme, for example, whether the utility jobs scheme should include unionized jobs or whether the different utility jobs activation sites in the municipality should be merged.

Table 7.5. Clients' perceptions of factors from "below" that influence the work supervisors' decision-making

Factors	Examples	No. of cases	No. of ref.
Clients complain	#I: "[…] do you think that they [the work supervisors] would be receptive to … you making some suggestions?" #R: "Well, I feel- I just think that I'll put myself in their shoes. Because, well, so many people [clients] come here, that it's- well, I can almost see it for myself that if someone comes and complains about one thing or another … Well, I almost wouldn't want to … be the one that has to tell them [the work supervisors] even more crap. They hear so much crap every day." (Christopher, age 40s)	26	83
Many clients to handle	#R: "I mean, I wouldn't want to be in his [Arne, work supervisor] shoes. It must be so terrible … Especially because every single week, new people arrive. And you don't know whether you'll see them once or whether it's someone who'll stick around. Because there are so many people who just come and go, you know? So … And he has to stand there and say the same thing over and over and over again, you know?" (Randi, age 30s)	21	43
Clients are lazy	#R: "Well, like Ole [the work supervisor] said about tunnel vision, right? So if you just try to open up and be a little happy and stuff. Because now we're here. So let's make the best of it, you know? It's not too much to ask. From 9.30 AM. to 1.00 p.m. It's three and a half hours. Real work. I used to work ten hours a day as a truck driver, you know? So three times as long. So you can start to feel a bit like, 'You lazy bugger' […] It's just- It's wuss-like, you know?" (Svend, age 30s)	14	22
Clients break the rules	#R: "[…] And I think it's also because they [the work supervisors] are often met with anger and indignation when they enforce punctuality […]" #I: "You mean when clients come in late?" #R: "Yeah, or when they leave early, like just go home without, uh, without … I've never seen it, but I've heard stories about people just going to the park, and when everyone is ready to drive home, someone is missing because he's walked to the subway and taken the train home, right, because he had to watch some TV show or play games on the computer, PlayStation…" (Peter, age 30s, follow-up interview).	12	22

Clients are violent	Well, the point of this [utility jobs activation] is, I guess, that you're activated … and … Ole [the work supervisor], he says it's something do with … that you talk to each other and maybe get some ideas on how to go forward with the job hunt or something. Some people have experience with things. And I think that the work supervisors who're here are really good because there are often people who come here who externalize their issues, and they're very good at handling that. I think so." (Tanja, age 40s, follow-up interview).	7	11

Table 7.4 and 7.5 illustrate clients' profound awareness of the bureaucratic challenges of being a work supervisor: the cross-pressure of facing problematic clients while navigating within a net of political rules and managerial demands seem to determine their decisions. It is also clear that clients, unlike their perceptions of the caseworkers and the job consultants, do not hold them accountable for their decisions. This shows a paradox. On the one hand, the work supervisors' decisions about how to plan the working day are largely based on their will and individual discretion (see Chapter 6). On the other hand, clients perceive the work supervisors' decisions as completely determined by matters beyond their individual control. As Franz (age 50s) said: "It's not at all … um … the supervisors out here … who have any influence over how long they have to wait […]".

First, regarding clients' perceptions of factors from "above", they directly draw upon daily conversations with the work supervisors when they talk about their decision-making, for example about how their management is watching them. Monica explains how the work supervisors are unable to efficiently plan a working day because they find themselves in a "limbo." At the time of the interview, the management considered merging two of the project places for utility jobs in the municipality.[100] However, this was solely an internal affair with no consequences for the clients. Moreover, the plan eventually came to nothing. However, during the work supervisors' daily conversations with the clients, they complained about these plans. The interviews therefore reveal how the clients incorporate these managerial decisions into their perceptions of the work supervisors' decision-making.

Second, regarding clients' perceptions of factors from "below", it is clear that clients believe, to a much greater extent than regarding their perceptions of the caseworkers' and job consultants' decision-making, that other clients influence the work supervisors' decision-making. The reason for this is that clients are able to observe directly how other clients interact with the work supervisors (*feature 3*) and how this influences the work supervisors' decision-making.

Moreover, regarding clients' deflection of responsibility downwards, the statements show a familiar pattern: Research on welfare recipients has consistently shown that they distance themselves from fellow clients (Briar 1966; Goodban 1985; Rank 1994; Snow and Anderson 1987; Soss 2005). These studies show that they distance themselves from one another because they try to escape the stigma of receiving welfare as it poses a threat to their self-image

[100] For the difference between "project places" and "individual places" in the utility jobs scheme, see Chapter 2.

(see Goffman 1963). As Soss (2005, 315–316) found: "Surrounded by degraded images of her group, the AFDC[101] client must find ways to sustain the belief that she is a 'good' and 'normal' person."

This also occurred for the clients interviewed in this study where they distanced themselves from the broad group who receive welfare. However, the majority distanced themselves from a specific[102] group of clients at the site, namely those who complain and are burdensome to manage for the work supervisors. Both Randi and Christopher put themselves in the work supervisors' place and identify themselves with them. They imagine how it feels to manage new clients all the time (Randi) and people who "tell them even more crap" (Christopher). Svend, (age 30s), who is a former truck driver and have been unemployed for approximately six months, categorizes these kinds of clients as a "lazy bugger" and considers them to be weak ("it's wuss-like").

The final comment by Svend reveals an internal hierarchy among clients that resembles that of maximum security prisons. In his study of a maximum security prison, Sykes (1958) describes a society of prisoners. The internal cohesion among them is dependent upon maintaining a good relationship with the guards. Those who threaten this cohesion are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy among prisoners. One of them, the "ball buster," openly complains and contests the guards' authority. The other prisoners regard him as a "fool" and his complaints as a sign of weakness (100). At the top of the hierarchy is the "real man": "the man who can 'take it,' who can endure the regime of the custodians without flinching, is the man who wins the admiration and respect of his fellow captives" (100–101). Prisoners who act like "real men" therefore display "toughness" and convey a vision of "manhood."

At the activation site, clients establish a similar hierarchy. They are dependent upon maintaining a good relationship with the work supervisors. Through this relationship, they are supplied time and attention from the work supervisors where they can talk about their problems, which no other official will listen to. Those who complain, upset, and put pressure on the work supervisors rob the work supervisors of time and energy that they could have used to engage with the other clients. In consequence, those who complain are placed at the bottom of the informal hierarchy and regarded as weak.

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[101] For more information on the AFDC group, see section 3.3.2 in Chapter 3.

[102] In their study of ways that homeless people present themselves, Snow & Anderson (1987, 1349) found two ways to distance themselves from one of another: (1) dissociation from the homeless as a general social category, and (2) dissociation from the specific groups among the homeless.

7.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analyzed the first process of bureaucratic decoupling: How clients separate their evaluation of frontline workers as "individuals" from their evaluation of them as "decision-makers." This perceptual distinction contests core assumptions in public administration research, namely that clients identify frontline workers with the policies they implement and perceive them as the "face of public policy" (Lipsky 1980, xiii). I summarize the results in table 7.6.

Table 7.6. Summary of findings for Chapter 7

Evaluations of frontline workers	Findings
Clients' evaluations of the caseworkers and the job consultants	*Evaluation of them as individuals*. Clients describe them as either invisible or in line with their perceptions of the cash-assistance scheme: unhelpful, condescending, and patronizing. Thus, clients are unable to distinguish between the caseworkers and the job consultants as individuals/private persons and as bureaucratic decision-makers. *Evaluation of them as decision-makers*. Clients acknowledge that multiple factors such as the rules, lack of resources, politics, and clients who complain or break the rules challenge their decision-making. However, despite this, clients largely hold them accountable for their decisions and call them "fools" and "idiots" when they make a mistake. Therefore, they view them as ground-level policy-makers in the cash-assistance scheme.
Clients' evaluations of the work supervisors	*Evaluation of them as individuals*. Clients emphasize many of the personal qualities of the work supervisors as private persons: They are nice, fun, understanding, empathetic, and human. Thus, clients are able to distinguish between the work supervisors as individuals/private persons and as bureaucratic decision-makers. *Evaluation of them as decision-makers*. Clients believe that factors such as the rules, their management, and clients who complain and act violently determine their decisions. Clients even establish a sense of loyalty to the work supervisors where they refrain from criticizing them. As a result, clients do not view them as ground-level policy-makers in the cash-assistance scheme and therefore do not hold them accountable for their decisions.

I find that the nature of the face-to-face encounter between clients and frontline workers creates this perceptual distinction. When clients are treated as

equals in the encounter with the work supervisors (*feature 1*), clients are able to distinguish between the work supervisors as individuals/private persons and as bureaucratic decision-makers. Therefore, clients emphasize many of the personal qualities of the work supervisors: They are nice, empathetic, helpful, and fun to be around. For example, as Bo expressed while describing his relationship with Sebastian, "He seems a lot like … down on our level, so I think he's a cool guy." As decision-makers, clients emphasize how the work supervisors face challenges that are beyond their individual control. As tables 7.4 and 7.5 illustrate, clients believe that factors such as the rules, lack of resources, and that the work supervisors have to manage too many and occasionally violent clients determined their decisions. In consequence, clients do not consider them ground-level policy-makers in the cash-assistance scheme, and therefore, they do not hold the work supervisors accountable for their decisions. They even establish a sense of loyalty to the work supervisors to the point where they consider themselves "backstabbers" – as Morten expressed – if they criticize them.

By contrast, if clients encounter frontline workers in a formal way, with an obvious power asymmetry involving high-stake decisions, clients evaluate frontline workers differently. Then, clients are unable to distinguish between them as individuals/private persons and as bureaucratic decision-makers. The encounter between Amina and Ivan displayed that even though Ivan consistently tried to evade the script by appealing to Amina's emotions, Amina stuck to her role as a bureaucratic decision-maker. Clients' evaluations of the caseworkers and job consultants as individuals are, therefore, largely aligned with the objective of cash-assistance. As the objective is, from the clients' point of view, to deter claimants from applying for assistance, they evaluated the caseworkers in this light. Thus, the clients viewed the caseworkers and job consultants as patronizing and unhelpful. As decision-makers, clients acknowledge that they face bureaucratic challenges such as the rules or clients that complain. However, they still hold them accountable for their decisions, which means that they consider them ground-level policy-makers in the cash-assistance scheme.

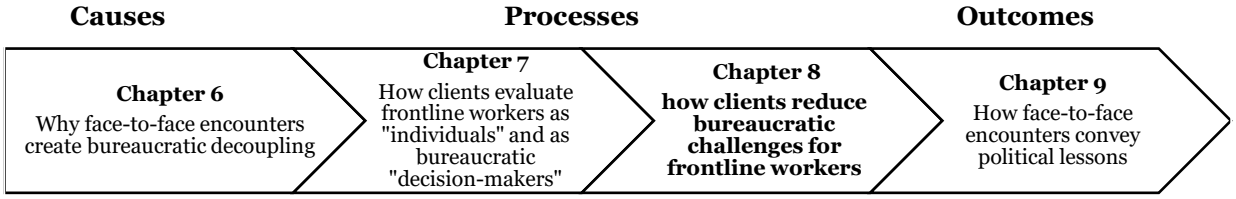
These perceptions are not unique and confined to a single space. They are created through the distinct nature of face-to-face encounters that occurs at utility job sites. While conducting fieldwork, I was able to observe a meeting with clients from all three utility activation sites in the municipality (see also Chapter 2) where they were able to anonymously give feedback and suggestions about improvements. During the meeting, everyone agreed that the work supervisors were a nice group of people. Moreover, every time they voiced their frustrations, they consistently used phrases like "it's not their fault" or "it is something that comes from 'above.'

Chapter 8. How Clients Reduce Bureaucratic Challenges for Frontline Workers

8.1. Introduction

How do clients act upon their perception of frontline workers? In this chapter, I argue that clients' decoupled image of the work supervisors lead them to reduce the everyday challenges of the work supervisors' job. The four features of the institutional order lead clients to spot the individual person behind the bureaucratic "rope" of the work supervisor. Therefore, clients want to help ease their bureaucratic challenges. This is the second process of bureaucratic decoupling.

Figure 8.1. Structure of the analytical chapters



I find that clients reduce three challenges for the work supervisors. First, they reduce the work supervisors' challenge of handling their management's conflicting instructions. Second, they reduce the work supervisors' challenge of managing many clients at the site. Third, they reduce the challenge of finding enough work assignments to fill a whole day of work.

However, this does not mean that clients are docile or compliant subjects. As I showed in chapter 6, clients often engage in forms of face-work where they challenge the work supervisors' and their decision-making. Yet, as they, over time in activation, come to regard the work supervisors more as individuals who face bureaucratic challenges beyond their control, they target their criticisms toward the more general and structural features of the cash-assistance scheme. Moreover, those who remain critical of the work supervisors challenge them through more indirect ways, for example by using secondary adjustments.

The aim of these analyses is twofold. First, the aim is to analyze the behavioral consequences of bureaucratic decoupling. This analysis contributes to

the street-level bureaucracy scholarship, as I show that clients do not only behave in ways that maximize their self-interest, for example by circumventing the rules (Dubois 2010; 2014). Their loyalty to the work supervisors leads them to help the supervisors and ease their bureaucratic challenges. Moreover, the analysis therefore adds new client strategies in street-level bureaucracy to an already sparse scholarship on this matter.

Second, the aim is to show that these behavioral adjustments are interaction-driven (Blumer 1969): Clients reduce the bureaucratic challenges for the work supervisors because their face-to-face encounters lead clients to see the private person behind the supervisors' bureaucratic rope.

8.2. Structure of the chapter and analytical strategy

I divide the chapter into two parts. First, I analyze how clients behave in ways that reduce bureaucratic challenges for the work supervisors. Second, in order to show that clients' behavioral adaptations are interaction-driven, I analyze how they engage in various forms of resistance against the organization and structure of the cash-assistance scheme while simultaneously embracing the work supervisors. Moreover, I analyze situations where clients contest the authority of the work supervisors and their decision-making. This analysis shows that direct ways of contesting their authority mainly occur at the beginning of their activation while indirect ways of contesting their authority occur in later stages of their activation. Moreover, it shows that those who continuously directly criticize their authority are excluded from the broader group of clients, as I also touched upon in chapter 6.

I used a similar analytical strategy in Chapter 6. In that chapter, however, the focus in the field notes was on the work supervisors. In this chapter, by contrast, the focus in the field notes is on the clients and their concrete adaptions to the institutional order. For clients' reduction of the work supervisors' bureaucratic challenges, I analyze situations where clients engage in behavior where they attempt to make the work supervisors' everyday work as easy as possible. This includes for example working less efficiently because the work supervisors then do not need to find work assignments. For clients' ways of criticizing the organization and structure of the cash-assistance scheme, I analyze events where they criticize, for example, their low benefit or the fact that they have to wear work clothes. For clients' ways of engaging in various forms of resistance, I analyze situations where clients attempt to contest and challenge the decisions of the work supervisors. This includes direct contestations of their authority (for example voicing complaints to the work supervisors) as

well as indirect contestations (for example using secondary adjustments by mocking the work supervisors behind their backs).

Behavior among individuals that either accommodates or resists authorities is always ambiguous as it is not always clear how individuals interpret what they are doing (McCann and March 1995; Rubin 1995). Therefore, I analyze behavioral adaptations where (a) clients somehow reflect upon their behavior, and (b) where these reflections include the work supervisors' challenges. Moreover, many of the clients analyzed were also part of the interview analysis. This means that their behavior is largely aligned with what they expressed in the interviews. This solves the "attitudinal fallacy" of interview studies where individuals' actions often deviate from their expressed perceptions (Jerolmack and Khan 2014).

8.3. How clients reduce challenges for the work supervisors

In this part of this chapter, I analyze how clients adapt themselves to a decoupled image of the work supervisors. Although the interview analysis (see Chapter 7) shows that clients identify the work supervisors' multiple challenges in their decision-making, I observed that clients reduced three challenges in particular for the work supervisors, as described in the beginning of this chapter.

8.3.1. Reducing challenges from clients

In Chapter 7, I showed that clients thought that other clients at the site challenged the work supervisors' decisions, either because the work supervisors had to manage too many clients or because clients were complaining. In this part of the chapter, I analyze examples of where clients adapt to this.

I find that they reduce the challenge of managing clients in three ways. First, everyday conversations both between clients and with the work supervisors show that clients are generally very aware of the challenge of managing many clients at once. Second, this awareness leads them to adjust both their own and others' behavior. Concerning their own behavior, I observed that clients stopped asking the work supervisors questions, avoided going into the staff room, or worked extra hard to ease the pressure of managing many clients. Concerning others' behavior, I observed that they condemned others who openly complained, made sure that they followed the rules, and acted on behalf of the work supervisors, for example by teaching others to use the tools properly.

The spatial structure of the activation site (*feature 3*) creates an immediate awareness of how the number of clients at the site influences the work supervisors. Clients are constantly surrounded by other clients, either in the park or in the meeting room. In April 2019, for example, while Ole [work supervisor] is driving us back to the meeting room, he tells us how Arne [the other supervisor] has forgotten to pick up a number of people from his own team because he does not have a comprehensive overview of his team. Tonny (age 40s), one of clients in the car, clearly sympathizes with Ole and says:

> *Field notes, 11.04.2019*
>
> It's got to be confusing for you … There are so many people out here [at the activation site] at the moment, and new ones are constantly showing up, so it must be hard to keep track of where everyone is.

Ole then explains that the number of clients at the site simply prevents him from keeping track of clients' attendance as well as being able follow up on their questions. This shows how clients' awareness of the work supervisors' challenges is reinforced in their daily interactions with them. Clients directly witness these challenges, and due to the blurred power asymmetry between them and the work supervisors (*feature 1*), clients can engage in conversations about how it influences the supervisors' jobs.

The observations also show that clients' daily interactions with the work supervisors reinforce the idea that they face bureaucratic challenges beyond their control. In late April 2019, I engage in a conversation with Bo (age 30s).[103] In the interview with him, he explains how he has a very positive relationship to Sebastian [work supervisor] and that the feels that they are often faced with multiple challenges. In this conversation, he reflects upon the pressure of managing too many clients and how this is a "political problem" and not a problem to be solved by the work supervisors. In the scene, I am standing by myself in front of the meeting room. Bo, who has just talked to Sebastian, comes over to me:

> *Field notes, 25.04.2019*
>
> #Bo: "Have you heard that 50 clients are coming next week???"
>
> #Me: "Yeah, who told you?"
>
> #Bo: "Sebastian did."
>
> #Me: "Did you ask him?"

[103] For more background information on Bo, see section 7.4.1 in Chapter 7 and section 8.4.1 in this Chapter.

#Bo: "No, he was just telling some of the women who're supposed to start emptying the lockers and stuff."

#Me: "Oh, okay."

#Bo: "It's quite a load of people to handle…"

#Me: "Yeah, you can say that again…"

#Bo: "It really is … I'm glad it's not my job."

#Me: "Yeah, it must be pretty stressful."

#Bo: "Yeah, and I don't understand why they don't spread it out a little and let some people stay home and send a few less out here so they don't all show up at once … but I guess it comes from higher up…"

#Me: "Where do you mean?"

#Bo: "From the politicians … or the Ministry of Education? Isn't that the one all of this [utility jobs activation] falls under or what?"

#Me: "No, I think it's the Employment Administration."

#Bo: "Oh yeah … of course, so it's probably some manager over there who's made the call."

First, it is clear that the difficulty of managing clients has left a strong impression on Bo. Without asking him, he comes over to me and leads the conversation with few questions from my side. Second, it shows that clients' awareness of this challenge stems from the spatial structure of the activation site. As he constantly observes the work supervisors' interactions with other clients, he gets an impression of the challenge of managing multiple clients at once. Finally, he deflects responsibility away from the work supervisors and onto a diffuse bureaucracy. He is certain that the amount of clients is controlled by people "higher up." This is correct. However, he is unable to identify who that it is, so he infers that it comes from politicians or some random manager in the municipality.

I find that this profound awareness of the difficulty of managing multiple clients leads clients to adjust their behavior. The first adjustment includes avoiding asking questions about work assignments when clients feel that the atmosphere is hectic due to the number of clients present. In early April 2019, I observe Bo again along with three other men. At 10:00 a.m., the whole area in front of the meeting room is packed with people. The work supervisors are anxiously trying to find work assignments for everyone. Bo goes into the meeting room to ask Sebastian what he is supposed to do. Sebastian tells us to get into one of the trucks but does not tell us where we are supposed to go. After the conversation with Sebastian, Bo says to me, "I could tell they were a little

cross when I asked … They were probably surprised that there are so many people. It's a lot to deal with, you know?"

We then get into the truck along with the three other men. At 10:15 a.m., another man, Arthur, joins us:

> *Field notes, 03.04.2019*
>
> #Arthur: "I've been told I'm supposed to ride along, but I actually have no idea what we're going to do," he says and laughs.
>
> #Bo: "Neither do we because we've been told that we don't need to bring tools or wheelbarrows."

We then wait for instructions. Everyone talks about the hectic environment at the site, and Bo says again, "I just don't think they were prepared for so many people, and now they're a little pressured because they have to deal with so many." Ten minutes later, Sebastian comes out and tells us to take trash out to the recycling site. This shows how clients directly adjust their behavior when they observe that the work supervisors are under pressure. The hectic atmosphere leads them to wait passively in the truck until told otherwise.

Another adjustment was a reluctance to go into the staff room. Some of the clients even referred to the staff room as the "forbidden room." I observed several times that clients were particularly reluctant to go into the staff room even when they had questions about their work assignments or when they had been waiting to be allowed to leave for a long period of time. Even clients who had a trustful relationship with the work supervisors would stand quietly outside the staff room and wait patiently until they came out and gave them instructions.

For example, in late April 2019, Pia, who finished her activation in March the same year, came back to the activation site to return some work clothes that she borrowed from the work supervisors. She has a background as an unskilled service employee in an IT company. However, she wanted to leave that sector, so the work supervisors helped her find employment in a market garden. While she was still in activation, I conducted two interviews with her. Both times, she described the work supervisors as "fun" and "nice": "It's so nice to be able to joke around with people who aren't always so strict," as she said in her first interview on 11.02.2019. Her case is, therefore, very illustrative of clients' reluctance to disturb the work supervisors. Considering her very positive image of them, one would expect her to be less concerned with that given that her interview statements indicate that she does not think of them as somehow "strict" authorities.

At 12:21 p.m., (the day she has come back to return her work clothes) I observe her waiting outside the meeting room. The work supervisors are in the

staff room having lunch. I ask why she does not just go home now that she has returned her work clothes:

Field note, 30.04.2019

#Pia: "I just want to stay and say goodbye to Ole and Sebastian"

#Me: "Oh, okay, but I think you can just go in," I answer and point to the staff room.

She looks over and replies:

#Pia: "No, I think I'll just wait till they come out."

#Me: "But I think they're just eating lunch?"

#Pia: "No, it's fine. I don't want to disturb them during their lunch break."

Even though she feels that she can joke around with the work supervisors, indicating a low power asymmetry (*feature 1*), she is still very reluctant to go into the staff room. At 12:52 p.m., she is still waiting. I ask her again:

Field note, 30.04.2019 (continued)

#Me: "You are really patient, aren't you, Pia?"

#Pia: "Yeah … Their lunch breaks are really long…"

#Me: "I think you can just go in."

#Pia: "No, I'll wait," she answers instantly.

In sum, this shows that clients' very positive image of the work supervisors as "individuals" leads them to ease their work pressures, such as being disturbed and having to answer multiple questions from clients.

Clients also worked extra hard on behalf of the work supervisors to ease the challenge of managing multiple clients at once. To show this, I analyze the case of a woman, Hanne (age 60s), a former secretary who has struggled with long-term unemployment. During her time in activation, she consistently worked more than other clients. The interview with her in early February (conducted on 01.02.2019) reveals that she has virtually no social network of either friends or family. Her behavior of staying later than other clients could, therefore, be interpreted as her way of using the activation site as a venue of socialization (see Dubois 2010, 177). Yet, despite this, she consistently justifies her behavior by referencing the work supervisors' challenges with managing clients.

Over a period of more than two months, from 17.12.2018 to 27.02.2019, I observe her daily at the activation site. At the site, she is on the "cleaning team." Unlike those clients who pick up trash or trim trees, clients on the

cleaning team actually need to finish their work. During their day in activation, they need to clean the meeting room, the staff room, the clients' locker room, and wash clients' dirty work clothes. Hanne was very serious about these work assignments. She would sometimes scold others if they had forgotten to wash their dishes, and she was also very meticulous about giving instructions to other clients at the site about how to clean. In late early February 2019, I also interview her. She explains that she has a very positive relationship with the work supervisors whom she thinks are able to create a very fun and pleasant atmosphere at the site.

On the 21.02.2019, the nine o'clock team, of which Hanne is a part, is allowed to leave at 09:15 a.m. because it is raining. I leave the activation site as well to do observations at the job center. At 11:30 a.m., I am back at the activation site. I encounter Hanne who is still there. We go into the meeting room to have lunch. I ask her continuously why she has not gone home, and she explains that she wants to finish washing the work clothes so they will be ready for a large group of new clients who are arriving the week after.

When I arrive at the activation site and see Hanne, I ask her why she is still there when the nine o'clock team has been allowed to leave:

> *Field notes, 21.02.2019*
>
> #Me: "Aren't you off work?"
>
> Hanne shakes her head
>
> #Me: "But the others have left?"
>
> #Hanne: "Screw that. I'm in the middle of doing the laundry," she says and goes into the meeting room.

We then go inside the meeting room. As we sit down, I ask her whether she has heard back from her internship applications, which she told me about earlier in our interview. In the interview, she told me how desperate she was to get an internship as she complained that she was getting "nowhere" by being in activation.

> *Field notes, 21.02.2019 (continued)*
>
> #Me: "Have you heard anything about your internship, Hanne?"
>
> #Hanne: "They're [the caseworkers at the activation site] letting me know on Thursday," she says, crossing her fingers. "But if it doesn't work out, my caseworker says I have to go on a job-searching course[104] for six weeks."

[104] The job-searching course is one of the other activation measures used in the municipality where I conducted fieldwork. It is typically offered to clients either after

She moves her index finger up to her temple and makes a twirling motion to indicate how crazy it is that she has to do that.

#Me: "Have you tried it before?"

#Hanne: "Yeah, many years ago … But it says in my plan that I need to upgrade my qualifications … But going on a job-searching course for six weeks is not upgrading my qualifications. I know how to write an application and a résumé … I don't need help with that. That's not a qualification upgrade."

Once again, she makes the twirling motion with her finger to show that it's crazy.

#Hanne: "If we just have to keep coming out here or going on those job-searching courses, we're just going to be placed again. We're not going to get a job out of that … We'll just be placed and stay stuck in the system."

#Me: "Are you going to say something to your caseworker at the next meeting on Thursday if she still says you have to go on the job-searching course?"

#Hanne: "You bet I am. I'm going to blow up and tell her I think it's completely ridiculous that I have to go on that course … I will!"

I tell her that I will keep my fingers crossed. Afterwards, I ask her again why she is not going home:

Field notes, 21.02.2019 (continued)

#Me: "But shouldn't you go home soon, Hanne?

#Hanne: "No, I've just started the laundry, so the washing machine needs to finish its cycle."

#Me: "But have they [the work supervisors] told you to stay?"

#Hanne: "No, but a big new team is starting on Monday, and Sebastian [work supervisor] has just emptied all the lockers, so there are a lot of clothes that need washing, and I've promised to help. And it's nice to get it done today because then it's over and done with. I like that best … There's a presentation[105] tomorrow so that only leaves me an hour beforehand where I can get it done."

I nod.

She then tells me that she looks forward to the day she is done on the cleaning team "because I'm tired of scrubbing toilets," as she says. I then ask her once again why she is not going home:

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they have applied for cash-assistance, or – if they fail to find employment or an internship – after they have finished their activation in the utility jobs scheme.

[105] Every month, a biologist from the municipality gives a presentation about the natural area where the clients are working.

#Me: “But can’t you just go home now that you’re off work? You don’t need to stay and take care of the cleaning.”

#Hanne: “The washer is on now, though, so it’s fine.”

#Me: “But has Sebastian told you to stay?”

#Hanne: “No, but there’s a big team coming on Monday, so it’s nic,e to get it over with. It doesn’t matter.”

The conversation with Hanne shows three relevant insights about how a decoupled image of the work supervisors influences clients’ behavior. First, Hanne appears to be very critical of the caseworker’s efforts to get her an internship. As I showed in Chapter 7, clients largely held the caseworkers accountable for their decisions. This is also the case for Hanne as she says, “I’m going to blow up and tell her I think it’s completely ridiculous that I have to go on that course […]”

Second, in stark contrast to this assertive behavior towards the caseworkers, she has chosen to stay at the activation site and help clean even though the work supervisors have allowed her and all the other clients to leave. Thus, while she wants to convey an image of herself as having a strong willingness to regain her employment, she simultaneously chooses to stay longer at the activation site even though these two things conflict.

Third, when asked about her motivation for staying, she references the work supervisors’ challenge of managing too many clients. Although it is an internal matter among the work supervisors, she is particularly aware that a large new team is arriving the week after. The work supervisors often complained about the difficulty of managing that many people, and this is driving her willingness to stay and make an extra effort.

The examples above show both how clients are aware of the challenge of managing multiple clients at once and how they adjust their own behavior in accordance with this perception. Other clients, however, also adjusted other peoples’ behavior so that they were less of burden to the work supervisors. I observed multiple times that clients told others to wait for the work supervisors to allow them to change into their private clothes or to go home. If the work supervisors had a meeting, some of the clients would also pass that information on to other clients so that they would not go into the staff room. Other clients even acted as the work supervisors. One the clients, Rasmus (age 20s), was often in charge of directing the work assignments in the park when the work supervisors were not present. He therefore decided how long clients should work and when to go back to the meeting room. One day, one of the new clients therefore asks him, “You’re employed here, aren’t you?”

I also observed that clients would "look down upon" clients who violated the rules or complained loudly in the meeting room. In March 2019, for example, clients from the nine o'clock team have been waiting for a while in the meeting room to be allowed to leave. The work supervisors are not present. Two men, Morten (age 30s) and Johannes (age 40s),[106] both of whom I had interviewed previously and who had just recently begun their activation, get anxious:

Field notes, 13.03.2019

#Johannes: "We're going upstairs [to the locker room] and changing now … It's 12:30 p.m., right?

#Morten: "Actually, we're only allowed to change after 1:00 p.m. … but this is pointless."

However, in the meeting room, Tanja[107] (age 40s), another client at the other end of the room, who had been at the activation site for two months, watches the scene with skepticism. She looks at me and laughs: "He'll [Johannes] know better once he meets Ole [work supervisor]." The expression indicates that they will change their opinion as soon as they get to know Ole and realize that such behavior is unwanted at the activation site.

Finally, I observed that clients would teach others to use the tools properly. What is remarkable is that when doing so, they reference budgetary explanations given by the work supervisors. They are painfully aware that the behavior of the client who uses the tools improperly has budgetary consequences.

We are a group of six people working in the park. As we arrive at the park, we gather around the truck where Ole gives us instructions. As there have been incidents where clients have broken the tools, he carefully gives us instructions on how to use the tools, and he also informs us that they have just bought new tools for us. As we are working, one of the clients, a woman in her forties named Alesha, starts hitting a tree with a pair of lopping shears. Although I never got to interview her, Alesha was known to be very critical of both the work supervisors and the utility jobs scheme in general. Two women, Pia (age 30s) and Tanja (age 40s), get into an argument with her:

Field notes, 26.02.2019

#Tanja: "You're ruining the tool by doing that!

#Alesha: "No, I'm not," she says and continues hitting the tree.

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[106] For more background information on Morten and Johannes, see section 7.3.2 and section 7.4.2 in Chapter 7.

[107] For more background information on Tanja, see section 7.3.1 in Chapter 7.

#Tanja: “Yes, you’re ruining it by twisting it back and forth. The trunk is way too thick for that, so you need to use a saw. Ole’s told us that many times…”

#Alesha: “Yeah, I don’t care what Ole says!”

She continues twisting the lopping shears with no luck.

#Tanja: “No, you need to use a saw!”

#Alesha: “I’m just doing what Ole said and chopping these trees.”

#Tanja: “Yeah, but Ole says we have to use a saw when the tree trunks are so thick.”

#Pia: “It’s true. Ole has bought us new tools for over 600 kroner.”

Alesha continues twisting the loppers.

#Tanja: “Yeah, you need to use a saw or else you’re going to ruin the loppers.”

#Pia: “Yeah, you’re ruining it!”

The argument between the three women reveals a relevant contrast between them. Alesha does not to hold a decoupled image of Ole, as she does not acknowledge the individual effort of Ole of buying tools for them. Pia and Tanja, by contrast, are very careful about using the tools properly. Their instructions to Alesha are based on their awareness of the cost of these tools and the inability of the work supervisors to replace them. This image is reinforced by the idea that Ole has personally bought these tools for them – not for the entire group of clients (“Ole has bought us new tools for over 600 kroner”). This leads them to establish a sense of loyalty to Ole, and they act on behalf of Ole by condemning others who damage the tools.

8.3.2. Reducing the challenge of finding enough work assignments

The observations also show that clients were aware that the work supervisors had trouble finding enough work assignments to fill a whole day of work. In Chapter 6, I analyzed how the work supervisors either solved this problem by drawing out time or by making clients work slowly or using manual tools instead of electric tools.

In general, the observations show that clients were generally aware of the fact that there was not a sufficient amount of work assignments to fill a whole day of work. This had two behavioral consequences. Clients would either ask if they were allowed to leave as soon as they were done. This was mainly the case for newcomers. Others decided to stay in the park to socialize or relax after they were finished with their assignments.

I analyze a discussion among a group of three clients who are particularly aware that there are not enough work assignments, and therefore, they stay in the park to socialize instead of going home. I interviewed all members of the group, and in these interviews, they expressed that they had come to develop a good relationship with the work supervisors. However, not all clients had these discussions. Instead, I often observed that there was an unspoken acknowledgement among clients who had been at the activation site for a while that working efficiently was neither appreciated nor encouraged by the work supervisors. Therefore, they decided to stay late in the park and take multiple long breaks throughout the day instead.

In February 2019, a group of clients are out working. All members of the group had been at the activation site for approximately one month. At 10:40 a.m., we take a break and discuss how we often have to wait a long time in the meeting room before we are allowed to leave. The scene displays that the clients whom I am working with do not want to go back to the meeting room too soon because the wait is tiring. However, their discussion also shows that they are aware that there are not enough work assignments to keep them busy. Moreover, they are also aware that there are not enough computers in the meeting room, which they could have used to fill the waiting time by writing job applications. As a result, they decide to stay in the park for longer than they otherwise would have.

Field note, 12.02.2019[108]

#Pia: "Yesterday, I waited for a whole hour!" she says, clearly frustrated.

#Nicklas: "But I think it has something to do with the weather, too. Yesterday, for example, it was really cold, so they probably wanted us to be home. The work supervisors can't help that."

#Lisbeth: "Yeah, but I think it also has something to do with there not being enough work for us for 13 weeks if we work until 1.30 p.m."

Everyone nods.

#Pia: "Yeah, that's true."

#Me: "But we also have to sit and wait often."

#Lisbeth: "In the beginning, I thought it was really bad how much we had to wait and how we often had to sit and wait for hours. It was really bad then."

[108] For more background information on Pia, Lisbeth and Nicklas, see section 7.3.2 and 7.4.1 in Chapter 7 as well as earlier parts of this chapter.

#Nicklas: “Yeah, the first day I came, I had to wait for three hours. We just sat there, staring into thin air. I remember thinking it was going to be a really shitty course [in activation]

Everyone laughs.

#Nicklas: “But if there were more computers, then we could apply for jobs or look at job announcements.”

#Lisbeth: “Well, I bring my own computer with me, and not everyone has the opportunity to do that, of course, but sometimes, I don’t want to bother taking it out because you don’t know how long you have to wait.”

The discussion shows their awareness of the work supervisors’ inability to control the weather, which means that they have to send clients home. This makes them accept that they have to wait and invent ways to pass the time with meaningful activities, such as bringing a computer or staying in the park to socialize:

Field note, 12.02.2019 (continued)

#Lisbeth: “Shall we grab a coffee here?”

#Pia: “Yeah, because we just have to sit and stare back at the site [the meeting room] anyway,” replies Pia right away.

They decide to stay in the park for another 20 minutes before they head home. Although their reluctance to go home is largely based on their irritation regarding the waiting time, they still incorporate the work supervisors’ challenges of finding enough work assignments into their decision to stay in the park longer.

The observations also show that clients actively taught others to work inefficiently. In this scene, on 02.12.2019, Arne, one of the work supervisors, asks the clients to take a break while he argues sarcastically that it is “madness” to keep on working. The other clients yell “scab” at a woman who, unlike the others, keeps on working. This shows more broadly that face-to-face encounters with the work supervisors lead clients to impose their vision of activation upon fellow clients.

Field notes, 02.12.2019

#Arne: “BREAK TIME!!! Don’t stand there and work. Are you completely mad?” he says while laughing.

Several of the clients come over, and Arne starts pulling out the pastries. […] While we stand around and chat, one of the women keeps on working.

#Man: “Scab!!” he yells at the woman who keeps working, while he laughs.

The woman is wearing a yellow hat, with a soccer clubs' tag on it, so she is easy to spot out on the field. She's raking up goldenrod.

#Arne: "Stop working and get over here, you fanatic!" he shouts and laughs.

The woman comes over. She appears to be Norwegian. She doesn't say much and stands a little apart from the circle of clients who are drinking coffee and eating cookies.

#Man: "How do you say 'scab' in Norwegian?" he asks and laughs.

#Woman in the yellow hat: "I don't know actually," she says and chuckles a little.

The clients continue standing around chatting for half an hour.

In the example, it is obvious how Arne imposes a norm of not working too hard. Although expressed in a sarcastic tone of voice, the phrase "Are you completely mad?" conveys the impression that efficient work is not appreciated and poses a problem for the work supervisors. Moreover, it is clear that some of the clients quickly tag along by condemning the efficient work behavior of one of the women.

8.3.3. Reducing challenges from their management

As shown in Chapter 6, the work supervisors repeatedly talked and complained about their management. In this section, I show how clients take over the work supervisors' critical image of their management and plan their behavior in accordance with this image.

Unlike reducing the challenge of managing clients or finding enough work assignments, reducing the challenges from the work supervisors' management was rarer. An explanation could be that their management was not physically present at the activation site, and clients' were unable to observe how it influenced their decisions except when the supervisors talked about it. In the example below, however, I analyze a group of three men who had multiple conversations with Ole about his management, which strongly influence their behavior.

In the observations below, I analyze how they, over a period of three days, consistently discuss when they can go back to the meeting room at the activation site. Their discussions show how they are particularly aware that management can penalize the work supervisors if they see clients back at the meeting room at the activation site before the official time. As a result, they decide to stay in the park and work longer. The three men are on the nine o'clock team and include Tonny (age 50s), Svend (age 30s), and William (age 40s). I

interviewed Svend and Tonny.[109] Both expressed that they thought that the management directly controlled the work supervisors' decisions regarding when they allowed clients to leave.

On Day 1, the clients refrain from going back to the meeting room at the activation site because they know that the work supervisors' management makes checks to see if clients are working until the official time. Back at the meeting room, a conversation between them and Ole occurs, which reinforces the clients' critical image of his management. On Day 2, the work supervisors criticize their management for hiring new supervisors with a different work approach. The clients then directly take over this view and embrace the current work supervisors for their qualities as individuals. Again, the clients choose to stay longer in the park and avoid coming back to the activation site too soon. On Day 3, I observe the clients' increasing frustrations about the work supervisors' management and their even stronger loyalty to the work supervisors.

Overall, this shows two relevant insights about bureaucratic decoupling. First, the behavioral consequences of bureaucratic decoupling are not isolated events but occur consistently over time (*feature 4*). Moreover, the clients' willingness to reduce the challenges of the work supervisors' jobs grow stronger throughout the three days. Second, the observations show that behavioral adaptations to bureaucratic decoupling are interaction-driven: clients' decision to reduce the supervisors' challenges is created and reinforced through their ongoing interactions with the work supervisors. During these interactions, both the work supervisors present themselves as powerless in a large bureaucratic machine. Afterwards, clients to take over this view.

Day 1. The scene displays first how the three clients decide to work longer to avoid that management will give a reprimand to the work supervisors. This is based on a logic, used by the clients, where if they choose to come back to the meeting room too early, it appears – from the management's point of view – that the work supervisors are not enforcing the rules of making clients work until the official point of time. Afterwards, in front of the meeting room, they engage with Ole [work supervisor]. His employment contract ends May 3 2019, and they discuss whether his management will possibly reappoint him. Based on this, the three men jokingly assert that they will barricade the activation site and "go on strike" unless he is reappointed.

At 11:35 a.m., in the park, we have been picking up trash for a while. We then discuss when we should head back to the meeting room:

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[109] For more background information on Svend and Tonny, see section 7.4.3 in Chapter 7. William has a background as an IT technician and has been unemployed for a couple of years.

Field notes, 29.04.2019

#Tonny: "Has Ole said when we're supposed to be back?"

#Me: "Nah … When do you usually go back?"

#Svend: "Last time, we were back at 12.30 p.m., but that seemed too early according to Ole … So we better go around 1 p.m … They come by and check sometimes, so it's probably good if we're not back too early."

#Me: [to Svend] "Who checks?"

#Svend: "People from the municipality. They come by and check that we don't leave too early."

#Me: "Has Ole said that?"

#Svend: "Yeah, he has. That's why we can't go back too early or they'll take it out on him if they're here to check."

#Tonny: "They're nice guys, both Ole and Sebastian. I really think so. They're nice and they do good work."

#Svend: [nods] "Now that Ole is stopping on Friday, things might be happening differently around here."

The conversation clearly shows that their perception of the work supervisors as "nice" has led them to establish a sense of loyalty towards them. They do not want the work supervisors to get a reprimand from their management, and therefore, they decide to stay longer in the park.

One hour later, at 12:20 p.m., they again discuss when to go back. However, Svend still thinks it is too early. He says, in a determined tone of voice, "I'm definitely not leaving until 1 o'clock." At 12:45, however, we pick up the discussion again:

Field notes, 29.04.2019 (continued)

#Svend: "If we go back before 1, then we'll be in for the same thing as last week."

#William: "I've tried going back too early and been sent to the incinerator and ended up home after 1.30 p.m. … so I don't want to either."

The scene shows Svend's attempt to regulate the others' behavior. Therefore, we end up being back at the meeting room at 1:10 p.m. Here, the three men engage in a conversation with Ole. This conversation illustrates how their decoupled image of Ole is reinforced to the degree that they want to revolt against his management on his behalf.

Field notes, 29.04.2019 (continued)

#Svend: [to Ole] "So Friday's your last day?"

#Ole: [turns towards me while answering] "Yeah … at least for now. I've just gotten an email from my boss saying that a position for a new work supervisor has just been advertised."

#Svend: "So is that a hint that you should apply for it?"

#Ole: "Yeah, that's the thing because you never know with my boss."

The others laugh and shake their heads.

#Ole: "It's the public sector, so you have to advertise available positions … It's so stupid."

The others laugh and nod in agreement with it being stupid that Ole's contract is not simply extended.

#Tonny: "We've talked about barricading the activation site if your contract isn't extended," he says and laughs.

#Ole: "Yeah, that'll probably mostly be a problem for you guys," he says, laughing.

The conversation shows that the features of the institutional order create a decoupled image of the work supervisors, upon which the clients also act. On the one hand, there is a blurred power asymmetry between them (*feature 1*). Ole presents himself almost as being in the same precarious position as the clients because of the uncertainty of his employment. Thereby, he creates a symbolic proximity to them. This leads clients to develop a sense of loyalty to Ole, to which the interviews with Tonny and Svend also attest.[110] Simultaneously, he deflects responsibility upwards (*feature 2 & 3*). He argues that his fate as a work supervisor is completely in the hands of his boss's arbitrary decisions: "Yeah, that's the thing because you never know with my boss." He also criticizes the public sector and creates an arbitrary image of their procedure for hiring staff when he says, "It's so stupid."

Having a crowd of several clients in front of him (*feature 3*), he is able to position himself in opposition to his management on the one hand, and therefore, on the other hand, as being on the same side as the clients. Simultaneously, the clients take over this view by laughing at his management and expressing their wish to act upon this by going on strike by "barricading the activation site."

Day 2: A couple of days later, I am out picking up trash with the same group again. The scene shows that the three men directly take over the work supervisors' vision of their management and use this to discuss their future behavior at the site. In the scene, they encounter Ole, whose employment ends

[110] See section 7.4 in Chapter 7.

the day after, and Arne [work supervisor] who is sent to one of the other activation sites in the municipality. The work supervisors complain about these managerial decisions. They also dissociate themselves from the new group of work supervisors whom they criticize for micro-managing clients' work. After the conversation, the three clients criticize this new group of work supervisors whom they have never met. Similar to other day, 29.04.2019, the three men decide to stay longer in the park to avoid coming back to the meeting room at the activation site too soon.

At 10:30 a.m., after we have been picking up trash for an hour, we encounter another group of clients from the nine o'clock team. Right afterwards, Arne and Ole come over. Svend asks Ole if it is his last day tomorrow, and Ole answers that he just needs to come by the next week to hand over his work clothes. Arne then talks about the two new work supervisors starting next week: "You'll probably be working with brush cutters all day. They love brush cutters, even though they [the brush cutters] make things go much faster."

In particular, Arne criticizes the new work supervisors for prioritizing efficiency. By saying "They love brush cutters, even though they [the brush cutters] make things go much faster," he contrasts their approach with his and Ole's approach to activation. The new work supervisors value efficient work, while Ole and Arne value that clients have time to socialize. They grant them this time by allowing them to work inefficiently. Second, Arne indirectly criticizes his own management for not valuing their approach. For the clients, this conveys the image that management opposes the work supervisors and that the work supervisors act on behalf of the clients rather than their management.

Afterwards, we continue picking up trash. Tonny says jokingly while he lifts his bag of trash, "So on Monday, we'll probably have our trash weighed when we come in to see who has collected the most trash … And afterwards, they'll damned well probably weigh us too." He also refers to the new group of work supervisors as the "terror regime". At 12:10 p.m., we are done picking up trash, and we discus when to go back to the meeting room. Svend, similar to 29.04.2019, thinks it is too early. Therefore, we decide to take a detour so that we are back at meeting room at 1:00 p.m.

In sum, the scene shows how clients' interactions with the work supervisors reinforce their positive and loyal relationship to them. A relationship they act upon by (a) criticizing two new work supervisors whom they have never met while (b) also staying later in the park to avoid that the current work supervisors get a reprimand from their management.

Day 3. Today, it is Ole's last day. First, the scene displays how the clients are sad that he is leaving as well as their open frustrations about his manage-

ment's decisions. The scene takes place just outside of the meeting room before we go to the park. Another man, Edward (age 54), initiates a conversation with Ole about his employment terminating:

> *Field notes, 03.05.2019*
>
> #Edward: [to Ole] "So, is it your last day today?"
>
> #Ole: "Yeah. Well, it's officially on Monday, you know?"
>
> #Edward: "Why don't they just extend your employment?"
>
> #Ole: "Something about some funds and some money that need to be moved around and stuff, which is the reason they can't just extend temporary contracts … It's this bureaucratic stuff that I can't and won't understand," Ole says, shaking his head.
>
> Edward nods. William has overheard the conversation and comes over.
>
> #William: [to Ole] "Oh well, but it's been nice working with you."
>
> #Ole: "Well, the day's not over yet."
>
> Then Ole explains that perhaps his manager will change her mind and decide to keep him anyway.

Williams' greetings to Ole indicates the blurred power asymmetry between them (*feature 1*) and William's loyalty to him. Second, it illustrates how Ole deflects responsibility upwards. By saying, "Something about some funds and some money that need to be moved around and stuff," he characterizes the cash-assistance scheme as a bureaucracy with a hidden logic that serves neither the clients nor the work supervisors. In Chapter 9, I show how clients draw upon these statements when they express their views about the cash-assistance scheme. In this scene, however, it conveys an impression to the clients that Ole's fate and decisions are beyond his control.

After the conversation, William and Edward head up to change into their work clothes. I stay with Ole who continues to voice his frustrations about his management:

> *Field notes, 03.05.2019*
>
> #Ole: "If I were a job consultant, I would spend more than an hour per meeting and just say 'yes' all the time … and completely blow up the budget. But I don't understand how they prioritize money in the municipality. Why spend 100,000 kroner on new tools [for the clients to use at activation site] just to use up the last of the money instead of giving the clients a stack of driver's licenses … They can buy ten driver's licenses with that amount of money."

However, Svend is standing near us listening carefully. As Ole goes over to another group of clients, Svend comes over. He asks me why they are not just extending Ole's contract. He then says in a frustrated tone of voice, "Why don't they just let the man be instead of laying him off now when everything's going so well???"

First, the scene displays how Ole criticizes his manager's decision to grant them new tools even though they do not need it. This conveys an impression to Svend, standing next to us, about Ole as a "decision-maker," namely that he lacks influence over his work and that his management is not listening to his needs. Second, Ole gives an impression of himself as an "individual": If he were in charge as a job consultant at the activation site, he would – against his managers' wishes – "blow up the budget" to help clients get a job. When Svend then says, "Why don't they just let the man be," it indicates that he sees Ole as an individual who, on the one hand, acts on behalf of the clients (by blowing up the budget) but is subject to his managements' arbitrary decisions on the other hand.

8.4. Client resistance

So far, I have shown how clients act compliantly: They make the job of the work supervisors as easy as possible by adjusting both their own and others' behavior. In this part of the chapter, I analyze how the clients also engage in forms of resistance. This resistance, however, is rarely targeted directly towards the work supervisors.

First, clients often criticize the general structures and organization of activation rather than the work supervisors themselves. This shows that clients' behavioral adaptations to bureaucratic decoupling are interaction-driven (Blumer 1969): Clients ease the work supervisors' bureaucratic challenges because they, over time, come to see the individual person behind the bureaucratic rope of the work supervisors. Yet, they still resist the structural and organizational aspects of activation, which they believe are beyond the work supervisors' control.

Second, some clients were, in fact, critical of the work supervisors and their decision-making. However, the analysis shows that their resistance rarely occurred face-to-face with the work supervisors but through "secondary adjustments" (E. Goffman 1961a). This indicates that clients, over time, come to believe that direct contestation of the work supervisors' authority is pointless. Yet, they still have a desire to prove – to themselves and others – that they can act autonomously (*feature 3*). Those clients who continuously contested the work supervisors' authority directly were excluded from the larger group of clients, as I analyzed in Chapter 6.

8.4.1. Resisting the organization of activation/embracing the work supervisors

In general, clients used various forms of what sociologists call "identity work" as a way of criticizing the general structures and organization of activation. This includes attempts to manage their appearance and ways of presenting themselves to prove to others that they have an identity independent of the activation scheme (Snow and Anderson 1987). For example, some clients engaged in "distancing" (1348) by loudly criticizing that they had to wear uniforms or wait for the work supervisors to allow them to leave. I also identified forms of "embracement" (1354) of their outside identity: Clients talked about their expensive clothing and their multiple job interviews, while others read Ulysses in the meeting room while waiting. Finally, others engaged in "fictive storytelling" (1358) by defining themselves as work supervisors or by denying that that they receive cash-assistance.

However, these forms of identity work were mainly a reaction to either the organization of the activation site (having to wear work clothes, perform manual work, or wait to be allow to leave) or the structure of cash-assistance (receiving low benefits, updating their job searches, or participating in meetings with caseworkers or job consultants). Parallel to these forms of resistance, clients embraced the work supervisors and defined themselves as part of their team.

In this section, I therefore analyze a particular example of how clients simultaneously dissociate themselves from the activation scheme in general, while they embrace being on a particular team, such as "Sebastian's team" (Work supervisor). I selected the example for two reasons. First, it displays behavior among a group of three people who are all particularly critical of the activation scheme. This is an ongoing subject in their conversation throughout the scene. They also have diverse institutional careers, and there is nothing to suggest that they would develop a special bond with one of the work supervisors. Simon is in his early thirties and is a graduate in computer science. Although he has been unemployed for 2.5 years (two years on unemployment benefits first and the remaining years on cash-assistance), he has work experience in his field and has a job interview the day after the scene. Bo is of similar age and has a similar educational background, but he has been struggling with unemployment since 2014. Oscar is in his forties. He just recently became unemployed and has previously worked as an unskilled bricklayer.

Second, the scene illustrate how clients' act upon their perceptions of the work supervisors. I interviewed both Bo and Simon a couple of days after the scene. In the interviews, they both express very positive views of the work su-

pervisors whom they characterize as "nice" and empathetic". The scene therefore shows how this leads to them to behave in ways that makes the work supervisors' job as easy as possible.

A day with Sebastian's team. We have to do a work assignment in another part of the city, so we drive for about 30 minutes in the truck. All three men have been working together for the past couple of weeks, so they know each other well. They have primarily received work instructions from Sebastian who values that clients do a "good job" – unlike Ole and Arne who prioritizes that clients "pass time."

As we are unable to find the exact destination, we arrive at one of the other activation sites in the same municipality. We all get out of the truck. Oscar walks determinately towards the entrance. "Let's see if there's a grown-up around here," he says. I observed how they said "is there a grown-up here" multiple times, and it appeared to indicate their indirect way of criticizing the lack of proper management of the activation site. However, the personnel at the activation site is unable to help us, so we get back into the truck, and after some time, we find the place where we have to work.

The assignment is to lay a path made of wood chips in a park. As they have done the same assignment before, they have developed a system: Two of us load two wheelbarrows with chips, and the other two unload the wheelbarrows to lay out the path. To do it as fast as possible, they run towards the path with the wheelbarrows. As we are talking, it is clear that they pride themselves in doing the work efficiently. They also tell me that when they have to work, they want to do it as efficiently as possible.

While we are working, I disclose my identity as a researcher. Simon then directly asks me, in a sarcastic tone of voice:

> *Field notes, 28.03.2019*
>
> #Simon: "Oh, so you're here to find out what's wrong with the municipality's project?" he says and laughs.
>
> #Me: "You can say that … At least, the way you experience it."
>
> #Simon: "Yeah okay, well, the only thing wrong with it is the way the whole thing's organized. I don't mind being here as such."

As the other two join the conversation, they also criticize the fact that they are unable to check online whether they have been registered in the morning. This generates uncertainty for them because it could potentially result in a financial penalty. Despite this, they do not criticize the work supervisors individually. They pride themselves on being, in Oscar's words, "Sebastian's team," which he says repeatedly during the day.

At 11:45 a.m., we are back at the meeting room. As we get out of the car, Oscar says proudly, "So, you got to see how a real team does things." Sebastian comes out, and we gather around the car. Sebastian praises our work and asks us to do one more work assignment: take trash to the recycling site.

We get back into the car. As we are leaving the activation site, we spot one of the men from the nine o'clock team. He is already dressed and about to leave the site even though it is before they are actually allowed to. In a frustrated tone of voice, Oscar says, "Why's he leaving??? I could also lie sick, but I don't want to! I would rather work since I'm supposed to be here anyway." We also encounter another group from the eight o'clock team. They are driving in one of the other trucks. Oscar comments again on their way of loading the truck: "Take a look at that truck bed. We pack it much better. Amateurs!" These statements indicate how they pride themselves on conducting the work properly and according the Sebastian's wishes.

On our way to the recycling site, Oscar continuously describes their team as the "Dream Team": "It was damn lucky you got a spot on the Dream Team, Lasse." However, Simon informs us that he has a job interview the day after. Oscar responds, "When you have such a good team like this with such good people, then it's just a shame that we have to part."

After we have unloaded the trash at the recycling site, Simon borrows a broom from the recycling site. He jumps onto the truck bed and starts sweeping it. I am watching along with Bo, who says in a tired tone of voice:

Field notes, 28.03.2019 (continued)

#Bo: "Do we have to do that? It's just going to get dirty again tomorrow."

#Simon: "Since you two [Bo and I] can't be bothered, then I'll show you how it's done."

#Oscar: "We're the only ones who bother to clean the vehicles properly"

In sum, the scene shows how they criticize the general organization of utility jobs activation. However, they never target this criticism at the work supervisors. They are not only compliant but also accommodating of the work supervisors' wishes and take a certain pride in doing the work properly. This shows more broadly that clients' general criticisms of receiving welfare can coexist with an attempt to reduce challenges for the work supervisors.

8.4.2. Contesting the work supervisors' decisions indirectly

Not all clients held favorable views of the work supervisors[111]. However, as I showed in chapter 6, those who directly and consistently challenged the work supervisors were either physically excluded from the larger group of clients or administratively re-categorized.[112]. Therefore, over time, the clients whom the work supervisors labeled as "heavy" or troublesome" contested and criticized the work supervisors and their decisions through more indirect ways.

The indirect ways that clients contested the work supervisors occurred mainly through what Erving Goffman defines as "secondary adjustments" – that is, "practices that do not directly challenge staff but allow inmates to obtain forbidden satisfactions or to obtain permitted ones by forbidden means" (E. Goffman 1961a, 54). Examples include inmates in prisons who hide their food to maintain the idea that they can eat when they wish to.

One of the clients who consistently used secondary adjustments was Lauritz (age 60s). He began his activation on 04.01.2019. Although he is long-term unemployed, he is not the type of person that one would expect to use secondary adjustments. He has a master's degree in media studies, and he has been working for many years as a musician and leader of cultural projects. However, his behavior at the site clearly shows an attempt to contest the work supervisors' decisions through indirect ways such as hiding bicycles and changing into his private clothes before being allowed to.

In the beginning of his activation, in January 2019, he criticized the work supervisors' authority directly by criticizing them for their way of managing the work assignments or refusing to wait for the work supervisors to allow him to change back into his own clothes. In late January 2019, he also asks me for help with filing a complaint against the work supervisors. He believes they are both driving illegally with clients in trucks, and he is critical of the fact that his commuting time to the activation site is not counted as "activation." He is very determinate, and he assures me that he will write the complaint.

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[111] However, this was a rather small share of the clients at the site. For example, only six clients described their relationship with the work supervisors in a negative way in the interviews.

[112] Utility jobs are targeted at the most resourceful groups of cash-assistance recipients (Ministry of Employment 2013). This means that if recipients are re-categorized and included in the "activity ready" group (in Danish, *aktivitetsparat*), they are no longer obliged to be activated through utility jobs but are included in other activation schemes within the cash-assistance scheme. For more information about the meaning of these different groups, see Nielsen (2015).

The next day, however, I ask him whether he has made any progress. The conversation with him shows resignation and a belief that complaints will damage his relationship with the work supervisors.

Field notes, 21.01.2019

#Lauritz: "Yeah, I did print out all those documents from the Ministry of Transport yesterday … but then I found out that we have some bicycles available and that if they can't drive us out there [to the park where clients are working], we have to bike out there instead, and we don't want that."

Shortly after this, he was excluded from the larger group of clients, and the work supervisors sent him down to work on the harbor by himself. From this point, he refrained from contesting the work supervisors' decisions face-to-face. For example, in March 2019, unlike in January 2019, he asks Sebastian very politely if he may leave:

Field notes 14.03.2019

#Lauritz: [to Sebastian] "May I go upstairs and change?"

Sebastian smiles.

#Sebastian: "Yes, you may, Lauritz. You can see the others have changed."

#Lauritz: "Okay … but can I leave afterwards?"

#Sebastian: "Yes, you may, Lauritz."

This shows that during face-to-face encounters with the work supervisors, Lauritz acts very compliantly. However, outside of this, he uses several secondary adjustments to indirectly contest their decisions.

First, he hides tools and a bicycle. In early March 2019, we have agreed to do an interview at the harbor. Before we go, he picks up his tools and his bicycle in one of the containers at the site. The container is filled with trash and old tools that no one uses anymore. Inside the container, he shows me some of the tools that he has hidden from the work supervisors:

Field notes, 01.03.2019

#Lauritz: "Ole [work supervisor] wants us to go down to the harbor and pick up [trash], right … But the other day, he had taken all the trash grabbers and taken them out to the field [where the other clients are working], so I couldn't do it. I mean … it's completely ridiculous when that's what we've been told to do, right … .

This shows that his motivation for hiding the tools and the bicycle is a way of contesting Ole's decisions. He could have easily approached Ole to discuss this, but instead, he chooses to hide them.

Two weeks later, he hides one of the municipal bicycles to prevent others from using it. At 08:50 a.m., I observe that Lauritz is already at the activation site 10 minutes before he has to register himself. I observe him biking on one of the municipal bikes. As he locks the bicycle, I ask him:

Field notes, 15.03.2019

#Me: "How come you're riding it already?"

#Lauritz: "I like riding this one best. I mean, there are three bikes in total, right, but this one is my favorite … and sometimes, someone else has taken it when I need to use it, so now I'm putting it here."

By talking about the bicycle as his "favorite," it shows how having a private bicycle has become a hidden pleasure that he carefully protects.

The other secondary adjustment he used was to change into his own clothes before being allowed to; however, he does so in a very different way than back in January 2019. In order to prevent the work supervisors from finding out about it, he puts on his work jacket while keeping his own shirt on underneath as well as his own jeans. In the following observation, Lauritz asks me in the locker room whether we have been allowed to leave, after which he discloses his strategy:

Field notes, 11.03.2019

#Lauritz: "Can we go?"

#Me: "Yeah, we can."

#Lauritz: "Okay, then I'll just change now … Usually, I tend to go upstairs [to the locker room] as soon as I get back here and change into my own clothes … BUT then I put my safety shoes on again once I have my regular pants on, and then I put my work jacket on over my sweater and go down to the meeting room. Then it looks like I'm still dressed when I'm sitting down there. I save four minutes on that," he says and laughs.

#Me: "Do you then go upstairs again when we're allowed to leave and put on your [private] shoes and jacket?"

#Lauritz: "Yeah, I do, but I do save four minutes on that. Four minutes might not be much, but you've got to take what you can get."

#Me: "Is that some kind of latent rebellion?" I ask and laugh a little.

#Lauritz: "Yeah, you've got to rebel when you can," he says, smiling.

The conversation shows that he has accepted that it is pointless to directly contest the work supervisors and their decision to allow clients to change into their own clothes. The resignation is clear when he says, "Yeah, you've got to

rebel when you can." The conversation also shows that he then finds loopholes and develops creative ways to preserve his autonomy.

I also identified secondary adjustments among other clients. These adjustments included changing into their work clothes after being registered. This enabled them to gain 5–10 minutes extra. Moreover, some also refused to work. This occurred only on days where clients were working in the park by themselves. Some of the clients would, therefore, either sit in the trucks all day or take long walks by themselves. I also observed that clients sometimes ridiculed the work supervisors by mocking them or parodying them as soon as they turned their backs on them.

However, some clients also used more violent ways of indirectly contesting the work supervisors' decisions. In the following scene, two clients act aggressively towards the work supervisors as the soon as the latter turn their backs on them. As the scene reveals, they have already been excluded from the larger group of clients as they are sent down to the harbor to work by themselves.

The work supervisors have decided to send two men, Martin and Edward, down to the harbor to pick up trash. As a reaction to this, the two clients both shake their heads and "lash out at" the work supervisors:

> *Field notes, 01.04.2019*
>
> Edward and Martin have been told that they have to go to the harbor and pick up trash. They are standing with a bag and a grabber in hand in the middle of the site. They both look displeased, and several times, I see them shake their heads while looking at Sebastian and Ole, who are standing 10 meters away […] When Sebastian walks past Martin and Edward, Edwards uses the grabber to snap after Sebastian and makes a face. Martin later says that they had a conflict because Ole would not let them hand out safety goggles. Allegedly, Ole got up close in Martin's face in a threatening manner:
>
> #Martin [to me]: "He can do that all he wants, I'm not moving. I'm just waiting for him to grab my arm, then he'll see!" […]

Again, we observe how clients do not voice their dissatisfaction with the work supervisors' decisions directly but act violently behind the backs of Sebastian and Ole. Yet, as mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, the work supervisors handled these outbursts by physically excluding the clients from the larger group of clients. After the scene, I head into the meeting room where Sebastian and Ole are:

Field notes, 01.04.2019 (continued)

#Ole: "We can take a walk down to the harbor and visit the guys [Martin and Edward] and diffuse the situation."

#Sebastian: "Yeah, I think we should do that."

This directly shows that clients who threaten the features of bureaucratic decoupling are excluded from the larger group of clients. Others who act violently at the site are not only excluded from the group but also refused admittance to the site. This happened to one of the men John[113] (age 50s) who, out of sheer desperation, threatened one of the caseworkers at the site because he felt that he did not receive enough help with writing his résumé. Afterwards, the work supervisors told him to pack up his things and leave the site immediately.

8.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analyzed the second process of bureaucratic decoupling: how clients' act upon their decoupled image of the work supervisors. The analysis shows that clients reduce those challenges, which they believe the work supervisors have no control over, namely orders from their management, the number of clients, and the number of available work assignments. I summarize the findings in table 8.1.

[113] For more background information on John, see section 6.5.2 and 6.5.3 in Chapter 6.

Table 8.1. Summary of findings for Chapter 8

Focus	Findings
Clients' reduction of the work supervisors' challenges	Clients reduce three challenges for the work supervisors: First, clients reduce the challenge of managing many clients at once. For example, clients avoid going into the staff room, give the work supervisors an extra hand, and teach other clients how to behave at the activation site. Second, clients reduce the challenge of finding enough work assignments. They do so by staying late in the park even though they are finished with their assignments so that the work supervisors do not have to find new assignments for them. They also teach others the norm of working inefficiently. Finally, clients reduce the challenges from upper management and the possibility that they check up on the activation site. Therefore, clients choose to stay longer in the park and take detours, even though they have finished their work assignments, in order to avoid being back at the meeting room too early.
Clients' resistance	Clients criticize the structural and organizational aspects of activation using various forms of identity work strategies. Yet, they still embrace the work supervisors and wish to relieve them of the bureaucratic challenges of their work. Those clients who are critical of the work supervisors challenge them mainly through secondary adjustments. These adjustments include examples such as hiding tools, refusing to work, whispering, and mocking or "lashing out at" the work supervisors behind their backs.

Based on this, I argue that this analysis has yielded two main insights about bureaucratic decoupling. First, clients' tendency to reduce these challenges are created in and through their face-to-face encounters with the work supervisors. The observations of Svend, Tonny, and William attest to this. It obvious that they view Ole as decoupled from his role as a bureaucratic decision-maker. This is reinforced through their interactions with him, upon which they choose to act directly. During their interactions with Ole, he presents himself as powerless in relation to his management. The clients' loyalty then grows stronger, and they act upon this by consistently taking detours in the park to avoid coming back to the site early. They also suggest barricading the activation site as a reaction to management's decision to terminate Ole's employment.

Not only do clients reduce the work supervisors' challenges from their management, they also reduce the challenge of handling many clients at once. Hanne's case, in particular, attests to this. Observations of her reveal that she

directly uses this as a justification of her decision to stay behind and clean after the other clients have been allowed to leave. This shows a unique loyalty to the work supervisors and an eagerness to make their work as easy as possible. Lastly, we also observe how clients are aware of the fact that there are not enough work assignments to fill a whole day of work. Clients then work inefficiently and impose a norm of doing so upon others.

However, this does not mean that all clients held favorable views of the work supervisors and attempted to reduce bureaucratic challenges for them. The analysis also shows clients still use secondary adjustments as a way of challenging the work supervisors and their decision-making. This shows that when clients attempt to retain their autonomy or resist the supervisors' decisions, they rarely do so during face-to-face encounters with the work supervisors.

Overall, this finding contributes to the street-level bureaucracy scholarship in two ways. The analysis adds strategies to an already limited catalogue of client strategies in street-level bureaucracies. Furthermore, this shows that clients not only develop strategies that enable them to achieve what is in their self-interest but that they also develop strategies that accommodate frontline workers and make their lives as bureaucrats as easy as possible. The implication, however, is that clients develop strategies that directly contradict the official political objective of utility jobs: "teaching clients the value of work." Taking multiple breaks or detours rather than working in order to accommodate the work supervisors does not teach them the value of work.

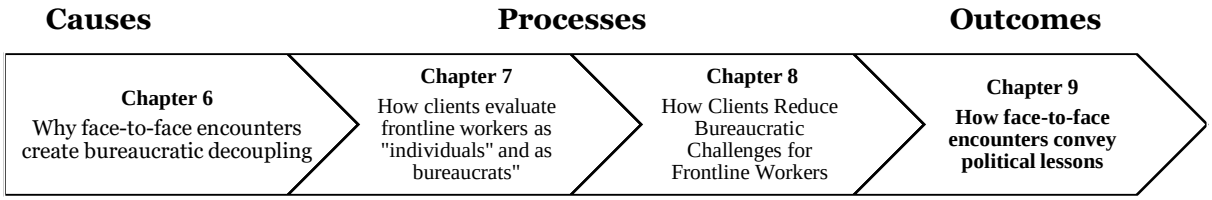
Chapter 9.
How Face-to-Face Encounters Convey Political Lessons

9.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze the broader political lessons of clients' face-to-face encounters in activation. The idea of political lessons is that clients' perceptions formed in mundane encounters at a welfare office "spill-over" into broader perceptions of bureaucratic organizations, such as the government. In particular, Soss (2005, 309) found that welfare recipients come to view government as "one big system" where "experiences at the welfare agency come to be understood as an instructive and representative example of their broader relationship with government as a whole".

Yet, contrary to what I originally expected from the political learning scholarship, I found that clients do not hold a "one-big system" perception. Through their encounters in activation, they infer the work supervisors workers are outside of this system, that is the cash-assistance scheme. This is what I define as bureaucratic decoupling, and this is the main political lesson of their encounters. In this chapter, I analyze the outcome of this.

Figure 9.1. Structure of the analytical chapters



The previous chapters show that clients generally do not hold the work supervisors accountable. Instead, they ascribe their decision-making to either factors relating to the cash-assistance scheme, such as the rules or the management, or other clients. When they talked about the cash-assistance scheme, in particular, they often described it in very diffuse and fragmented ways, emphasizing the influence of managers, rules, or the lack of resources.

Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to analyze how clients view this diffuse bureaucratic system. In other words, if the work supervisors' decisions are determined by factors in the cash-assistance scheme, how does this cash-assis-

tance scheme represent itself in the minds of the clients? Through an abductive logic of reasoning, I therefore decided to "write the system from the bottom-up." I analyze – from the clients' point of view – who is in this system, how are decisions made, and with what objective.

I find that clients view and describe the system in five ways. These views describe different aspects of the cash-assistance scheme: the policies, the organization, the actors, the rules, and the communication with the cash-assistance scheme. I provide an overview of the five views in table 9.1[114,115]:

[114] Although Soss focuses on clients' perceptions of government, there are some overlaps in terms of how the clients in his study described the government and how the clients in this study described the cash-assistance scheme. For example, he found that clients both described government as "capitalist" (Government exists to serve rich people and corporations) and as "complicated" (Government is too large and has too many complicated systems and laws) (Soss 1999a, 369). The view that government is capitalist is very similar to the view of the "system with a hidden objective", where some of the clients in this study described how the policies of cash-assistance are designed to save costs. Moreover, the view of government as "complicated" is similar to the view of the "confusing system", where the clients in this study described how the rules are complicated and subject to constant change.

[115] The aim of this table is not compare the percentage of clients expressing one view compared to clients expressing a different view. The aim is to show how there, across all interviewed clients, is a tendency to express fragmented and diffuse views of the cash-assistance scheme.

Table 9.1. Overview of the clients' views of the cash-assistance scheme

Views	Description	Aspects of the system	Examples	No. of cases	No. of ref.
A system with a hidden objective	A perception of the cash-assistance scheme as having a hidden and undisclosed objective, for example creating employment for the frontline workers	The *policies* of the cash-assistance scheme	"That the whole thing is a conscious strategy. It's a plan. In reality, there are no ambitions to get the unemployed back to work. Because this provides employment for those in the system." (Johannes, age 40s)	26	111
A top-down system	A perception of the cash-assistance in which frontline workers' decisions are determined by their management or a higher level authority	The *organization* of the cash-assistance scheme	"I think they [the work supervisors] are VERY restricted. Um … by the people upstairs, someone further up, well, by their bosses. I can't say exactly. I've never met their bosses, you know…" (Tinna, age 50s)	26	82
A mechanical system	A perception of the cash-assistance in which mechanical actors such as computers or telephones make the decisions rather than human frontline workers	The *actors* in the cash-assistance scheme	"Now, the caseworkers don't have to make decisions regarding sanctions against clients themselves […] And so there's a computer at the other end saying 'BING' at the municipality's sanctions unit, 'Edward hasn't been checked off. Take a look at that.'" (Edward, age 50s)	22	48
A confusing system	A perception of the cash-assistance as confusing because the rules are complex or enforced differently across frontline workers	The *rules* of the cash-assistance scheme	"Well, I feel I can't navigate in this system AT ALL because it completely depends on the people you come across. Um … I can't figure out these laws or clauses either … Neither can they." (Lisbeth, age 50s, follow-up interview)	22	53

A sluggish system	A perception of the cash-assistance scheme as sluggish because communication with frontline workers is slow or ineffective	The *communication* with the cash-assistance scheme	#I: "Would you consider filing a complaint if you feel unfairly treated?" #R: [...] it would have to be really bad, you know, because I have this impression that ... in this system, there's ... there's a lot of heel dragging, you know? And I could imagine that a complaint like that would take incredibly long to be processed. (Randi, age 30s)	29	74

I argue that these views are created because clients' encounters in different venues of the cash-assistance scheme clash and contradict. When clients encounter caseworkers or job consultants at the activation site, the job center, or the social benefit office (see chapter 2), they are constantly reminded that they should fulfill their obligations. However, the work supervisors enforce the rules leniently and make them perform useless work assignments such as "sweeping puddles." This conveys an image of the policies of the cash-assistance scheme: The contrast erodes the official objectives of cash-assistance and paves the way for speculation about the hidden objectives, for instance creating employment for the frontline workers instead of the clients. Moreover, when clients encounter the work supervisors, the power asymmetry between them is blurred. The work supervisors simultaneously deflect responsibility upwards and inform them that someone "above them" determines their decisions. This conveys an image of the organization of the cash-assistance: that it is a top-down system where individual frontline workers are always subjected to the will of some higher-level authority.

More broadly, this shows the outcomes of the institutional order of face-to-face encounters in activation. As the institutional order operates independently from other venues of cash-assistance, this produces a very diffuse and fragmented view of how decisions are made, by whom, and with what purpose in the cash-assistance scheme.

9.2. Structure of the chapter and analytical strategy

As in Chapter 7, I base the analysis on an in-depth reading of the semi-structured interviews with the clients at the activation site. I combine these interviews with field observations to illustrate how face-to-face encounters in activation convey these views.

As I described in Chapter 7, I asked all clients to define their relationship with the work supervisors and the job consultants or the caseworkers. However, most of the clients quickly began talking about the challenges of their decision-making, which I analyzed in Chapter 7. Therefore, I asked them continuously to describe, "Why do you think that is?" Through this probe, they reflected upon their views of the cash-assistance scheme. I show this interview technique in table 9.2.

Table 9.2. Example of interview technique for exploring clients' views of the cash-assistance scheme

#I: "And can you generally try to explain your relationship partly with the work supervisors and partly with the job consultants or the ones on the other side of the wall?"
#R: "Well, I … there's not much of a relationship. I think you talk to different people all the time. […] I mean, when you meet people, they're really critical and criticize society and say, 'Well, the job center only exists to create jobs for those working at the job centers and ….' So, I'm inclined to say, 'yes' because it seems like- like there's an EXTREME amount of administrative work that's being done. […]"
#I: "Why do you think that is? That they just cover their backsides-" [interrupted]
#R: "Well, you can say that it's just a society under pressure […]"
#I: "And who do you think is pressuring them? I mean, where is this pressure coming from? […]"
#R: "Well, there's maybe … yeah, it's from above. It is. It must be political, right?"
(From an interview with Christopher, age 40s)

Through this interview question, he describes both the policies of cash-assistance ("the job center only exists to create jobs for those working at the job centers") and the organizational structure of cash-assistance ("it's from above"). Moreover, many of the clients described situations where they had to complain. When I asked about these cases specifically, they talked about the decision-making process in the cash-assistance scheme. Finally, I asked the clients about their perceptions of the rules, namely whether they had an overview of the rules and understood them.

I coded the interviews through a flexible coding strategy (Deterding and Waters 2018) as described in Chapter 5. For example, the majority of the clients consistently deflected responsibility away from the work supervisors or described the challenges of the supervisors' work. Therefore, I was interested in the question of who then was responsible for their decisions, how the clients described this decision-making process, and for what purpose. I sorted all text related to this into a broad index code titled "clients' perception of the nature of decision-making in the cash-assistance scheme."

Afterwards, I did a round of analytical coding. I re-read all text in the index code while I reported my theoretical reflections in analytical memos. I discovered that when the clients talked about different aspects of the cash-assistance scheme, they described these aspects in very similar ways, for example as sluggish or as mechanical. I then systematized and categorized these descriptions into the five broad views of cash-assistance, as detailed in table 9.1.

9.3. A system with a hidden objective

The official stated objective of cash-assistance is to help recipients become self-supporting (The Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment 2016). Utility jobs contribute to this aim by teaching clients to "be part of a work community"(Ministry of Employment 2013, 10). In these work communities, they perform "useful" work assignments for the local community, such as gardening. Through utility jobs, clients therefore make themselves "useful" to society while simultaneously preparing themselves for the labor market[116].

However, when the clients discussed the policies of cash-assistance, they described how it contained several "hidden objectives." First, in the narrowest sense, the clients emphasized that the aim of cash-assistance was to create employment for the frontline workers rather than for the clients. Second, in the broadest sense, the clients emphasized how the cash-assistance serves political, economic, or punitive objectives, none of which helped clients become self-supporting.

Two sets of experiences create this view. First, the work supervisors actively support the clients' views of hidden objectives in the cash-assistance scheme. Second, the interplay and contradiction of clients' different experiences with cash-assistance creates this view. On the one hand, clients experience a lenient enforcement of the rules at the activation site. On the other hand, they experience a rigid and strict enforcement of the rules at other venues of cash-assistance. These contradicting experiences appear to erode the official purpose of cash-assistance and pave the way for a speculation into the more hidden aspects of assistance.

9.3.1. Hidden objectives created at the activation site

First, the work supervisors directly supported this view of a hidden objective in the cash-assistance scheme. For example, while we were out working in the park, Sascha (age 50s) engages in conversation with Arne (a work supervisor). Sascha is a former real estate agent whom I interviewed twice at the activation site, in December 2018 and then in December 2019. She finished her activation in December 2018 and then came back to the activation site in September 2019, which indicates, although she does not admit this in the interviews, that she struggles with long-term unemployment. In her conversation with Arne, she explains that politicians might as well just close the job centers because they do not bring clients closer to the labor market. Arne then responds:

[116] See also Chapter 2.

Field note, 02.12.2019

> #Arne: "But sometimes, I agree with politicians saying that you should shut this [the utility jobs scheme] down, do something else, right, do it in another way now that this has been done for so many years. It's given the jobs people want, so there are upturns and downturns, and now, we're in a good period […] But really, a lot of people are employed and few are out of work. But it's always been like that. Everyone gets employed, and there's got to be that 5 percent or something, right? So it works, right? This thing that there's no work, it's not that there's no work; it's just how it is. Some people just can't get employed."

Arne agrees that the utility jobs scheme does actually not bring clients closer to employment. He also argues that society is somehow dependent upon maintaining a certain percentage of people in unemployment ("there's got to be that 5 percent or something, right? So it works, right?").

Second, the interplay between clients' experiences in different venues of cash-assistance creates this view of a hidden objective with cash-assistance. In particular, the clients emphasized two contrasting realities: (1) the obligations of receiving assistance vs. the lack useful work assignments at the activation site, (2) and the lenient enforcement of the rules at the activation site vs. the strict enforcement of rules in other venues of cash-assistance.

Johannes (age 40s) emphasized that he constantly had to show that he is actively applying for jobs. For instance, when he phones the social benefit office to call in sick, he experienced the following: "And you can almost hear the [interrogation] lamp being turned on and pointed right in your face. 'All right, you're sick. How are you sick?'" Yet, despite the obligation to show that he is actively applying for jobs, he find himself conducting rather useless assignments at the activation site, such as "sweeping puddles":

> You know, I'm dead serious, there was one of the unemployed here who was tasked with emptying those potholes so that the water could, maybe, be drained away to another place or something. That is such a lack of insight and – what's it called – and activity. I mean, that's completely … I'm serious. That's the front page of a tabloid. There's no way in hell he's getting any closer to the job market doing that. Standing there and sweeping puddles.

The work supervisors' very lenient enforcement of the rules at the activation site compared to the very rigid enforcement at other venues of cash-assistance also contradicted the official objective of obligations. As Simon (age 30s) describes:

> The thing with the municipality on paper and the municipality in reality is that they are two very different things. Because the municipality on paper is, like, super hardcore. 'Argh, okay, well, you've just moved.' I just moved. 'Well, then,

> we'll lower your benefits by 200 kroner.' I mean, like … I think I've had five official letters because I've moved in with my partner, and so I'm getting a tiny bit less in benefits. I mean, that's like … well … it's practically nothing. And they've spent so much energy on it. There are so many official documents that you have to confirm that you've received and … then there's a consultation: 'You can write and answer if you want to complain within 14 days' and blah, blah, blah. A whole lot of that … legal hullabaloo. Then you come out here [at the activation site], and it's like 'Can I stay home tomorrow because I have to do something?' [and the work supervisors reply] 'Yeah, yeah.' You know? They don't care at all, but if you miss a day, then you get a 500 kroner fine and all these angry letters, right?

On the one hand, he has to submit a series of documents about his change of address. The social benefit office then uses loads of time to process these documents only to change his benefits by a mere 200 kroner. On the other hand, he describes the very lenient enforcement of the rules at the activation site. He does not have to submit any documents, and the work supervisors trust him if he is absent from the activation site. This contrast erodes the official objective of the obligations of cash-assistance and paves the way for speculation about the hidden objectives of cash-assistance as I will show below.

9.3.2. Cash-assistance creates employment for frontline workers at the expense of clients

Based on these contrasting and contradictory experiences with cash-assistance, the clients inferred that the objective of the policy of cash-assistance was to create employment for the frontline workers at the expense of of the clients. For Johannes (age 40s), the experience of complying with multiple obligations and then seeing one of the other clients, "sweeping puddles," conveyed the lesson: "That the whole thing is a conscious strategy. It's a plan. In reality, there are no ambitions to get the unemployed back to work. Because this provides employment for those in the system."

Moreover, the general strictness of the rules in the cash-assistance scheme vs. the lenient approach to the rules at the activation site also created the view that the cash-assistance scheme generates employment for the frontline workers. Considering all the resources the social benefit office use to make a 200 kroner adjustment to his benefits, Simon questions whether utility jobs contribute to the aim of finding employment for clients: "They all [the employees at the social benefit office] need to get paid. And if they don't really do anything of value in getting people back to work, then it's … Well, why are they there then?"

Others like Christopher (age 40s) inferred that the amount of rules and administrative tasks in the cash-assistance is only aimed at creating employment for the frontline workers:

> well, my impression is – and this going to be viewed a bit from the outside – but it's … I mean, when you meet people, they're really critical and criticize society and say, 'Well, the job center only exists to create jobs for those working at the job centers and …' So, I'm inclined to say, 'yes' because it seems like – like there's an EXTREME amount of administrative work that's being done.

Thus, the contrasting realities at different levels of cash-assistance – the activation site vs. the job center and the social benefit office – pave the way for speculation about the hidden and undisclosed objectives of cash-assistance.

9.3.3. The broader objective with cash-assistance

In the broader sense, the majority of the clients did not believe that the objective of cash-assistance was to help clients become self-supporting and find a job. Clients emphasized that the cash-assistance scheme served a political purpose (getting politicians re-elected), an economic purpose (saving costs by cutting their benefits), or had a punitive objective (punishing the unemployed for their laziness and inability to find a job). For instance, Tanja (age 40s, follow-up interview) argues that cash-assistance serves a political strategy of keeping people unemployed:

> #I: "There are so many rules for cash-assistance, and many people are sanctioned against all the time. Why do you think the system looks like this?"
>
> #R: "Well, it's because they can. Society wouldn't really work if there wasn't anyone who was unemployed … and it would affect all sorts of people in the trade unions … and pay and so on."
>
> #I: "So, it's necessary to have some people on cash-assistance?"
>
> #R: "Yeah … I think so […]"
>
> #I: "What are you thinking when you say 'they can'?"
>
> #R: "Well, they have to find something to do."
>
> #I: "The politicians?"
>
> #R: "Yeah…"

Tanja explains that society is, in fact, dependent upon having a certain share of unemployed, as Arne also explained in his conversation with Sascha. The politicians simply have the power to keep clients in unemployment ("it's be-

cause they can"). If that were to change, it would affect peoples' (i.e. the frontline workers, the trade unions, and the politicians) salaries. In other words, this reflects a public choice perspective: Frontline workers' and politicians are utility maximizers who regulate the number of unemployed to maintain their own employment.

In sum, clients' face-to-face encounters in activation compared to their encounters in other venues of cash-assistance create a view where the policies of cash-assistance are not aimed at creating self-supporting members of the labor market. Instead, this policy contains a hidden objective: to keep them unemployed in order to create and maintain work for the frontline workers. What is remarkable, however, is that clients often use administrative procedures, which officially improve their rights (e.g. consultation procedures) as evidence of this.

9.4. A top-down system

When the clients talked about the work supervisors, they generally deflected responsibility upwards towards their management. However, through this, they also described the organizational structure of cash-assistance: A top-down structure where "someone" from "above" influenced – if not, determined – the work supervisors' decisions. Yet, very few clients were able to identify who that was other than something or someone "from above."

First, I find that the work supervisors create this top-down view through both their inconsistent decisions and use of blame avoidance. This teaches clients that they are dealing with a cash-assistance scheme where frontline workers are always subject to the will of some diffuse higher authority. Second, many of the interviews have already experienced a lack of agency among frontline workers in other venues of cash-assistance, for example in their meetings with caseworkers at the job centre or the activation site. The work supervisors' consistent deflection of responsibility upwards therefore confirms and reinforces an already established view of cash-assistance as a top-down organization.

9.4.1. The work supervisors create a top-down organizational structure

In Chapter 6 and in Paper A, I showed that the work supervisors often make clients wait. These decisions are based almost solely on their own will, to which the large day-to-day variations in the length of waiting time attest. Yet, when I interviewed Franz (age 50s), he argued that waiting time was inevitable because of issues with coordination at the top-level management in the utility jobs scheme:

#I: “So, this thing where you have to wait so much and waste time in general, it’s actually impossible to change it?”

#R: “It’s impossible to change since, uh … this whole utility activation system is as it is because it’s coming from higher up […]”

#I: “So you’re saying that the work supervisors are actually limited by the system?”

“Well, yeah, they [work supervisors] are limited … by the system. Definitely. But that’s always how it is when you create a system that doesn’t work, and there’s no…no one from … a bit higher up who can look down and say, ‘Okay, this isn’t running how it’s supposed to.’ And then change it from the top.”

Through the work supervisors’ decisions about waiting time, he infers a very top-down view of the organizational structure of the cash-assistance scheme. He has to wait because of coordination issues at the top-level management who “look down upon” the work supervisors and control their decisions. Yet, he is unable to dissect the people who are in power. The work supervisors are just subject to orders “from higher up.”

Second, as the work supervisors often deflect responsibility upwards, they transpose their decision-making power onto some diffuse power “above them.” In an interview with Tinna (age 50s), she has incorporated this into her perception of the organizational structure of the cash-assistance:

#R: “I think they [the work supervisors] are VERY restricted. Um … by the people upstairs, someone further up, well, by their bosses. I can’t say exactly. I’ve never met their bosses, you know…”

#I: “Who do you think is pressuring them from above?”

#R: [interrupts me] “Yeah, I have no idea. None other than it seems like the municipality to me, but it doesn’t necessarily have to be them. I don’t know their structure, you know? […] Well, I cannot AT ALL picture our work supervisors’ management. NOT AT ALL! I have an impression … My impression is that there are a lot of layers … and, um…I might be biased … but that’s my impression, that there are a bunch of managers above on different levels, and THEN somewhere someone makes a decision … about something.”

According to Tinna, the work supervisors are watched and controlled by “by the people upstairs, someone further up, well, by their bosses.” However, the details of this organizational structure are blurred: “Well, I cannot AT ALL picture our work supervisors’ management.”

9.4.2. Other venues of cash-assistance reinforce a top-down view

The top-down image of the cash-assistance structure taps directly into clients' experiences in other venues of cash-assistance. Multiple clients describe that when they deal with frontline workers at the job center, the social benefit office, or with the caseworkers or job consultants at the activation site, their actions are influenced by something from "above."[117] This is particularly evident in the interview with Ilse (age 30s):

> #R: "Yeah, it's my last day [at the activation site]. It's really nice, not because I hate being out here – the people [the work supervisors] are really very nice and welcoming and understanding, actually – but the reason I don't LIKE being here is because I think it's a waste of my time since I have to do things that have no relevance to what I work with. But that's the way the system is, and that's…how it's supposed to be, and yeah, there's nothing you can do about it […]"
>
> #I: "Can you try to elaborate on the part about 'that's the way the system is and there's nothing you can do about it'?"
>
> #R: "[…] I asked them [the caseworkers at the job center] whether there was a way that I could do something else than, um, be in the utility activation scheme […] and one of the caseworkers just said that, um, that, um … 'I don't think the municipality cares whether it's relevant or not. Uh, it's more about getting you started; you have to do something useful for the money you get.'"

Before being sent to the utility activation, Ilse expresses a wish to her caseworker at the job center to participate in other forms of activation that are more relevant to her academic background. However, the caseworker responds, "I don't think the municipality cares whether it's relevant or not." This indicates that the caseworker conveys an image of a top-down system where someone higher up in the municipality influences their decisions.

In sum, as the work supervisors manage clients' lives inconsistently while transposing their power onto something "above" them, they create a very top-down view of the organizational structure of the cash-assistance scheme. This taps directly into clients' experiences in other venues of cash-assistance, which reinforce the view of a "top-down" system.

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[117] See also Chapter 7, section 7.3.3, regarding clients' perceptions of the caseworkers' and the job consultants' decision-making. The argument here is not that clients also decouple caseworkers from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers, but that they are aware of the bureaucratic challenges that also influence their work.

9.5. A mechanical system

As I showed in Chapter 7, the clients emphasized the individual qualities of the work supervisors. They described them as "nice," "fun," and "understanding." Yet, when the clients described frontline workers in other venues of cash-assistance, they used very mechanical terms. They emphasized how mechanical entities, such as computers, conducted their job assignments. For many of the clients, these "computers" appeared to be the main actors in the cash-assistance scheme who – rather than the frontline workers themselves – made decisions about clients' lives.

Two experiences form this mechanical view of the actors in the cash-assistance scheme. First, as the work supervisors deflect responsibility upwards towards the "system," they also reinforce a perception that mechanical actors are managing their decisions (*feature 2 & 3*). Second, through their everyday encounters with clients, the work supervisors sympathize with clients and involve them in their own private lives (*feature 1*). This conveys a very "human" impression of themselves while it makes other actors in the cash-assistance scheme appear even more mechanical and computerized.

9.5.1 The "human" nature of the work supervisors

First, the work supervisors reinforce a view in which computers are the main actors in the cash-assistance scheme. For example, in March 2019, we are discussing the amount of new clients arriving each week. Thirty-two new clients were supposed to come, but only seventeen clients arrived. In the meeting room, Monica asks Sebastian (work supervisor) whether it is due to the level of unemployment in general. Sebastian then invokes a mechanical view of actors within the cash-assistance scheme: "robot-like" beings in the cash-assistance randomly pressing buttons on a computer, which determines the amount of clients arriving each weak.

> *Field notes 05.03.2019*
>
> "No, that's not why. People are just being moved around at the job center right now because we have to move everything over to another site, right … And so someone is sitting somewhere pressing buttons, and so some people get sent out here."

Clients also experienced being called in to several meetings on the same day at the same time and that their cash-assistance is suddenly stopped for no particular reason. This creates the idea that computers manage their cash-assistance benefits rather than frontline workers themselves. For example, I observed a meeting between Uffe (work supervisor/job consultant) and a man in

his forties. The man explains that within the last two days, he has received four invitations to a meeting with a job consultant:

> *Field notes, 28.03.2019*
>
> #Man: "Yeah, I would rather like to know why I've received four invitations to meetings?"
>
> The man once again shows the four invitations on his phone. Uffe looks through his cases and turns the computer towards me. On the screen, I can see that the man has received two invitations to a meeting on the same day as well as an invitation for the day before and one for the day after. One of the meetings has even been scheduled to last for three hours, which never happens. The job consultants usually have a maximum of 30 minutes set aside for each meeting. In the invitations, it just says that the man has to show up at address X at a specific time but not whom he is supposed to speak with or where the meeting will take place. This is considering that there are approx. 1200 employees at that job center. Uffe scrolls down over the invitations to find out who has notified the client, but he is out of luck. Uffe keeps looking at the invitations but cannot explain to the man why he has been called in to the meetings.
>
> #Uffe: "Just ignore them."

The shows a Kafkaesque image of the cash-assistance scheme, which is difficult to ascribe to the agency of individual frontline workers. Instead, it appears as if computers are in charge: Due to program errors, these computers send out several invitations to meetings.

Second, the clients depicted the actors in other venues of cash-assistance in direct contrast to the work supervisors[118]. Svend (age 30s) contrasts his view of the work supervisors with a very "cold" cash-assistance scheme:

> Because out here, again, what's the difference? It's that I can speak to Ole [work supervisor]. I can see him in front of me. I can see how he expresses himself and … When you call in, it's just very cold […] Again, to save money, they've made this answering machine computer thing where you have three different sets of information you have to go through.

He experiences this "coldness" when he phones the social benefit office. Instead of reaching an actual human being, he only reaches a computer switchboard.

[118] See also section 7.4.1 in Chapter 7 regarding clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as individuals.

9.5.2. The mechanical nature of actors in other venues of cash-assistance

In contrast to the work supervisors, the clients described actors in other venues of cash-assistance as computer-like or robot-like beings. For example, Lisbeth (age 50s) labeled all frontline workers, except for the work supervisors, as "the cash-assistance people" while Pia (age 30s) described the caseworkers at the social benefit office as "municipality people."

Moreover, when they explained decision outcomes or invitations to meetings, they emphasized errors made by computers rather than by frontline workers. These computers operated independently of the frontline workers. In a follow-up interview, Peter (age 30s) describes, in a follow-up interview, how he is called in to a meeting at the job center: "The egg-timer goes off at the job center and they figure out they need to call me in to something." Monica (age 50s), in a follow up-interview, also emphasized that computers, rather than actual human beings, are calling her in to meetings: "Their IT system totally fucks up. It just sends out notifications at 3 o'clock at night that you have to blah, blah, blah."

Rasmus (age 20s), for example, in a follow-up interview, described how he received a financial penalty for not registering his job searches online. He describes that the computers made an error regarding his benefits. However, the caseworkers at the social benefit office were unable to do anything about this error. According to him, the computers in the cash-assistance scheme therefore appear to be the main actors, operating independently from the frontline workers.

> And then that error had just been passed on in the system because the others [caseworkers] can't confirm that they've made a mistake. It [computer system] doesn't know that they just – what do you call it … well, that they're registering it wrong. Apparently, the system was down those days too. So I think they had to find a new system.

In sum, as the work supervisors continuously deflect responsibility towards the system, they position themselves in contrast to mechanical actors in the cash-assistance scheme, such as computers or telephones. This is a particularly salient image for the clients. They regularly experience how their appointments are cancelled or their benefits stopped. This often appears to be the actions of computers rather than human beings.

9.6. A confusing system

When the clients talked about the rules of cash-assistance, they described a very confusing system. Most of the clients had a general overview of the rules.

Yet, they felt that caseworkers or job consultants enforced these rules very differently, which created confusion. Moreover, the work supervisors reinforced this confusion by enforcing the rules leniently and often in direct contrast to frontline workers in other venues of cash-assistance.

9.6.1. The confusing nature of the rules of cash-assistance

Some of the clients generally believed that the rules were very confusing because there were so many. As Johannes (age 40s) described: "They're insanely confusing. It's a lost cause, I mean. And then they also have all these weird little peculiar rules." Tonny (age 50s) described the Law of Active Social Policy as one of the most complicated laws: "The Law of Active Social Policy is about 3–4 meters long. It's this gargantuan … It's probably the most complex law we have."

Other described the rules as confusing because they seemed to change all the time. They described how every year, a new set of rules were added to the cash-assistance scheme. This created a lot of uncertainty, as Monica (age 50s) emphasizes in a follow-up interview. To her, the nature of the rules are completely dependent on the parties in office:

> I'm subject to rules and restrictions, and as I can see during the next 10 years, they can just [snaps her fingers] change depending on who's elected, and who gets the good ideas, and who has to work with which parties in Parliament, and so on.

The clients also describe how this confusion arises as the frontline workers in the job center or in the social benefit office enforce the rules very differently. Multiple clients describe how the caseworkers at the social benefit office, at one point, decide to stop clients' benefits because the clients have failed to comply with their obligations. However, later, the caseworker change their decisions and their enforcement of the rules. This was the case for Lisbeth (age 50s, follow-up interview):

> Well, I feel I can't navigate in this system AT ALL because it completely depends on the people you come across. Um … I can't figure out these laws or clauses either … Neither can they. When I say, for example, 'You've given me two weeks less [in her cash-assistance benefit],' it's because my paycheck was delayed at the job I had for two months. 'Well, that … that was what I got at the end of the month, and then it was included in the calculations of my cash-assistance.'[119] So

[119] Lisbeth explains that the caseworkers at the social benefit office have decided to lower her benefit because they believe that Lisbeth has performed paid work the first 14 days in the same month as she has received cash-assistance. However, Lisbeth

> I say, 'Well, that can't be right. Now I don't have any money.' And she [the caseworker] just rejected that. But then suddenly … in December … I got those 14 days … without any comment or anything, just with some extra amount or delayed amount or whatever they called it. So, well, that says something.

First, she argues that the rules of cash-assistance are generally very confusing. Second, she argues that the caseworkers, at the social benefit office, themselves also find these rules confusing, which makes them enforce the rules very inconsistently. She describes how they reduced her benefits one month. Lisbeth tries to argue with them and point out that they have made a mistake. However, the caseworkers from the social benefit office disregard her complaints. Then all of a sudden, they side with Lisbeth and decide to refund the reduced benefits without further explanation.

9.6.2. The work supervisors reinforce confusion

First, the contrast between the lenient enforcement of the rules at the activation site and the rigid enforcement of the rules in other venues of cash-assistance create an image of a very confusing system. This is particularly the case for Morten (age 30s):

> I have no overview of this system. […] I mean, that thing that there's always someone [the work supervisors] sitting behind some computers [at the activation site], and you don't really know what's going on and how the system is. And you can't check up on it. It's annoying. And it's also … well, I think the work supervisors here have so much to deal with that they don't always- well, sometimes I've experienced that I've said, 'I'll come [at the activation site] at this specific time.'[120] And I've said it several times, and they're like: 'But we won't see each other tomorrow. We need to register it.' Where they don't really have a handle on these things, and it's quite frustrating when the system is so hard and my experience with the social benefit office is so hard that, um … yeah, that I don't really know what's going on. And I don't really know what … I haven't really had the rules explained. When am I supposed to let them [the work supervisors] know I'm not coming? Is it at the end of the day before? Or when? Like, what do you need? When do you sit down and do these things?

As Morten encounters two virtually different bureaucratic realities, this creates a great degree of confusion regarding the rules of cash-assistance. The

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explains that this is because her paycheck was delayed and that she performed the paid work of 14 days in the previous month before she received her cash-assistance benefit.

[120] This is because he had a job interview. Therefore, he informs the work supervisors that he will arrive later at the activation site.

social benefit office demands that Morten registers his job searches and reports his absence from the activation site. At the activation site, the work supervisors are more or less indifferent regarding his attendance. Moreover, they have not made any clear guidelines for how the clients should report their attendance. This generates confusion, which is only compounded by the fact that Morten observes that the work supervisors are reporting things on the computers. However, he is unable to detect how it influences his benefits.

Simon (age 30s) describes a similar situation. He emphasizes how it is very confusing to register his attendance at the activation site. The work supervisors have written the rules on a yellow board in the meeting room. However, he does not trust this because the work supervisors generally enforce the rules in a very lenient way:

> #R: It's written on that board over there. But it's like … it's a hand-written board [in the meeting room]. It's written by people [the work supervisors] who don't necessarily, from a legal standpoint, know with one-hundred percent's certainty what they are talking about. I can't trust that. I need to trust what I can see in black and white, on the website, which is the official website, because I can't … I mean, I'd like to trust the people out here [the work supervisors], but I don't dare because at the end of the day, it's not them … their approach or opinions … or what they say that matter at all. It's only what's specified by the system […]
>
> #I: Even though one can technically say that they [the work supervisors] are the ones who manage the rules out here?
>
> #R: Well, it's … I don't think they do. I mean, they also do things they're not supposed to. I mean … it's not that I want to throw anyone under the bus right now, but I know that a lot goes on out here that I'm completely sure they're not allowed to do.

In sum, the clients describe how there are loads of complicated rules. Yet, what creates confusion is the contrast in the enforcement of rules across the different venues of cash-assistance. This means that clients are unable to figure out which rules count, when, and where.

9.7. A sluggish system

When the clients talked about their communication with frontline workers in the cash-assistance scheme, they described a very "sluggish" system. When they phoned the job center, they waited for hours before reaching a frontline worker, and if they wrote a complaint, it took months before they got a response.

This perception is created by the contrast between clients' communication with the work supervisors and their communication with the frontline workers

in other venues of the cash-assistance scheme. At the activation site, clients encounter the work supervisors face-to-face who respond immediately to their requests. By contrast, clients often encounter frontline workers at the social benefit office or at the job center over the phone or by e-mail. This makes the communication appear particularly slow and makes the cash-assistance scheme appear as a very sluggish system.

9.7.1. Communication with frontline workers at the job center or social benefit office

First, the clients described the difficulty of actually reaching the right frontline worker. When they had to call in sick, they were only able to call in between 9–10 a.m. As many clients were calling in at the same time, they had to wait a long time. Many clients therefore described this communication as very "heavy" or as "flogging a dead horse."

The clients also described the system as sluggish when they elaborated on their attempts or thoughts about writing a complaint. When Randi (age 30s) reflected upon the possibility of complaining, she describes how she is very hesitant to write a complaint because the processing time is so slow.

> it would have to be really bad, you know, because I have this impression that … in this system, there's … there's a lot of heel dragging, you know? And I could imagine that a complaint like that would take incredibly long to be processed. Um … and you'd also have to man up to do it.

Others were reluctant to complain because they then had to "go through the system," as Rasmus (age 20s) explained in a follow-up interview:

> #R: "If you have to go through the system too, that's also kind of…"
>
> #I: "Yeah, can you try to like elaborate?
>
> #R: "Yeah, if you complain, you have to, you know? I'm not sure how it works. You're supposed to apply something, write something, or call in, and you also have to figure out which it is."

In his view, "going through the system" means that he has to call or write to the social benefit office. This is particularly time consuming and complicated, which discourages him from complaining. Finally, Johannes (age 40s) described the sluggish nature of the cash-assistance scheme by characterizing it as "a system within a system within a system":

> Or when I call in, you know? 'You're number 1019,' right? Uh … so. And then because it starts as a system, you build a system within the system. It's like this box, you know? You open it, and there's a box, and the box within keeps getting

> smaller and smaller and smaller. And you have – what do you call it … In reality, it's like building a … like Christiansborg [the Danish parliament]. I mean, it's built on top of an old palace, right? So you can tear Christiansborg down and build a new one on top of Christiansborg. But there are remnants left behind all the time. And that's what this is like too.

Johannes uses the metaphor "a system within a system" to describe the formalization of frontline workers' communication with clients. As new formulas and new forms of documents are continuously introduced, this prevents the frontline workers from responding to clients' needs.

9.7.2. Communication with the work supervisors

I find that the clients' very contrasting form of communication with the work supervisors reinforced their sluggish view of the cash-assistance. Even though the clients often had to wait or perform work assignments in an inefficient way, they appreciated their everyday, face-to-face interaction with the work supervisors. In this interaction, the work supervisors appeared more unconstrained by formulas and administrative procedures, as I also showed in Chapter 6. The work supervisors were, therefore, able to actually listen to and respond to clients.

Svend directly emphasized this contrast in communication: "I think they [the work supervisors] are way better out here [the activation site] than when you … well, that whole circus of calling in and getting ahold of someone in there [the social benefit office]." He also described how as soon as he tries to call frontline workers in the social benefit office office, then "all service disappears. All humanity. Understanding." Nicklas (age 30s) also described how he had a meeting with one of the work supervisors and a job consultant at the activation site regarding an internship. Based on the meeting, he felt that "things were set in motion right away." However, he contrasts this with his communication with frontline workers in other venues of cash-assistance where such things progress much slower.

In sum, clients characterize the communication in the cash-assistance scheme as very slow and sluggish. They experience having to wait in phone queues or never getting a response when they complain. The work supervisors, however, offer a contrasting form of communication: Their face-to-face interaction with clients appears to be more unconstrained by rules and administrative procedures. Moreover, communicating with the work supervisors also appears to be less sluggish because – in contrast to other venues of cash-assistance – they listen and respond to clients' needs immediately.

9.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analyzed the outcomes of clients' face-to-face encounters in activation. These encounters convey a political lesson: that the work supervisors are outside and bureaucratically decoupled from the cash-assistance scheme. The aim of this chapter was therefore to analyze how clients view the cash-assistance scheme.

I systematized and categorized their perceptions and found five views of the cash-assistance scheme. These views describe clients' perceptions of different aspects of the cash-assistance scheme: the policy, the organization, the actors, the rules, and the communication.

Overall, these five views show clients' perceptions of who makes decisions, how, and with what objective in the cash-assistance scheme. Viewed from the bottom-up, mechanical actors such as computers make the primary decisions independently of – and sometimes even replacing – actual "human" frontline workers. These decisions are planned by a management situated "above" clients' and frontline workers, which imposes complicated rules and communication channels. Finally, the objective of this is not to create employment for clients; the policies of cash-assistance seek to keep clients in unemployment. This creates employment for frontline workers, and it enables politicians to use the cash-assistance scheme as a disciplinary tool to get re-elected.

Table 9.3. Summary of findings for chapter 9

Views	Findings
A system with hidden objectives	The policy of cash-assistance contains a number of hidden objectives, such as keeping people in unemployment to create employment for frontline workers and as a way for politicians to get re-elected. The work supervisors actively create this view as they delegitimize the usefulness of utility jobs in their face-to-face encounters with clients. Simultaneously, they enforce the rules in direct opposition to the enforcement of rules in other venues of cash-assistance. This erodes the official objective of the policy of cash-assistance and paves the way for speculation into the policy's hidden objectives.
A top-down system	Cash-assistance relies on a top-down organizational structure: A diffuse power from above always determines or heavily influences frontline workers' decisions. The work supervisors convey this view as they transpose their powers onto some diffuse bureaucratic entity that controls their decisions. This reinforces clients' experiences in other venues of cash-assistance where they learn that frontline workers have limited decision-making power.
A mechanical system	Mechanical actors make decisions in the cash-assistance scheme. The work supervisors convey this view as they present themselves as very "human." Simultaneously, they deflect blame onto a number of mechanical factors such as computers. This reinforces and confirms clients' experiences in other venues of cash-assistance where mechanical actors such as "egg-timers" make changes to their benefits.
A confusing system	Clients think of the rules as complicated and often changing. Moreover, as the frontline workers, in other venues of the cash-assistance scheme, enforce the rules differently and inconsistently, this creates further confusion. The work supervisors reinforce this confusion by enforcing the rules leniently at the activation site. This creates a direct contrast to the enforcement of rules in other venues of cash-assistance.
A sluggish system	Communication in the cash-assistance is sluggish. Clients have to wait hours to get in contact with frontline workers at the job center or the social benefit office. When they complain, months go by before they receive an answer. The work supervisors reinforce this sluggish view of the system by offering a contrasting form of communication. Clients encounter them face-to-face during which the work supervisors can provide an immediate response to their problems or needs.

Chapter 10.
Contributions and Scope of Findings

10.1. Introduction

This dissertation sheds light on how clients experience their face-to-face encounters with frontline workers and how these encounters convey broader political lessons. This dissertation shows that bureaucratic decoupling is a defining aspect of clients' experiences of their encounters with frontline workers. These encounters lead them to decouple frontline workers from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers. The political lesson of this is that frontline workers are not the face of the policies of street-level organizations: in clients' view, they are situated and placed outside these organizations.

Why does bureaucratic decoupling occur? Investigating this through extensive ethnographic data of clients at an activation site, I find that when clients and frontline workers encounter each other face-to-face for a long period, frontline workers are able to blur the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients. Simultaneously, frontline workers often deflect responsibility away from their own decisions onto something beyond their individual control. Clients therefore come to believe that frontline workers face a number of challenges that determine their decisions. In consequence, clients think of them as individuals decoupled from their official role as decision-makers and representatives of a bureaucratic organization. This contests some of the standard assumptions in street-level bureaucracy research, namely that clients view frontline workers' decisions as the materialization of public policy (Lipsky 1980). Rather, at this dissertation shows, from the clients' point of view, public policy determines frontline workers' decisions.

In the following, I discuss both the contributions and the scope of the argument. I argue that theorizing face-to-face encounters enables a further understanding of three factors:

1. How clients perceive frontline workers
2. The strategies that clients use in their encounters with frontline workers
3. How they infer broader political lessons from these encounters.

After this, I contemplate the scope of the argument and conjecture the extent to which scholars will find bureaucratic decoupling in other bureaucratic organizations.

10.2. Contributions: The value of theorizing face-to-face encounters

This dissertation explains bureaucratic decoupling by theorizing face-to-face encounters between clients and frontline workers in street-level bureaucratic organizations. In contrast to existing studies, I argue that clients' ways of perceiving and acting towards frontline workers cannot be reduced to power asymmetries or the design of policies (see also Chapter 3).

I theorize that an institutional order governs face-to-face encounters between clients and frontline workers (see Chapter 4). In particular, four features of the institutional order shape how clients and frontline workers interact. These features are: (1) a blurred power asymmetry, (2) deep discretion exercised in mundane decisions, (3) the presence of a public, and (4) time. Together, these four features enable frontline workers to present themselves as individuals while deflecting responsibility away from their decisions onto factors beyond their control. This makes clients perceive frontline workers as individuals decoupled from their role as decision-makers and representatives of a public policy. In particular, theorizing face-to-face encounters enables scholars to advance new knowledge about clients in street-level bureaucracies in three ways, as I will explain in the follow section.

10.2.1. Clients' perceptions of frontline workers

Studying clients' perceptions of frontline workers, scholars have found a so-called puzzle of client evaluations (Soss 1999b; see also Barnes and Henly 2018). Clients evaluate frontline workers positively and bureaucratic organizations negatively. For example, Soss found that when clients on social assistance talked about the welfare agency, they described how they felt degraded and humiliated. Yet, when they evaluated individual frontline welfare workers, they described them as courteous and helpful (Soss 1999b, 84–85). Scholars, however, have been unable to explain this puzzle.

The problem is that Soss explains clients' perceptions based solely on the policy design of social assistance benefits. He therefore disregards the role of frontline workers and how they, during their encounters with clients, reposition themselves in relation to the bureaucratic organization and reconstruct the design of policies. Yet, by looking at the nature of the face-to-face encounter, it is possible to explain this puzzle. The work supervisors are able to blur the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients (*feature 1*). This makes clients perceive them positively. Simultaneously, the work supervisors transpose their powers onto some diffuse bureaucratic agency (*feature 2 & 3*). This leads clients to develop negative perceptions of the cash-assistance

scheme, characterizing it, for example, as a system with a "hidden objective" of keeping clients unemployed.

10.2.2. Positive sum client strategies

By theorizing face-to-face encounters, this dissertation has discovered new client strategies used in encounters with frontline workers in street-level bureaucratic organizations.

Existing studies find that client strategies are based on a *zero-sum logic*.[121] Clients are perceived to be "knaves" (Le Grand 1997) who act in ways that maximize their own utility while simultaneously reducing frontline workers' utility. For example, clients remain silent to hide welfare fraud (Dubois 2010, 157–60). This prevents clients from being penalized, but it also prevents frontline workers from doing their job. Clients often develop these strategies because they find themselves in an asymmetrical power relationship. Clients therefore use various formal and informal strategies to claim more power or autonomy in their relationship with frontline workers (see e.g. Dubois 2010; E. Goffman 1961a; Scott 1990; Sykes 1958).

By contrast, I find that clients' strategies are based on a *positive-sum logic*. For example, clients believe that the work supervisors' management is making regular checks to see if the work supervisors are making clients work until the official end of the workday. In consequence, clients avoid going back to the activation site even though they have finished their work assignments (see Chapter 8). If they go back to the activation site, it appears – from the management's point of view – that the work supervisors are not putting them to work. This strategy is based on a positive-sum logic. On the one hand, clients act in the interest of the work supervisors: If clients avoid going back to the activation site, the management will not give the work supervisors a reprimand. On the other hand, this makes the work supervisors act in the clients' interest: The work supervisors continue their lenient enforcement of the rules and allow clients to have long breaks and leave early.

I find that this is because the power asymmetry between clients and the work supervisors is blurred. This means that during their daily interactions, clients come to perceive the work supervisors as individuals (*feature 1*) decou-

[121] Positive-sum and zero-sum are concepts from game theory. A zero-sum game refers to "situations in which the total of wins and losses adds up to zero, and thus one party benefits at the direct expense of another." By contrast, a positive-sum game refers to "situations in which the total of gains and losses is greater than zero. A positive sum occurs when resources are somehow increased and an approach is formulated in which the desires and needs of all concerned are satisfied" (L. Murray 2021).

pled from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers. Clients therefore establish a sense of loyalty to them and refrain from criticizing them. At the activation site, the work supervisors retain this loyalty by enforcing the rules leniently while deflecting responsibility away from themselves (*feature 2 & 3*). This means that clients recognize that the work supervisors face multiple challenges in their daily work, and clients therefore act in ways that reduce the supervisors' everyday work challenges.

10.2.3. Spillover dynamics in political learning

The dissertation contests how policy feedback and political learning works. These studies have focused on a range of street-level organizations, including social assistance (Kumlin 2004; Soss 1999a), social security (Campbell 2003), schools and education (Bruch and Soss 2018; Mettler 2005), and prisons (Lerman and Weaver 2014; Weaver and Lerman 2010). In other words, these studies focus on street-level organizations where several conditions vary, including the duration of the encounter, the power of the frontline workers, and the social construction of target groups (Schneider and Ingram 1993). These studies are all based on the theoretical premise that clients' perceptions of frontline workers inadvertently spill over into broader perceptions about bureaucratic organizations, such as government (Soss 1999a).

This dissertation shows that this spillover dynamic is more complex. For example, in the face-to-face encounters with clients, the work supervisors blur the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients. Yet, when clients reflect upon the cash-assistance scheme, they view it as a "top-down organization" where a diffuse power "from above" regulates both the work supervisors' and clients' lives. In contrast to existing studies, this shows that there is no direct commonalty between experiences formed in the encounters with frontline workers and experiences of broader political institutions.

How can we explain this? From clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as *individuals,* they infer that there is no power asymmetry between themselves and the work supervisors. Yet, from their perception of the work supervisors as *decision-makers*, they infer a hierarchical image of the cash-assistance scheme. Future studies on political learning and policy feedback should, therefore, take into consideration how clients divide their perceptions of frontline workers into a perception of them both as individuals and as decision-makers, and how this perceptual divide influences the kinds of political lessons they draw.

10.3. Scope of findings

In this part of the chapter, I contemplate in which street-level organizations scholars will potentially be able to find bureaucratic decoupling. I theorize bureaucratic decoupling based on ethnographic research undertaken at a utility activation site in Denmark. Although utility jobs resemble some other workfare programs in Europe and the US (for examples, see Girardi et al. 2019; Goldberg 2007; Rossetti et al. 2020), it is essentially a unique program.

Yet, as I will argue in this section, the findings and the theoretical mechanisms identified are transferable to other forms of street-level bureaucratic organizations. Therefore, I will first discuss the characteristics of the bureaucratic organizations that need to be present in order for bureaucratic decoupling to occur. Afterwards, I sum up and present the bureaucratic organizations that fit these conditions best.

10.3.1. Conditions for bureaucratic decoupling to travel to other organizations

I argue that the extent to which bureaucratic decoupling will occur depends on five conditions in street-level organizations:

1. The reputation of the bureaucratic organization.
2. The spatial characteristics of the bureaucratic organization.
3. Frontline workers' willingness to dissociate themselves from the bureaucratic organization.
4. Internal and external actors' control of frontline workers' decisions.
5. Clients' wish to encounter an individual rather than a bureaucratic decision-maker.

Condition 1: Bureaucratic reputation. At the activation site, the work supervisors often use commonsensical criticisms of the utility jobs scheme and the cash-assistance scheme in general. However, these criticisms need to have some form of r,esonance among clients and tap into an already existing distrust of the bureaucratic organization. This depends partly on the bureaucratic reputation of street-level organizations and partly on clients' wish to encounter an individual rather than a decision-maker, as I will discuss later.

Bureaucratic reputation is defined as "a set of symbolic beliefs about the unique or separable capacities, roles, and obligations of organizations" (Carpenter 2010, 45). If a bureaucratic organization has a positive reputation, this provides it with legitimacy and power. This is typically the case for healthcare or education (Lee and Van Ryzin 2018). By contrast, welfare-to-work policies

generally have a bad bureaucratic reputation across national contexts, which reduces the legitimacy of frontline workers' decisions.

The analytical chapters show that a majority of the clients in this study are familiar with this bad reputation. For example, they do not consider the cash-assistance scheme to be an institution that can bring them closer to finding employment. The work supervisors' ways of deflecting responsibility away from themselves therefore taps directly into – and reinforce – this knowledge, which allows them to reposition themselves against the cash-assistance scheme.

Condition 2: The spatial-temporal characteristics of bureaucratic organizations. Many bureaucratic encounters occur online or over the phone, they are often short and not repeated, and they occur in places where the frontline workers' management is able to control their decisions (Goodsell 1981). I argue that for clients to come to view frontline workers more as individuals decoupled from their role as bureaucratic decision-makers, three spatial-temporal characteristics of the encounter have to be present. The encounter must: (a) occur face-to-face, (b) be shielded from the management of the bureaucratic organization, and (c) occur over a significant period of time.

When they interact face-to-face, both parties need to engage in forms of face work (E. Goffman 1967). The analysis shows that this leads clients to ask questions and demand justifications to which frontline workers are forced to respond. Moreover, as the work supervisors find themselves shielded from their "back office," (i.e. their management or other frontline workers in the cash-assistance scheme) they are also able to invoke commonsensical criticisms of their management, for example lack of planning or consideration or their work. Other studies also show that when frontline workers have an "isolated post" (Dubois 2010) in the organization, far from their management, they often comprise the rules or justify their decisions in ways that discredit the organization in which they work (Dubois 2014). Finally, studies suggest that when clients and frontline workers interact over extended periods, clients often establish a strong bond to frontline workers (E. Goffman 1961a; Sellerberg 2008; Sykes 1958).

Condition 3: Frontline workers' wish to dissociate themselves from the bureaucratic organization. In the analysis, I show that the work supervisors dissociate themselves from the cash-assistance scheme by blurring the power asymmetry between themselves and clients (*feature 1*), enforcing the rules leniently (*feature 2*), and deflecting responsibility away from themselves (*feature 3*). Yet, it is also necessary that frontline workers individually wish to dissociate themselves from the bureaucratic organization in which they are employed.

The existing literature on frontline workers focuses on for example how policies influence frontline workers' decisions (e.g. May and Winter 2009) and how frontline workers cope with enforcing these policies (e.g. Brodkin 2011; Tummers et al. 2015). Yet, it is also relevant to ask whether frontline workers want to be seen as the representatives of the policies they enforce – *in the eyes of clients*. Although frontline workers disagree with the policies they carry out, they may still want to present themselves as the official representatives of the policies. For example, although the school classroom and the activation site display some similar spatial-temporal characteristics, teachers do not necessarily want to dissociate themselves from the school as an institution. Often, the role as teachers gives them a sense of dignity and a feeling that they fulfill an important function in society from which they most likely do not want to dissociate themselves.

Condition 4: The presence of internal and external actors. Although frontline workers might want to dissociate themselves from the bureaucratic organization in which they work or enforce the rules leniently, they are often constrained by both internal and external actors.

Regarding internal actors, the presence of fellow frontline workers may limit the ability to enforce the rules leniently or criticize the rules (Oberfield 2010). Moreover, at welfare offices, clients may act as internal actors. For example, clients in the waiting area may overhear conversations between clients and frontline workers. If the frontline worker chooses to compromise the rules or criticize the organization, other clients in the waiting area may use this against other frontline workers, asking them to similarly compromise the rules (Dubois 2010, 42). This also occurred at the activation site. Clients often overheard that one of the work supervisors allowed some of the other clients to leave early, which clients then used against the other work supervisors. However, this did not stop the work supervisors from enforcing the rules leniently or deflecting responsibility away from themselves.

External actors may, therefore, exert more control over frontline workers' ways of behaving in meetings with clients. There are no obvious external actors at the activation site that can protect clients' interests from the actions of work supervisors. However, this is very different from other types of bureaucratic organizations. For example, pupils' parents in schools may constrain teachers' behavior in the classroom. Parents can also complain to a board of governors or to the teachers themselves if they believe that the teachers have acted wrongly.

Yet, there may also be external actors with more legal power. In Denmark, for example, cases regarding custody rights over children are made by caseworkers in the State Administration (SA). Yet, their decisions are only temporary, and the final decision is made by a district court (Bisgaard 2020, 23).

Moreover, in cases regarding the granting of asylum, caseworkers in the immigration office make a temporary decision, while the Refugee Appeals Board makes the final decision.

Condition 5: Clients' wish to encounter an individual rather than a bureaucratic decision-maker. Finally, clients must also display a wish to deal with an individual rather than a bureaucratic decision-maker. In my ethnographic account of clients in activation, they all display a desire for dealing with *an individual* – a person who listens to them appear as being on their team. In other words, they want to be "seduced" somehow and enter into a conspiracy with the work supervisors against the broader "system" (Prottas 1979, 108).

Yet, this is not a universal wish for all clients. Quite the contrary in fact. Most people wish to deal with a frontline worker who enforces the rules properly and appears as a representative of the institution in which they work. If they acted otherwise, this would increase the uncertainty of the outcome of their decisions and reduce clients' trust in the institution (see e.g. Auyero 2012; Soss 1999a). Hence, I now discus the conditions that would make clients search for an individual rather than a bureaucratic decision-maker.

First, this depends on the clients' level of resources. Broadly speaking, clients from the middles classes rarely encounter bureaucratic organizations where they feel stigmatized or reduced to bureaucratic categories. Rather, they are treated with respect and told that their problems are important and legitimate (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 341). This reduces their wish for dealing with a frontline worker who appears more as an individual rather than a bureaucratic decision-maker. Moreover, as clients from the middle classes have more resources, they also have more exit options if they feel unfairly treated (Hirschman 1970). This is not the case for clients from the lower classes where there is a "forced proximity" between them and the bureaucratic institution (Dubois 2010, 30).

Second, it also depends on clients' previous experiences in dealing with frontline workers. Clients who have only rarely dealt with frontline workers are more likely to enter into a conspiracy with them (Prottas 1979). When frontline workers disclose the internal challenges of their work or blame the "system," this is often a way of coping and moving away from clients (Dubois 2010; Tummers et al. 2015). Yet, for clients who only rarely encounter frontline workers and have limited knowledge of the bureaucratic organization, they are very likely to find these explanations extraordinary and trustworthy. This may be more complex for clients who have frequently dealt with frontline workers. On the one hand, clients may have experienced a certain number of failures which makes them turn "sour" (E. Goffman 1952), losing all hope and trust in frontline workers' ability to help them (Mirowsky and Ross 1983). On

the other hand, these failures may also put them on a more intense search for a compassionate frontline worker who acts on behalf of them rather than the bureaucratic institution.

10.3.2. In which bureaucratic organizations will bureaucratic decoupling occur?

Based on these conditions, I now discuss where bureaucratic decoupling will most likely occur. Below, I provide a list of bureaucratic organizations where scholars will most likely find bureaucratic decoupling. The list is not meant to be exhaustive. The aim is to provide a general discussion of bureaucratic decoupling in core street-level bureaucracies, which have been subject to most research.[122]

Table 10.1. Street-level organizations where bureaucratic decoupling would most likely occur

Organizations	Will bureaucratic decoupling occur?	Potential problems or limitations
Unemployment services	Yes	It does not meet conditions 2 and 4.
Police	Yes	It meets all conditions.
Prisons	Yes	It meets all conditions.
Education	No	It does not meet conditions 1, 3, 4, and 5.
Health	No	None of the five conditions is met.

First, I argue that there is potential for finding bureaucratic decoupling *within* the delivery of unemployment services and especially in the delivery of welfare-to-work[123] policies. These policies have always had a contested reputation (*condition 1*) of fostering dependency and passivity (Mead 1986; C. Murray 1984). This has created a particularly negative image of social assistance benefits among the public (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011a).

In Denmark, such debates have been less intense. Yet, in the 2010s, the Danish public became increasingly skeptical about the cash-assistance scheme (Hansen and Stubager 2017). The media coverage of "Lazy Robert" and "Poor Carina" created an image of cash-assistance recipients as a group of people

[122] For a list of these organizations, see Tummers et al. (2015, 1107).

[123] This includes "those programs and services that are aimed at strengthening the employability, labor market, or social participation of unemployed benefit recipients of working age" (Caswell et al. 2017, 3).

who chose to rely passively on benefits rather than actively seek work (Hedegaard 2014). Moreover, activation schemes for cash-assistance recipients also became increasingly unpopular. In particular, activation courses offered by private contractors gained a bad reputation and were even scandalized for their lack of ability to offer relevant activation that brought clients closer towards employment (Breidahl and Larsen 2015, 510–11). These scandals have been firmly documented in newspapers – for example, that recipients in one activation course offered by private contractors had to find "their inner bird" (Nord and Vester 2009). This means that there generally is a strong awareness of the bad reputation of welfare-to-work policies, among both the public and the welfare recipients.

Moreover, many welfare-to-work frontline workers may display a wish to dissociate themselves (*condition 3*) from the policies they implement. Multiple studies show that welfare-to-work frontline workers, in different national contexts, employ multiple coping techniques to overcome having to comply with performance measures and standardization (Brodkin 2011; Morgen 2001; Caswell and Larsen 2017). Studies also suggest that as clients on social assistance frequently change frontline workers, they rarely encounter a person who is familiar with their needs or interests (Danneris and Nielsen 2018). This suggests that many clients on social assistance may wish to deal with a more compassionate frontline worker who dissociate him or herself from the bureaucratic organization (*condition 5*).

Recent empirical studies also suggest that clients receiving social assistance decouple welfare-to-work frontline workers. In an evaluation of cash-assistance recipients' experiences of the job centers in Denmark, they found that clients have a "caseworker vs. system" perception (VIVE 2019, 30). One of the interviewees in the evaluation said: "The system is one thing; the employed are another thing. The system is bad, but the caseworkers are doing the best they can"[124] (31). The reason for this is that clients often experience that frontline workers appear stressed due to large caseloads (31).

Yet, the majority of encounters between frontline workers and clients in the delivery of unemployment services are often short, and clients often encounter different frontline workers during the time they receive their benefits (*condition 2*). Moreover, both managers and municipal and government agencies closely monitor frontline workers' decisions (*condition 4*), for example their level of sanctioning (Caswell and Larsen 2017), through performance reviews and benchmarking systems. However, I argue that even though traditional welfare-to-work encounters do not meet conditions 2 and 4, the above

[124] The interview quote has been translated from Danish to English.

results at least suggest that bureaucratic decoupling can occur outside of the utility jobs scheme and in more traditional welfare-to-work encounters.

Outside of welfare-to-work bureaucratic organizations, I find that bureaucratic decoupling could occur in prisons and within community-oriented policing (COP). Even though there are differences between types of prisons, the spatial characteristics of prison in general fit condition 2 well. Erving Goffman (1961a, xii), for example, conceptualizes prisons as a "total institution," which he defines as "a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals [are] cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time."

Moreover, studies suggest that prison inmates often have problematic relationships with most established institutions such as schools, places of employment, and hospitals (Brayne 2014; A. Goffman 2009; Weaver and Lerman 2010). Therefore, inmates may potentially want to form a strong bond with prison guards (*condition 5*) if the prison guards dissociate themselves from established bureaucratic organizations (*condition 3*). Studies suggest that this occasionally occurs (Lerman 2013). In his study of a maximum-security prison, Sykes (1958), for example, found that as prison guards and inmates interacted face-to-face over a significant period, the prison guards began to dissociate themselves from the correctional institution: "the reprimands, the lack of ready appreciation, the incomprehensible order – and in the inmates, he [the prison guard] finds willing sympathizers" (55). Moreover, through their face-to-face encounters, the prison guards developed close relationships with the inmates: "in the eyes of the custodian, the inmate tends to become a man in prison rather than a criminal in prison" (56). Similar dynamics have been identified in more recent studies of prison guards (Lerman 2013; Lerman and Page 2012). This suggests that prison guards use the public's bad reputation of prison inmates (*condition 1*) to establish a close relationship with inmates.

However, studies also show that prison guards often use their discretion to "move against" (Tummers et al. 2015) inmates, for example by degrading and humiliating them (Lerman 2013). On the one hand, this illustrates that there is limited external and internal control over prison guards' behavior (*condition 4*). On the other hand, it also suggests that prison guards, rather than dissociating themselves from their role as authorities, use their authority to punish inmates and reinforce the power asymmetry between themselves and the inmates (*condition 3*).

Bureaucratic decoupling might also potentially occur in COP targeting "at-risk" residents in ghettos or disadvantaged residential areas (Peyton, Sierra-Arévalo, and Rand 2019). The goal of COP is to build relationships between the police and residents as a preventive strategy of reducing crime as well as

build trust in the police among the residents. Among residents in these areas, the police often have a bad reputation (*condition 1*), for example because their profiling strategies lead to more stops and arrests of residents in these areas compared to residents in other areas (see e.g. Fassin 2013; Stuart 2016a; Brunson 2007; Soss and Weaver 2017). Therefore, residents may want to deal with a police officer who dissociates themselves from the police organization (*condition 5*).

In consequence, the police may have an interest in using the residents' distrust of the police as a strategy to approach residents (*condition 3*), for example by criticizing or dissociating themselves from police officers at the police department. Moreover, in these encounters, community officers also have a certain amount of freedom to engage with residents as they are subject to very little control by internal or external actors (*condition 4*). Finally, as the main goal is to build trust, these encounters often occur over a long period of time (*condition 2*), which makes it likely that residents will come to see the police officers more as individuals rather than as bureaucratic decision-makers.

Looking solely at the spatial characteristics (*condition 2*), schools may also be a place where bureaucratic decoupling could occur. Teachers and pupils spend considerable time together in closed-off classrooms where managers are unable to observe their interactions. Moreover, teachers are constantly faced with a large "public" of pupils. They continuously question the teachers' authority by asking questions or making provocations (Willis 1977). This necessitates that teachers assert their authority and win the respect and trust of pupils.

Yet, I argue that bureaucratic decoupling will most likely not occur in schools. First, if teachers chose not to follow the curriculum, this would affect the pupils' grades, for which they will be held accountable by the parents or the school principal (*condition 4*). Second, the job as a teacher is highly professionalized,[125] which gives them authority in their daily encounters with pupils and reduces the risk that they will use culturally commonsensical explanations for their decisions (Cecchini 2018; Harrits and Larsen 2016; Harrits and Møller 2016). Moreover, although some pupils contest the objective of education in general, the school as a societal institution has a positive reputation

[125] For both teachers and health professionals, the argument is that they will dissociate themselves from the school system and health system because their job is highly professionalized. However, one could also expect that both groups of frontline workers would use their professional knowledge to delegitimize and dissociate themselves from the health system or the education system. This could potentially create a bureaucratic decoupling effect in both these organizations.

(*condition 1*). Therefore, teachers' jobs are seen as fulfilling an important function in society, making it less likely that they will dissociate themselves from their role as teachers (*condition 3*). This is supported, for example, by the fact that teachers have a high degree of "public service motivation" (Andersen, Heinesen, and Pedersen 2014) – that is, "a wish to do good for society."

Within *health*, none of the conditions seems to be met. Healthcare has a strong positive bureaucratic reputation (Lee and Van Ryzin 2018, 189) (*condition 1*). Encounters between health professionals, such as physicians or nurses,[126] and clients/patients are often short (*condition 2*). This reduces the possibility that they will establish a personal bond (Harrits 2016, 13) where the clients/patients form an impression of health professionals as individuals and as decoupled from their role as physicians or nurses. Health professionals' decisions are also monitored by several actors (*condition 4*), for example multiple patient organizations (external actors) and other health professionals (internal actors). More tellingly, health professionals' job tasks are extremely professionalized – and based on a strong professional identity and autonomy – which defines their way of interacting with clients (Harrits and Larsen 2016). Therefore, they often justify and legitimize their decisions by referencing their expertise derived from their job specialization (Sanders and Harrison 2008, 295). This reduces their willingness to dissociate themselves from their role as health professionals and present themselves as individuals (*condition 3*). Finally, patients generally wish to deal with a physician or nurse who is not "hurried" and has time for their needs (Ridd et al. 2009). Yet, as health is a case with high stakes (Bisgaard 2018), clients/patients still want to deal with a professional who uses their formalized knowledge when assessing their health.

[126] There are, of course, relevant differences regarding how doctors and nurses encounter patients. Compared to doctors, nurses often have much closer and more frequent contact with patients. Studies show that this enables nurses to form a personal relationship with patients and that nurses value this aspect of their profession (Harrits 2016, 9).

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Appendix A.
List of participants in interviews

Appendix A1: Clients at the activation site

Name	Gender	Age	Education	Follow up interview
Andi	Man	30s	High	No
Lisbeth	Woman	50s	High	Yes
Randi	Woman	30s	High	No
Pia	Woman	30s	Low	Yes
Sascha	Woman	50s	Low	Yes
Tonny	Man	50	Low	No
Tinna	Woman	50s	High	No
Johannes	Man	40s	Low	Yes
Yvonne	Woman	50s	Low	No
Bo	Man	30s	Low	No
Svend	Man	30s	Low	No
Edward	Man	50s	Low	No
Franz	Man	50s	Low	No
Monica	Woman	50s	High	Yes
John	Man	50s	Low	No
Hanne	Woman	60s	High	No
Verner	Man	40s	High	No
James	Man	50s	High	No
Johnny	Man	60s	High	No
Tanja	Woman	40s	Low	Yes
Sofie	Woman	50s	High	No
Christopher	Man	40s	High	No
Rasmus	Man	20s	Low	Yes
Mario	Man	50s	Low	No
Peter	Man	30s	High	Yes
Morten	Man	30s	High	No
Simon	Man	30s	High	No
Lauritz	Man	60s	High	No
Isabella	Woman	30s	High	No
Ilse	Woman	30s	High	No

Marc	Man	40s	Low	No
Nicklas	Man	30s	Low	No
Rafael	Man	30s	High	No
Kurt	Man	60s	Low	No

Appendix A2. Members of staff

Name	Job description	Gender	Age
Ole	Work supervisor	Male	40s
Sebastian	Work supervisor	Male	50s
Arne	Work supervisor	Male	50s
Brian	Work supervisor	Male	50s
Steffen	Work supervisor	Male	50s
Uffe	Work supervisor/job consultant	Male	40s
Shelia	Caseworker	Woman	20s
Amina	Caseworker	Woman	20s
Irina	Caseworker	Woman	20s
Per	Manager	Male	50s

Appendix A3. Clients at the job cafe

Name	Gender	Age	Education
Albert	Man	20s	High
Ibrahim	Man	20s	High
Jonathan	Man	20s	Low
Lucas	Man	20s	High
Ingeborg	Woman	20s	Low
Søren	Man	20s	High
Benjamin	Man	20s	Low
Shadia	Woman	20s	High
Laura	Woman	20s	Low
Trine	Woman	20s	High

Appendix B. Interview guides

Appendix B1. Interview guide for clients at the activation site

Theme	Questions
Briefing	• Ensure that the informant signs the consent form. • Is it okay with you that I record the interview? • I believe our conversation will take around one hour. • Our conversation is completely anonymous. In other words, I will not be using your name or anything that can identify you in my project. • I will, at most, use short quotes from our conversation. • Do you have any questions before we start?
Warm-up	1. Why don't you just start by telling me a little bit about yourself and your background? 2. Can you describe a typical workday? Probes: • What did you do just before you arrived today? • What takes up the most time and energy on a workday? • What do you typically do during the week? Do you have any hobbies?
Everyday life in activation and perception of utility jobs scheme	3. If we assume that I don't know anything about the utility jobs scheme, can you explain it to me in your own words? Probes: • Can you describe the types of tasks you do? • Can you describe the people your work with here at the activation site? 4. What expectations did you have regarding your time in utility jobs activation? Probes: • What tasks did you expect you would have to do? • Did you expect that it would be embarrassing to do utility work? • Did you expect that you would have to work efficiently?

Perception of work supervisors and their way of making decisions	5. Can you describe your relationship with the work supervisors out here? Probes: • Do you think they are, for example, nice or helpful? • Do you think they listen to you if you have any suggestions? 6. Can you describe the mood like when you are out working with the work supervisors? Probes: • Is there a bad or a nice atmosphere? • Do you joke around while working? 7. Can you describe how they organize the work assignments at the site? Probes: • When do they send you out to work? • What do they do when there are not enough work assignments? 8. Do you think they face any challenges in their work? Probes: • Do you think that it is difficult for them, if they have to handle many clients at a time? • Do you think it affects them when clients complain? • Do you think their management monitors them a lot? • Do you think they are subject to many rules? • What do you think their opinion is on the utility jobs scheme? • Why do you think that is? (for example, why do you think they are subject to many rules?) 9. Why do you think it varies a lot regarding when you get off work? Probes: • Yesterday, we got off early. Why do you think that is?
Perception of caseworkers/ job consultants and their way of making decisions	10. Can you describe your relationship with the job consultants and the caseworkers? Probes: • Do you think they are, for example, nice or helpful? • Do you think they listen to you if you have any suggestions? 11. Can you describe a typical meeting with your caseworker/job consultant? Probes: • How often do you have meetings with them? • How long do the meetings last?

	• Are you nervous before you have to meet with them? If so, why? • How have they helped you find employment? • Do you read up on the rules before the meeting? 12. Do you think they face any challenges in their work? Probes: • Do you think that it is challenging, if they have a large caseload? • Do you think it affects them when clients complain? • Do you think their management monitors them a lot? • Do you think they are subject to many rules? • What do you think their opinion is on the utility jobs scheme? • Why do you think that is? (for example, why do you think they are subject to many rules?)
Perception of waiting time and the work supervisors' decisions regarding waiting time.	13. Have you experienced sometimes having to wait a lot? Probes: • Have you experienced having to wait to get started in the morning? • Have you experienced having to wait to be allowed to leave? 14. (If the informant has experienced having to wait) What thoughts and feelings go through your head while you are waiting? Probes: • Is it frustrating or demotivating? • Is it nice having some time in the morning before you have to go out and work or in the afternoon before you are allowed to leave 15. Why do you think you have to wait? Probes: • Why don't they (the work supervisors) just put you to work immediately when you arrive in the morning? 16. If you are frustrated or annoyed by having to wait, have you considered saying something to the work supervisors? Probes: • Would you consider suggesting that they plan the workday a little better?

Perception of the cash-assistance scheme	17. If we assume that I don't know what cash-assistance is, can you, in your own words, describe what cash-assistance is? Probes: • What is the purpose of giving cash-assistance? • How do you think politicians view cash-assistance recipients? 18. Do you feel that there are many rules in the cash-assistance system? Probes: • Do you have an overview of these rules? • Have you tried to familiarize yourself with the rules? • Are you familiar with the 225-hour rule, the cap on cash-assistance, etc.? • Do you feel that it is hard to figure out when/why one gets sanctioned? 19. Have you ever experienced having to file a complaint? Probes: • How did you approach the process? • Did you get a reply to your complaint? • If not, why do you think, that is?
Outro	20. Is there anything you have thought of during the interview that we have not gotten around to discussing? 21. Do you have any questions that have not been answered?

Appendix B2. Interview guide for the work supervisors, job consultants, and caseworkers

Theme	Questions
Briefing	• Ensure that the informant signs the consent form. • Is it okay with you that I record the interview? • I believe our conversation will take around one hour. • Our conversation is completely anonymous. In other words, I will not be using your name or anything that can identify you in my project. • I will, at most, use short quotes from our conversation. • Do you have any questions before we start?
Warm-up	1. Will you start by telling me a little bit about your background? Probes: • How long have you worked here as a work supervisor/caseworker/job consultant? • Have you done anything else – or worked some place else? 2 Can you describe a typical day at work? Probes: • What happens from the time you arrive in the morning to the time you go home? • How much time do you have to spend with the clients when you have a consultation/when you are out working? 3. Can you describe what being a caseworker/job consultant/work supervisor consists of? Probes: • What tasks do you have to do? • Which tasks take up the most time and energy during the day? 4. Can you tell me briefly what "kind of" work supervisor/job consultant/caseworker you are? Probes: • What do you focus on most in your job as a work supervisor/caseworker/job consultant, for example in meetings with clients? • What is the best part of your job/what is the worst part of your job? Can you provide an example?

Perception of the utility jobs scheme	5. If we assume that I do not know what the utility jobs scheme is, can you explain it in your own words? Probes: • For example, what is the purpose of the utility jobs activation scheme? • Do you feel that you are capable of fulfilling that purpose? 6. If you could make all the decisions on your own, is there anything you would change or prioritize in a different way? Probes: • For example, having more frequent meetings/consultations with clients (for the caseworkers/job consultants). • Having the opportunity to offer clients a course, for exampling in using a chain saw? (for the work supervisors)
Interaction with clients	7. Can you try to describe the clients you typically meet in the utility jobs scheme? Probes: • Are the clients different when considering gender, education, how long they have been here, etc.? Can you provide an example? • Are there any "heavy" clients, for instance "Lazy Robert" types? 8. How do you handle clients who complain or are skeptical? Probes: • How do you get them "back on track" in the conversation/consultation? • What do you do if they start talking about politics? 9. Can you try to tell a story about a client that you thought was particularly difficult to work with/have a consultation with? Probes: • What was especially challenging? • What did you do to solve the problem? 10. How do you handle clients who do not complain and are cooperative? 11. Can you try to tell a story about a client that you thought was easy to work with/have a consultation with?

Discretion and perceptions of rules	12. How much time and energy do rules and legislation take up in your work? Probes: • Do you keep yourself informed on the rules for cash-assistance, e.g. the Act on Active Employment Efforts? If not, why not? 13. Are there some rules that you do not follow? Probes: • Do you sometimes allow clients to leave early? • Do you always sanction clients when they have not updated their job searches 14. Do you feel that much of your workday as a work supervisor/job consultant/caseworker is dictated by others, for example your management? Probes: • How often are you in dialogue with management? • How do you keep your management informed on your work?

Appendix C. Transcription guide for the interviews

1. In general, you will start the transcription from the start of the audio file. Obviously, there is a lot of intro talk that is irrelevant (e.g. where we should sit during the interview and where I place the tape recorder etc.). Thus, begin the transcription when the interviewer begins the introduction.
2. Write #I for the interviewer and #R for the respondent. The text starts after regular intervals (no insertion). Insert an extra line between "#I" and "#R".
3. Write out as word-for-word as possible
   a. Expressions as "øh" and "mhm" from the respondent should be included.
   b. Small pauses in sentences are indicated as …. Long breaks are indicated as … …
   c. Standard pauses in a flow of talk are indicated with a decimal point and a full stop.
   d. If a significant importance is attached to a word, then use BLOCK LETTERS.
   e. Ignore the interviewer's continuous supportive communication ("yes", "mhm" etc.), if it seems obvious that it is speech acts that express this communicative support. If there is a substantial interruption, then indicate this with a shift of the person talking.
   f. Write other things that are relevant for the conversation in parenthesis, e.g. (nervous), (laughing), (ironical). Of course, this is a matter of appraisal but still try – at least with the most objective things such as whether there is laughter.
4. If there is a distinct question, then indicate with a question mark – even if cannot be seen on the sentence.
5. If stories are told or other people are quoted in the interview, then use quotation marks.
6. Use parentheses for something that is happening 'outside' the interview. This could for instance be an interruption due to someone entering the door or a phone call.
7. If there are questions of doubt – e.g. if something is so unclear that you are unable to hear it then write (UNCLEAR TALK) in the interview and include an indication of the minute/second so we are able to locate it later. Do not spend too much time on listening to unclear passages as it may be irrelevant.

Appendix D. Coding Schemes

Appendix D1. Final coding scheme for interviews with clients at the activation site

Index codes	Analytical codes	Description
Clients' relationship with the work supervisors at the activation site	Clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as individuals	Any reference to the work supervisors as individuals and as private persons (e.g. that they are "nice" or "condescending")
	Clients' perceptions of the work supervisors as decision-makers	Any reference to the work supervisors' decision-making (e.g. that their decisions are based on their individual will or constrained by managerial directives)
Clients' relationship with the caseworkers and the job consultants at the activation site	Clients' perceptions of the job consultants/caseworkers as individuals	Any reference to the job consultants/caseworkers as individuals and private persons (e.g. that they are "nice" or "condescending")
	Clients' perceptions of the job consultants/caseworkers as decision-makers	Any reference to the job consultants/caseworkers' decision-making (e.g. that their decisions are based on their individual will or constrained by managerial directives)
Clients' perception of waiting time at the activation site	Clients' perceptions of waiting time	Any reference to the experience of waiting time in activation (e.g. that waiting time is demotivating, frustrating, or boring)
	Clients' perceptions of the work supervisors' decisions regarding waiting time	Any reference to the work supervisors' decision-making regarding waiting time (e.g. that the work supervisors are constrained by rules that prevent them from organizing the work activities in a more efficient way)

Clients' perceptions of the nature of decision-making in the cash-assistance bureaucracy	A system with a hidden objective	Any reference to hidden or undisclosed objectives of the cash-assistance scheme (e.g. creating employment for the frontline workers at the expense of clients)
	A top-down system	Any reference to higher-level authorities in the cash-assistance scheme controlling or determining frontline workers' decisions (e.g. that managers determine frontline workers' decisions)
	A mechanical system	Any reference to mechanical actors or entities in the cash-assistance scheme (e.g. computers or telephones) making decisions rather than human frontline workers
	A confusing system	Any reference to the confusing or complex nature of the rules in the cash-assistance scheme (e.g. that rules are enforced differently across frontline workers)
	A sluggish system	Any reference to the slow or sluggish nature of communication in the cash-assistance scheme (e.g. that complaints by clients are processed slowly)
Clients' background	Educational background	Any reference to clients' education
	Former employment	Any reference to clients' former employment
	History of receiving unemployment benefits	Any reference to clients' history of receiving unemployment benefits (e.g. cash-assistance or unemployment benefits)
	Private circumstances	Any reference to things that are not relevant for the remaining codes (e.g. private and personal thoughts or place of residence)

Appendix D2. Final coding scheme for interviews with work supervisors at the activation site

Codes	Sub-codes	Description
The work supervisors' perception of the purpose of the activation site	No sub-codes	Any reference to the work supervisors' perception of the purpose of the activation site (e.g. what they think the political purpose is)
The work supervisors' challenges related to the activation site	Challenges caused by the rules of the cash-assistance scheme and the organization of the activation site	Any reference to challenges that the work supervisors face at the activation site, caused either by poor organization or the rules of the cash-assistance scheme (e.g. that the work supervisors lack the resources to perform according to what is expected of them)
	Practical challenges at the activation site	Any reference to challenges for the work supervisors caused by practical problems at the activation site (e.g. bad facilities)
	Challenges related to the clients	Any reference to challenges that the work supervisors face in their daily work with the clients (e.g. clients with a language barrier)
The work supervisors' strategies at the activation site	Strategies concerning the work supervisors' practical work with the clients at the activation site	Any reference to the work supervisors' strategies in their daily interaction with clients (e.g. keeping track of the time)
	Strategies concerning the work supervisors' own effort at the activation site	Any reference to the work supervisors' reflections on their own behavior and work methods (e.g. finding it important to have self-awareness as a work supervisor)
	Strategies concerning the work supervisors' communication with the clients	Any reference to the work supervisors' way of communicating with the clients (e.g. their way of speaking to the clients)
	Strategies concerning increasing the employability of clients	Any reference to the work supervisors' way of talking about job opportunities and job-searching strategies with clients

The work supervisors' motivation	No sub-codes	Any reference to the work supervisors' reflections on what motivates and demotivates them in their job (e.g. what do they find interesting about their job?)
The work supervisors' handling of challenging or problematic clients at the activation site	No sub-codes	Any reference to the work supervisors' handling and treatment of clients they see as challenging or problematic to work with (e.g. how they handle clients that are reluctant or unwilling to work)
The work supervisors' handling of unproblematic or easy clients at the activation site	No sub-codes	Any reference to the work supervisors' handling and treatment of clients they see as willing and easy to work with (e.g. how they act towards clients that are cooperative)
The work supervisors' enforcement of rules at the activation site	Rules that are enforced	Any reference to rules that the work supervisors enforce (e.g. rules that they always make sure to enforce)
	Rules that are not enforced	Any reference to rules that the work supervisors do not enforce (e.g. rules that are not enforced because they do not think they are fair to the clients)
	The work supervisors' general reflections on rules at the activation site	Any reference to the work supervisors' more general reflections about the rules at the activation site (e.g. how much time and energy they spend reflecting on the rules)
The work supervisors' general reflections on the activation site	No sub-codes	Any reference to the work supervisors' overall observations of and thoughts about the activation site (e.g. what a normal workday is like or anecdotes from the activation site)
The work supervisors' perception of society	No sub-codes	Any reference to the work supervisors' perceptions and thoughts about society (e.g. general reflections on Denmark as a society, groups in society, or public debates)

The work supervisors' background	Educational background	Any reference to the work supervisors' education
	Former employment	Any reference to the work supervisors' former employment and experiences and thoughts associated with this
	Private circumstances	Any reference to things that are not relevant for the remaining codes (e.g. private and personal thoughts or place of residence)

Appendix D3: Final coding scheme for field notes

Codes	Sub-codes	Description
Work supervisors	The work supervisors' ways of blurring and revoking the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients	Any reference to events where the work supervisors blur the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients (e.g. allowing clients to decide which work activities they should conduct)
	The work supervisors' lenient enforcement of the rules at the activation site	Any reference to events where the work supervisors' decisions deviate from the official rules (e.g. allowing clients to leave earlier than the official end of the workday)
	The work supervisors' ways of justifying their decisions	Any reference to events where the work supervisors justify their decisions (e.g. referencing poor weather conditions when they allow clients to leave early)
Clients	Clients' ways of reducing the challenges in the work supervisors' jobs	Any reference to events where clients behave in ways that make the work supervisors' jobs easier (e.g. by taking more breaks or asking fewer questions)
	Clients' direct contestations of the work supervisors' decisions	Any reference to events where clients, when face-to-face with the work supervisors, contest the work supervisors' decisions (e.g. criticizing their decisions or provoking them)

	Clients' indirect contestations of the work supervisors' decisions	Any reference to events where clients contest the work supervisors' decisions but without doing so face-to-face with the work supervisors (e.g. hiding tools or mocking them behind their backs)
	Clients' criticisms of the general and structural features of the cash-assistance scheme	Any reference to events where clients criticize the more general features of the cash-assistance scheme as well as the utility jobs scheme (e.g. criticizing the fact that they have to wear uniforms or that they receive low benefits)
Positionality	No sub-codes	Any reference to events where the researcher's identity and position in the field influenced both the clients and the work supervisors as well as their interactions

Appendix E.
Consent form

AARHUS UNIVERSITET

1. Project title
In relation to the research project "Perceptions of everyday life, citizenship and politics among citizens who receive cash-assistance" (AU ID/serial number: 2016-051-000001, serial number 1338), we need your consent to process your personal data in accordance with the Data Protection Regulation.

2. Project description
The project examines how citizens experience their everyday life in the cash-assistance course including experiences of citizenship and politics in a broader sense.

3. Data manager, project group and project manager
Aarhus University, CVR nr. 31119103, is the data manager for processing your personal data. The participants in the research project are responsible for the project (hereinafter referred to as "Project Group"). The project is managed by PhD student Lasse Schmidt Hansen and can be contacted at the following address: Institut for Statskundskab, Bartholins Allé 7, Aarhus Universitet, 8000 Aarhus C, tlf. 29681852. E-mail: lsh@ps.au.dk

4. Categories of personal data processed about you
We process ordinary personal data through your answers in the interview. We do not process sensitive personal information.

5. Purpose and processing activities
Purpose: We use your answers from the interview for research and teaching – yet your answers will be depersonalized.

6. Potential recipients or categories of recipients of personal data
We share your personal data with research fellows in the project group and research assistants.

7. Transfer to third country or international organization
We do not transfer your personal data to anyone outside EU/EEA.

8. Duration of storage
At the present moment we cannot say for how long we will keep your personal data. We emphasize the importance of contributing to the ongoing research and we will store your personal data for as long as necessary in relation to the purpose of the project and in accordance with the current legislation.

9. Possibilities for withdrawing consent
Participation is voluntary and you can at all times withdraw your consent to the processing of your personal data. This can be done by written notice (mail or letter – read the above for contact information) by contacting the project leader with a message about this. If you decide to withdraw your consent, it will not till then take effect and it will not influence the legality of our processing prior to the present time.

Signature
I confirm that I have received, read and understood abovementioned as the basis for my consent to the processing of my personal data for the following purpose:

_____
(Signature and date)

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Summary

This dissertation explores how clients on cash-assistance (in Danish, *kontanthjælp*) experience their encounters with frontline workers. The dissertation finds a new phenomenon that characterizes clients' frontline experiences: "bureaucratic decoupling." Bureaucratic decoupling means that clients decouple frontline workers from their official bureaucratic role as ground-level policy-makers. As a result, clients do not hold frontline workers accountable for their decisions. This contradicts the standard assumption in street-level bureaucracy theory: that clients view frontline workers as the "face of public policy" and identify them with the policies they enforce. Therefore, this dissertation adds significant new knowledge to the study of street-level bureaucratic organizations and the way these organizations shape clients' views and behavior.

This finding is based on 370 hours of participant observations as well as 62 interviews mainly with clients in utility job activation (in Danish, *nyttejobs*). At activation sites, clients conduct manual work assignments, such as picking up trash in parks, every day for more than three months as an obligation to receive their cash-assistance benefits (in Danish, *kontanthjælp*). Clients wear identical work clothes, and they encounter a group of work supervisors (in Danish, *arbejdsledere*) who monitor clients' work activities. Utility job activation can, therefore, be considered a particularly disciplinary policy in which there is a clear power asymmetry between the clients and the work supervisors. One would, therefore, expect that clients would think of the work supervisors as the "face" of the cash-assistance scheme. However, despite these conditions, this is far from the case.

The dissertation therefore uses this field data to theorize bureaucratic decoupling. Existing studies explain how clients experience their encounters with frontline workers by focusing on either the power asymmetry between them or the design of policies. However, these studies fail to account for the fact that during face-to-face bureaucratic encounters over a long period, power asymmetries between clients and frontline workers are often revoked while policies are re-interpreted and re-enacted.

I therefore theorize that bureaucratic decoupling is created in the face-to-face encounters between clients and the work supervisors. In particular, the face-to-face encounters are governed by four features:

1. Feature 1: During the encounters, the power asymmetry between them becomes blurred. The work supervisors therefore come to appear more as individuals and private persons in the eyes of clients rather than as bureaucratic decision-makers.

2. Feature 2: The work supervisors have the discretion to manage clients' lives in activation based almost solely on their own will. They use this discretion to enforce the rules leniently, conveying the idea to clients that they act on behalf of clients rather than on behalf the cash-assistance scheme.
3. Feature 3: As clients always find themselves in the immediate presence of fellow clients, this prompts them to ask for a justification of the work supervisors' decisions. To retain their image as "nice individuals" among the clients, the work supervisors justify their decisions by deflecting responsibility away from themselves onto something beyond their individual control. This leaves the impression among clients that the work supervisors have no power to change their decisions.
4. Feature 4: As clients and the work supervisors interact for more than three months, these encounters leave a significant impression among the clients.

The dissertation consists of four analytical chapters that address the causes, processes, and outcomes of bureaucratic decoupling.

In the first analytical chapter, I explore the causes of bureaucratic decoupling. In the chapter, I explore empirically how each of the four features governs the encounter between the clients and the work supervisors. For example, the chapter shows that the work supervisors blur the power asymmetry between themselves and the clients by remembering their names, including clients in their decision-making, and by de-emphasizing the importance that clients fulfill their official obligations as cash-assistance recipients. The chapter also analyzes how the work supervisors deflect responsibility away from their decisions when questioned by clients. For example, they often hold their managers accountable for their decisions to allow clients to leave early, whereas they blame the clients themselves when there are longs periods of waiting time at the site.

In the second analytical chapter, I explore the first process of bureaucratic decoupling: how the face-to-face encounters lead clients to separate their perception of the work supervisors as individuals from their perception of them as decision-makers. The analysis shows that as "individuals," clients view the work supervisors as "one of them." As "decision-makers," clients believe that the work supervisors face multiple challenges beyond their control, which prevent them from changing their decisions. As a result, clients do not hold the work supervisors accountable for their decisions.

In the third analytical chapter, I explore the second process of bureaucratic decoupling: how clients act upon their perception of the work supervisors. The analysis shows that when clients believe that the work supervisors have no

control over their decisions, they begin to behave in ways that reduce the challenges of the work supervisors' job. For example, clients teach new clients not to ask too many questions and to work inefficiently as this means that the work supervisors do not need to find new work assignments for them.

In the final analytical chapter, I explore the outcomes of bureaucratic decoupling. The chapter shows that clients come to develop diffuse and fragmented perceptions of the cash-assistance scheme as a bureaucratic organization. For example, clients come to view the cash-assistance scheme as a top-down system where low-level frontline workers do not have any decision-making power.

There are three implications of bureaucratic decoupling. First, even though the analysis shows that the work supervisors manage clients' lives in arbitrary ways, clients fail to hold the work supervisors accountable for their decisions. Second, clients come to act in ways that reduce their own efficacy as they learn to behave compliantly and not ask questions. Third, it has implications for clients' citizenship. When clients do not think they are dealing with bureaucratic decision-makers, the activation site is consequently not an arena in which clients exercise their social rights. Do these findings and implications then travel to other bureaucratic organizations? The dissertation finally argues that bureaucratic organizations such as prisons and policing share many of the characteristics that are present at the activation site. This makes it highly likely that bureaucratic decoupling may also occur in cases such as these.

Dansk resumé

Denne afhandling undersøger, hvordan borgere, der modtager kontanthjælp, oplever deres møde med markarbejdere i kontanthjælpssystemet. I afhandlingen finder jeg et nyt fænomen, som karakteriserer borgeres frontlinjeoplevelser: "Bureaukratisk afkobling". Bureaukratisk afkobling betyder, at borgere afkobler markarbejdere fra deres officielle rolle som "gadeplansbureaukrater". Det betyder, at borgerne ofte heller ikke holder markarbejderne ansvarlig for de beslutninger, som de træffer. Det bryder med standardantagelsen i markarbejderteori: at borgere opfatter markarbejdere som "ansigtet" på en offentlig politik og identificerer dem med den politik, som de implementerer. Det tilføjer afgørende ny viden til studiet af bureaukratiske organisationer, og hvordan de skaber borgeres opfattelser og adfærd.

Dette fund er baseret på 370 deltagelsesobservationer samt 62 interviews primært med borgere i såkaldte nyttejobs. I nyttejobs udfører kontanthjælpsmodtagere manuelle arbejdsopgaver, såsom at samle skrald op i parker, hver dag i mere end tre måneder, som en betingelse for at modtage deres kontanthjælp. Borgerne er iført identisk arbejdstøj, og de interagerer med en gruppe arbejdsledere, som overvåger borgernes udførsel af arbejdsopgaverne. Nyttejobs kan derfor opfattes som en særlig disciplinær politik med en klar magtasymmetri imellem borgerne og arbejdslederne. Man kunne derfor forvente, at borgerne ville identificere arbejdslederne med kontanthjælpssystemet. Imidlertid er det langt fra tilfældet.

Derfor anvender denne afhandling den indsamlede feltdata til at teoretisere fænomenet "bureaukratisk afkobling". Eksisterende studier forklarer borgernes oplevelse af mødet med markarbejdere ved at fokusere på enten magtasymmetrien imellem de to parter eller ved at fokusere på designet af den politik, som ligger til grund for mødet. Imidlertid overser eksisterende studier det faktum, at når borgere og markarbejdere møder hinanden ansigt-til-ansigt over en længere periode, så ophæves magtasymmetrien imellem dem, imens den politik, som ligger til grund for mødet, bliver genfortolket.

For at forstå fænomenet bureaukratisk afkobling teoretiserer denne afhandling dette ved at fokusere på ansigt-til-ansigt-mødet imellem borgerne og arbejdslederne. Dette ansigt-til-ansigt-møde er styret af fire hovedtræk.

1. I løbet af mødet sløres magtasymmetrien imellem borgerne og arbejdslederne. Arbejdslederne kommer derfor til at fremstå mere som "individer" og privat personer frem for bureaukratiske beslutningstagere.
2. Arbejdslederne har vide beføjelser til at styre borgernes tid i nyttejobs, og de træffer beslutninger mere eller mindre baseret på deres

egen vilje frem for formelle regler. De beføjelser bruger de imidlertid til at bøje reglerne på en sådan måde, at de fremstår som nogen, der agerer på borgernes vegne frem for på vegne af kontanthjælpssystemet.

3. Idet borgerne altid befinder sig iblandt mange andre borgere, så tilskynder det dem til at udfordre arbejdsledernes beslutninger. For at bevare deres positive image iblandt borgerne retfærdiggør arbejdslederne deres beslutninger ved at flytte ansvaret for disse beslutninger væk fra dem selv og over på faktorer, som ligger uden for deres kontrol. Det efterleder det indtryk blandt borgere, at arbejdslederne ikke har magt til at ændre deres beslutninger.
4. Idet borgerne og arbejdslederne interagerer ansigt-til-ansigt over en længere periode, efterlader oplevelserne i nyttejobs et særligt stærkt indtryk hos borgerne.

Afhandlingen består af fire analytiske kapitler, som adresserer både årsagerne, processerne og resultatet af bureaukratisk afkobling. I det første analytiske kapitel undersøger jeg årsagen til bureaukratisk afkobling. Her viser jeg, hvordan hver af de fire hovedtræk styrer mødet imellem borgere og arbejdsledere. For eksempel viser kapitlet, hvordan arbejdslederne slører magtasymmetrien ved at huske borgernes navne, ved at involvere dem i deres beslutninger og ved at nedtone vigtigheden af, at borgerne overholder deres formelle forpligtelser som kontanthjælpsmodtagere. I kapitlet undersøger jeg også, hvordan arbejdslederne flytter ansvaret for deres beslutninger væk fra dem selv og over på faktorer, som ligger uden for deres kontrol. For eksempel så holder de deres ledere ansvarlige for, at de giver borgerne tidligt fri, imens det faktum, at der er mange borgere til stede på aktiveringspladsen, bliver brugt som en undskyldning for, hvorfor borgerne ofte skal vente på at komme i gang med arbejde.

I det andet analytiske kapitel undersøger jeg den første proces imod bureaukratisk afkobling: hvordan borgerne begynder at adskille deres opfattelse af arbejdslederne som ”individer” fra deres opfattelse af dem som ”beslutningstagere”. Som ”individer” og privat personer opfatter borgerne arbejdslederne som ”en af dem”. Som ”beslutningstagere” har borgerne derimod en opfattelse af, at arbejdslederne er tynget af diverse faktorer, som gør dem ude af stand til at ændre deres beslutninger. Det betyder, at borgerne opbygger en form for loyalitet til arbejdslederne, imens de samtidig stopper med at kritisere og holde dem ansvarlige for deres beslutninger.

I det tredje analytiske kapitel undersøger jeg den anden proces imod bureaukratisk afkobling: hvordan borgere handler på deres opfattelse af arbejdslederne og deres beslutningstagning. I analysen viser jeg, hvordan borgerne

begynder at agere på en sådan måde, så de reducer de faktorer, som påvirker arbejdsledernes beslutningstagning. Med andre ord gør de arbejdsledernes job nemmere at udføre. For eksempel lærer borgere andre nye borgere, at de enten ikke skal stille for mange spørgsmål til arbejdslederne, eller at de ikke skal arbejde for hurtigt, idet det betyder, at arbejdslederne må ud og finde nye arbejdsopgaver for borgerne.

I det sidste analytiske kapitel undersøger jeg resultatet af bureaukratisk afkobling. I det kapitel undersøger jeg, hvordan ansigt-til-ansigt-mødet imellem borgere og arbejdslederne fører til, at borgerne udvikler diffuse og fragmenterede opfattelser af kontanthjælpssystemet. For eksempel udvikler borgerne en opfattelse af kontanthjælpssystemet som et "top-down" system, hvor markarbejdere får frataget al beslutningskraft.

Afhandlingen viser, at bureaukratisk afkobling har tre implikationer. For det første afholder det borgerne fra at holde arbejdslederne ansvarlige, selvom deres beslutninger ofte er truffet på et arbitrært grundlag. For det andet får det borgerne til at opføre sig føjeligt, f.eks. når de stiller færre spørgsmål, eller når de lærer andre at arbejde langsomt. Endelig har bureaukratisk afkobling betydning for borgernes udøvelse af deres social rettigheder. Når de ikke anser arbejdslederne som bureaukratiske beslutningstagere, så fremstår nyttejobs heller ikke som en arena, hvor de har sociale rettigheder. Er det så muligt at finde bureaukratisk afkobling andre steder end her? I den sidste del af afhandlingen argumenterer jeg for, at i fængsler eller i mødet imellem borgere og politibetjente vil man kunne forvente at finde et fænomen som bureaukratisk afkobling.