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Moral Dilemmas in the Practice of Aspiration Management: Coping Strategies Among Swiss and Finnish Street-Level Bureaucrats Providing Integration Services to Refugees and Migrants

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the moral dilemmas faced by street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) as they engage in aspiration management while providing integration services to migrants and refugees. European integration policies prioritise rapid employment, often directing refugees toward low-skilled jobs, which may conflict with their higher professional and educational aspirations. Drawing on case studies from Switzerland and Finland, we investigate how SLBs navigate these moral dilemmas. Two primary coping strategies emerge: first, an "owning" (or paternalistic) strategy, where SLBs guide refugees to lower their ambitions and justify this as a way to protect them from failure; and second, a "disowning" strategy, where SLBs shift accountability to external policies or institutions. This study highlights the complexities of balancing policy requirements with refugee aspirations and calls for more nuanced approaches in integration programmes that better accommodate refugees' long-term goals.

1 | Introduction

Europe has seen sustainable high asylum applications, particularly after crises like wars in Syria, Afghanistan, or in Ukraine (Eurostat 2023; UNHCR 2023).

In response, host countries developed integration programmes aimed at refugees[1] or broader migrant populations, prioritising rapid financial self-sufficiency (Konle-Seidl 2018). Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) play a key role in guiding migrants and refugees toward employment and societal integration.

Western European integration policies prioritise rapid labour market entry to reduce welfare costs (Arendt 2020; Hinger and Schweitzer 2020). While they improve employment rates (Bevelander and Pendakur 2014; Valenta and Bunar 2010), critics argue they overemphasise quick placement, pushing migrants into precarious jobs that hinder long-term financial stability (Orav 2022; Arendt 2020).

Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) in charge of the implementation of integration policy are tasked with the challenging mission to enforce policy requirements on migrants and newly arrived refugees. The aim is to support them in identifying an integration plan or strategy that facilitates their entry into the labour market within a relatively short period, as employment is seen as the primary pathway to broader societal integration. The overarching goal is to alleviate pressure on the welfare state. To do that,

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they can rely on a range of tools including language courses, integration measures, or vocational training. In this context, SLBs must decide the extent to which they accommodate their clients' aspirations and ambitious plans, especially when they are not in line with policy requirements or contradict them. Therefore, accompanying migrants and refugees on their integration path may involve an important dose of "aspiration management", which we define as a proactive effort by SLBs to reorient their clients' aspirations to align with policy requirements. In many cases, aspiration management means convincing refugees to renounce more ambitious plans, such as those involving lengthy periods of study, vocational training, or the recognition of degrees (or professional status) obtained in their country of origin, in favour of a more immediate integration path leading to lower-skilled and less prestigious employment.

In this article we investigate the moral dilemmas generated by the practice of aspiration management in two countries Switzerland and Finland. In Switzerland, we examine SLBs assisting newly arrived refugees in devising an integration plan. In Finland, we focus on SLBs supporting a broader migrant population with a similar objective—labour market entry. These two cases were selected because both countries have highly developed integration policies that emphasise rapid labour market integration, feature diverse migrant and refugee populations in terms of origin and qualifications, and are likely to generate the types of moral dilemmas that are central to our analysis. For these reasons, they represent "most likely cases" in which SLBs are expected to navigate competing pressures between policy constraints and individual aspirations.

Building on the concept of aspiration management, we explore how it generates moral dilemmas for SLBs in both countries. We adopt Zacka's (2017) framework on pathological coping strategies—namely, the enforcer, the caregiver, and the indifferent bureaucrat—but extend it by examining the nuances within these profiles and the fluid boundaries between them. Specifically, we argue that systemic constraints related to aspiration management shape these coping strategies, which we conceptualise as "owning" and "disowning" the policy. "Owning" the policy refers to varying degrees of enforcement and caregiving, whereas "disowning" the policy involves bureaucrats distancing themselves from the constraints imposed on their clients.

The paper begins with a discussion of aspiration management in integration policy and the presentation of an analytical framework, largely based on Zacka (2017), for examining the moral dilemmas arising from aspiration management. We then present the two case studies, followed by an analysis of the coping strategies employed by SLBs in both contexts.

2 | Integration Policy and the Practice of "Aspiration Management"

The term "integration" is often used to describe the process of migrant incorporation into host societies, particularly in Europe, where it is defined as a two-way process involving both the host society and migrants (Ager and Strang 2008). While widely used, the notion of integration is criticised for its normative nature, often placing disproportionate responsibility on migrants to meet criteria for rights such as permits and social benefits (Favell 2019; Schinkel 2018; Hinger and Schweitzer 2020).

In Western Europe, including Switzerland and Finland, integration programs share a similar approach. These programs commonly include language courses, orientation sessions on life in the host society, and emphasise rapid integration into the labour market to alleviate strains on the welfare system (Konle-Seidl 2018; Pöyhönen and Tarnanen 2015; Saukkonen 2020; Valenta and Bunar 2010). Research indicates that while these initiatives can positively impact migrants and refugee employment rates (Bevelander and Pendakur 2014; Valenta and Bunar 2010), they face criticism for their restrictive nature and heavy emphasis on quick labour market integration (e.g., Arendt 2020; Hinger and Schweitzer 2020; Konle-Seidl 2018; Kurki 2018; Masoud 2024), often leading migrants and especially refugees into precarious jobs and prolonged dependency on welfare (Arendt 2020). Despite recent concerns over labour shortages, the approach in refugee integration has remained largely influenced by the so called "activation paradigm", which prioritises quick labour market (re-) entry over training and investment in skills for all non-working individuals (Jørgensen and Schulze 2024; Otmani 2023; Bonoli and Otmani 2022), resulting in refugees being disproportionately represented in the low-skilled segment of Europe's labour markets (Orav 2022).

This observation contrasts with findings from research on migrant and refugee aspirations, which generally indicate that they tend to have relatively high aspirations. Numerous studies have found that migrants and refugees typically aspire to better economic opportunities, education, social mobility, and improved living conditions (e.g., Portes et al. 1978; Orav Murdoch 2014; Pietka-Nykaza 2015; Hebbani and Khawaja 2019; Morrice et al. 2020).

It is then expected for a collision to emerge between, on one side, the relatively high aspirations of sections of migrants and refugee populations, especially those who have achieved a certain level of education in their country of origin, and, on the other side, the overall orientation of integration policy that prioritises quick labour market access, often inevitably in low-skilled jobs (Orav 2022).

3 | Moral Dilemmas in the Management of Aspirations

Against this background, this study examines how SLBs navigate the moral dilemmas inherent in aspiration management. Moral dilemmas, as discussed in street-level bureaucracy literature (Lipsky 1980; Zacka 2017), arise when bureaucrats must navigate conflicting obligations with their personal and professional ethics. Lipsky (1980) emphasises the discretion frontline workers exercise, while Zacka (2017) explores the moral dispositions they develop. In aspiration management, moral dilemmas materialise when SLBs perceive policy constraints as misaligned with their ethical duty to clients. These moral dilemmas may result from a tension between the overall orientation of policy and the SLB perception of what the appropriate course of action is in given individual instances. For example, employment policy may assume that clients have certain capabilities in

relation to their ability to devise their own integration plan or in relation to the use of digital services. Moral dilemmas emerge when these assumptions turn out to be inadequate (Nielsen and Monrad 2023; Pors and Schou 2021).

This paper presents a case in which a dissonance results from a gap between assumed client capabilities and the reality that may be observed by the SLB. The direction of the gap, however, is opposite, in the sense that clients are assumed to have limited capabilities, but in reality, some of them have bigger potential. We assume that moral dilemmas will emerge when caseworkers are confronted with migrants and refugees who objectively have the potential to achieve a relatively high social status, for example because of the skills they have acquired in the country of origin and/or because of personality traits that can be seen as conducive to career success. As seen above, integration policies tend to pursue the objective of quick access to employment, generally in the low-skilled segment of the labour market. Our starting point is that these situations may generate sizable moral dilemmas.

Building on Zacka's work, we hypothesise that SLB may develop different coping strategies to deal with the moral dilemmas generated by the practice of aspiration management. Coping strategies, as conceptualised in the SLB literature (Lipsky 1980; Tummers et al. 2015; Zacka 2017), refer to the mechanisms that frontline workers adopt to manage the tensions between policy demands and their ethical considerations. These strategies range from full adherence to policy requirements to more detached approaches aimed at protecting their moral integrity. We attempt to organise these strategies on a single dimension that reflects the degree of ownership or self-identification by SLB with the principles and the moral implications of refugee integration policy.

At one extreme, SLB may decide that they totally adhere to the policy and generate an interpretation of their role that is compatible with their values. We call this strategy "owning strategy—paternalism" and see it as a conflation of two of Zacka's moral dispositions, the "caregiver" and the "enforcer". Zacka (2017) describes the caregiver as an SLB who overinvests in their clients' well-being, while the enforcer adheres strictly to rules, prioritising institutional logic over individual needs. The combination of these two dispositions produces a distinct approach in aspiration management, where SLBs adopt a paternalistic stance—both guiding and regulating their clients' aspirations.

In the context of managing migrant and refugee aspirations, a paternalistic SLB (practicing owning strategies) will try to persuade ambitious clients to lower their aspirations to align with policy expectations. This persuasion is not only a form of compliance but also an attempt to "protect" clients from anticipated failures. However, this strategy also involves the enforcement of policy, as SLBs believe achieving high aspirations is very difficult or impossible. This aligns with Trappenburg et al.'s (2022) notion of "caring forcefully," where SLBs justify restrictive measures as acts of benevolent intervention, emphasising "tough love" as a guiding principle.

In this study, we are particularly interested in the nuances of these strategies and how they are implemented. While Zacka (2017) introduces the caregiver and enforcer as distinct moral dispositions, our analysis suggests that SLBs may fluidly combine these roles, adapting their approach based on situational constraints and personal convictions. Additionally, the degree of directness in enforcing aspiration management varies. Do SLBs explicitly steer clients away from high ambitions, or do they employ more covert strategies, such as gradual discouragement? What systemic constraints shape these practices? Our study aims to expand Zacka's framework by empirically analysing these variations.

Dealing with the moral dilemmas arising from aspiration management can also involve disowning integration policy. This strategy reflects Zacka's concept of the "indifferent" moral disposition, which describes SLBs who disengage from ethical dilemmas by attributing responsibility to external factors, such as policy frameworks or broader societal structures (Zacka 2017). However, in our study, we argue that disowning strategies are more nuanced than mere avoidance. Disowning does not solely reflect a desire to evade accountability; rather, it can be a response to systemic constraints, a professional boundary-setting mechanism, or a belief that clients should exercise full autonomy over their decisions.

For instance, some SLBs may perceive their institutional tools as inadequate for supporting highly ambitious refugees. Rather than imposing external limitations, they may choose to withdraw from intervention, believing that other organisations are better equipped to handle these cases. In other instances, SLBs may externalise responsibility, encouraging clients to navigate bureaucratic hurdles independently, thereby positioning themselves as neutral facilitators rather than active guides. By reframing disowning not just as a pathology but also as a strategic response, this study deepens Zacka's framework and examines the ethical implications of disengagement in aspiration management.

4 | Integration Policy in Switzerland and Finland

4.1 | The Swiss Integration Agenda and the Focus on Refugees

In Switzerland's federal system, refugee integration is shared between federal and cantonal authorities, executed via schools, health services, and vocational training institutions (SEMa 2021). With one of Europe's highest shares of foreign-born residents (around 30% in 2023), Switzerland hosts a predominantly European migrant population, while its refugee arrivals primarily originate from Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea, and Turkey (NCCR—On the Move, 2024; AIDA 2024).

Understanding Switzerland's integration policy requires familiarity with the various permits for asylum seekers and refugees, each with specific rights and obligations. Refugees recognised under the 1951 Geneva Convention receive a B permit, granting them full rights, including family reunification (Asile, 2021). Those recognised as refugees by the Geneva Convention but denied asylum in Switzerland for "subjective reasons subsequent to the flight" which happens when the authorities find that the applicant only became a refugee by leaving the country of provenance or by engaging in certain activities (e.g., political activism

in exile) after leaving that country (Asile, 2021), are admitted provisionally and are awarded an F refugee permit (Guidesocial, 2021). Receive a provisional F refugee permit. Rejected asylum seekers who cannot be deported for humanitarian reasons receive a temporary F permit (Guidesocial, 2021). These three types of permits are associated with different levels of rights. For example, F permit holders receive a lower amount of social aid and along with F refugee permits face restrictions in family reunification, employment, and education.

To obtain more rights, F status holders must demonstrate financial independence, often forcing them to lower their career aspirations to meet integration criteria (Otmani 2024).

The Swiss Integration Agenda (SIA), introduced in 2019, emphasises vocational training over tertiary education by leveraging the Swiss dual Vocational Education and Training (VET) system as the main pathway to economic self-sufficiency (SEMa 2018). While degree recognition for highly skilled refugees is not explicitly ruled out, it remains a complex and lengthy process. The agenda defines integration as a process beginning upon arrival or asylum application, lasting until the individual enters vocational training or employment. Job coaches and social workers play a central role in directing refugees toward available career paths, reinforcing labour market integration as the primary goal (Otmani 2024). The ultimate aim is to foster financial independence, reduce welfare costs, and strengthen social cohesion (SEMa 2018).

To implement this approach, the SIA relies on "case-by-case management" and "potential evaluation", key tools for professional coaching. This coaching, provided by street-level bureaucrats (SLBs), helps refugees navigate integration pathways. SLBs operate within public institutions responsible for refugee support or mandated non-public entities executing integration programmes. SLBs may impose compliance requirements for programme attendance, making participation necessary for securing rights and benefits. Non-compliance with integration programmes can result in reduced social assistance or other consequences, reinforcing the power imbalance between refugees and caseworkers.

4.2 | Finnish Integration Policy and a More Comprehensive Focus

In Finland, the main responsibility for the national migration policy lies with the Ministry of Interior, whereas the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment is responsible for the integration of migrants and for integration legislation. In 2022, migrants accounted for 11% of the total population in Finland (Statistics Finland, n.d.). The largest migrant groups have been EU citizens and members of their families and third-country nationals moving to Finland for family reunification (Kazi et al. 2019). The majority of the overall population but also of the migrants live in Southern and South-Western Finland. These are also the areas with a wide range of educational and career prospects.

Finland's integration policy follows a Nordic model, tailoring measures to individual needs (OECD 2018). The concept of integration applies to all migrants, not just refugees (Ministry of Employment and the Economy 2010). The aim is to provide migrants with the skills needed for societal and workforce participation (Ministry of Employment and the Economy 2012). This can take place by means of various employment measures, one of which is an integration training programme, a targeted service for migrants over the compulsory education age. This concerns foreign nationals with a valid residence permit who are registered as jobseekers in the employment administration (Ministry of Employment and the Economy 2010, 2012). The programme consists of learning the language (Finnish or Swedish) and of learning so-called civic skills. The latter also includes individual career counselling and work try-out periods that fall under the responsibility of career practitioners, which are in this article called the SLBs. Their duties are defined at the local level by the programme providers in a counselling plan (Ministry of Employment and the Economy 2010). The main task of the SLBs is to ensure that all migrants proceed to either some study programme or work placement, start their own enterprise, find a job or are otherwise ensured a next step in their integration path. It is the responsibility of the SLBs to decide how these next steps are achieved and what kind of support is needed for that. The SLBs monitor and report back to their own organisation but also to the public employment services how each migrant is progressing with their plans. Since the integration programme is part of the employment measures, the migrants may face sanctions if they do not comply with the programme requirements.

As in Switzerland, the focus of the Finnish integration policy is also on employment and securing an entry to the labour market for the migrants.

5 | Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach, focusing on two case studies from Switzerland and Finland. Rather than comparing the two national contexts, this research aims to use Switzerland and Finland to gain complementary insights into the moral dilemmas experienced by street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) working directly with refugees and migrants. In Switzerland, the study focuses on SLBs working specifically with refugees, while in Finland, the sample includes SLBs working with various migrant groups. By examining these different contexts, we aim to deepen our understanding of the moral dilemmas SLBs face and the coping strategies they employ.

The diversity in migrant groups between the two countries provides a broader perspective on the moral dilemmas experienced by SLBs and allows us to explore a wider range of coping strategies. This approach helps to identify commonalities and differences in SLBs' experiences and responses, enriching our overall findings. What follows provides more details on the methodology adopted in each case study.

5.1 | Street-Level Work With Refugees in Switzerland

The Swiss study was conducted in the canton of Vaud[2], Switzerland, based on semi-structured interviews conducted

between March and June 2021 with 23 street-level bureaucrats (SLBs). These SLBs were working in public organisations, NGOs, or external integration services responsible for implementing integration policy in the Canton of Vaud. The interviewees occupied various positions, either as generalist social workers managing multiple aspects of refugee life, including accommodation, health, education, and employment, or as specialists focused on education and employment, such as job coaches and career counsellors (see Tables A1 and A2 in Appendix). For simplicity and coherence, all interviewees will be referred to as SLBs in this paper.

Interviews, lasting an average of 1.5 h, explored SLBs' profiles, job challenges, and experiences implementing integration policy.

The interviews were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process. After familiarisation with the data, chunks of material were identified and grouped into categories such as "Perceptions of refugee aspirations," "Experiences with integration policy," "Perceptions of their own role and mission," "Factors for career orientation," "Owning coping strategies," and "Disowning coping strategies." Additional rounds of coding were performed to identify recurring themes, which are presented in the results section.

5.2 | Street-Level Work With Different Migrant Groups in Finland

The Finnish study was conducted in Southern Finland in 2019 and is based on 18 video-recorded, semi-structured interviews with four career counsellors (SLB) working in the national integration training programme for unemployed migrants aged 17–60 (IOM 2019). SLBs had varied educational backgrounds and experience levels.

The interviews lasted between 25 and 105 min. Thematically, these interviews included questions on how the SLBs thought about their work with the migrants, the educational and employment support provided for them, and the SLBs' work within the employment administration system. The SLB interviews were conducted by so-called stimulated recall method (Bloom 1953), using 18 video-recorded career counselling discussions between the same SLBs and their clients as a background material.

The video-recorded sessions with the SLBs were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis involved coding the discussions by identifying and naming the topics covered in the recorded sessions. For this paper, after familiarising with the data, the data was coded and grouped into categories such as "Influencing factors in management of migrant aspirations," "Tools in management of migrant aspirations", "Experiences with integration policy," "Challenges in management of migrant aspirations" "Owning coping strategies," and "Disowning coping strategies." Additional rounds of coding were performed to identify recurring themes, which are presented in the results section.

6 | Results

6.1 | Owning Strategies—Balancing Enforcement and Care

In both countries, SLBs cope with the complexity of their function and its resulting ethical dilemmas by adopting various forms of owning strategies—ways of handling their responsibilities based on how much they identify with the principles and moral implications of integration policies, as well as with their clients' cases. Building on Zacka's binary conceptualisation of enforcement and caregiving strategies, the findings reveal nuanced variations within these two pathologies. Owning strategies are applied at varied degrees, either directly or indirectly, to manage clients' aspirations. The aim is to confront them with harsh realities and the structural hurdles that may hinder their fulfilment.

6.1.1 | Direct Enforcement: Managing Aspirations With Realism

SLBs enforce policy by confronting clients with labour market realities, guiding them to adjust aspirations through internships and skills assessments as explained by how a Finnish SLB reacts to "unrealistic" aspirations.

> If someone dreams of becoming a cosmetologist but has no experience or background in it, one can use power and stop that, as many cosmetologists are self-employed and there are not so many paid jobs there (SLB FI4).

In doing so, SLBs assume an educator role, proactively guiding their migrant-clients toward more achievable goals as illustrated by the following Swiss SLB:

> I am obliged to integrate the educator part. That is to say that at some point, I really have to make young adults understand that somewhere, everything does not necessarily fall from the sky and that it is actually difficult to build things on illusions (SLB CH3).

Reframing the enforcement role as an "educator" in both the Swiss and Finnish cases can be seen as a way for SLBs to navigate the moral and practical dilemmas they face in their work. By actively intervening to "educate" their clients—aligning their aspirations with the demands of labour market and integration programs—SLBs address the tensions between enforcing policy and supporting their clients' long-term success. This reframing adds to Zacka's concept of enforcement by highlighting how SLBs use their discretion not only to apply rules, but also to shape and guide client behaviours in ways that balance institutional goals with individual needs. It illustrates enforcement as an active, strategic process, one that is deeply intertwined with SLBs' attempts to resolve their own ethical and professional challenges. While these methods may sometimes appear confrontational, they also involve subtle, covert strategies to

influence and manage refugee aspirations, further emphasising the complexity of their role.

6.1.2 | Indirect Enforcement: Guiding Through Cover

Indirect enforcement strategies involve guiding clients toward more realistic projects without explicitly discouraging them pursuing their initial project. By appearing supportive of clients' ambitions, SLBs can gradually introduce them to the practical challenges they may face. One SLB explained this process as "leading the person on the path of their project" while subtly highlighting its complexity:

> Well, I support them, I defend them, I... and then, I try to know how we're going to do it. 'I want to do that,' great, very nice project, now how are we going to develop this project?' What are we going to start with? And I try to lead the person on the path of their project, and I make them aware that the path is longer than we thought, that it is a labyrinth, a maze too (SLB CH4).

A particularly novel strategy identified in this study, specially used in the Swiss case, is "*future delegation*." This approach involves framing clients' aspirations as achievable but only in the distant future, after certain structural barriers—such as skill gaps or labour market restrictions—have been addressed. By prompting clients to focus on short-term, achievable goals, SLBs lead them to temporarily reconsider their ambitious aspirations, subtly managing their expectations. SLB CH5 illustrates this approach clearly:

> I really have one thing I always say: if it's not possible today, that doesn't mean that the door is closed. It doesn't mean that. It means that today we are in this context; this is how it is organized. And if what you want to do today is not immediately possible, that does not mean it's not possible later. I think it's really important, but often they don't necessarily want to hear because they want to do it right away (SLB CH5).

The usage of indirect enforcement reinforces Zacka's argument about the moral complexity of frontline work. Zacka's discussion is further deepened by providing concrete strategies SLBs used to balance encouragement and realism, while making sure clients' goals align with institutional requirements. SLBs do not merely enforce policies; they also act as mediators, subtly shaping clients' goals to meet systemic expectations while mitigating the emotional and ethical tensions of their role. In this capacity, SLBs do not just regulate but also offer a sense of hope, helping clients navigate institutional constraints.

6.1.3 | Beyond Caregiving: Protecting Clients From Disillusionment

An alternative form of owning strategies manifests through caregiving (Zacka 2017). However, findings reveal that caregiving extends beyond the pathological disposition described by Zacka. Rather than overextending themselves or neglecting institutional constraints, SLBs adopt a parental role—one that blends encouragement with aspiration management, shaping clients' expectations while maintaining institutional compliance.

Encouragements come as praise or some form of energising the migrant-client. Here, the encouragement can also be a disguised form of control or governing of the migrants (Guo 2013; Kekki 2022). The SLBs may also put effort into motivating the clients in any way they deem relevant in the situation. One of the caseworkers finds it important to strengthen the client's self-image and thus support their career aspirations by giving praise:

> That this person would become more confident about their own skills in a sense that if the caseworker says I can speak Finnish, then it must be true at least to some extent. When the caseworker says I can, I am able, I am good at this, then all that helps to face the scary things (at the work try-out place). (SLB FI1).

Another approach implemented by the SLBs is adopting the role of an important person, either a parent or someone the migrants may find enabling their aspirations. By adopting this approach, they assume they possess a deeper understanding of the system, thereby enabling them to steer their clients toward options deemed most advantageous, ultimately minimising the risk of failure and disillusion.

> When I say realistic and achievable [project or aspiration], that is to say that ...we have the dream and the reality. Clients [refugees] must not say: "I want this project" and that we tell them: "okay" without weighing the pros and cons .....to afterward come to the disillusionment: "but I did not expect that at all" and that we start all over from scratch. This is very bad for the mental health of people (SLB CH15).

While it could be argued that this kind of social support has been shown to strengthen the process of integration (Linde et al. 2021; Udayar et al. 2021; Yakushko et al. 2008). Within this parental thinking, a SLB may also assume a hierarchical relationship toward the migrant-clients, whom they then consider as 'teenagers' or 'young citizens' who do not or cannot have the same capabilities as 'grown-ups,' which in this case refers to the native-born population:

> With migrants, although they are all adults, I tend to think of them as young citizens, even though they would be over 50, so they are teenagers. I give them advice in the same way as to teenagers since they do not have the life experience or experience of the Finnish bureaucracy and our system, so I have no choice. I must use power if it can be called power, we call it counselling. I have to use it on them as they are young citizens (SLB FI1).

To conclude, the concept of owning strategies highlights the nuanced ways in which SLBs navigate their dual role as both enforcers and caregivers to manage clients' aspirations and align them with policy goals. These strategies raise critical questions about the fine line between support and control and whether they ultimately expand or limit clients' access to opportunities that reflect their true aspirations. Yet, SLBs do not always engage with their role in this way. Instead of taking ownership, they may also create distance—either by disengaging from their clients' cases or shifting responsibility elsewhere. The next section explores these disowning strategies and their implications in different national contexts.

6.2 | Disowning: Between Indifference and Externalisation

SLBs also adopt disowning strategies—indifference and externalisation—to distance themselves from difficult decisions. These strategies either disengage SLBs from responsibility or shift it elsewhere, with Swiss and Finnish cases showing both similarities and context-specific differences.

In this section, we distinguish between indifference and externalisation, the latter referring to SLBs' efforts to shift accountability onto external actors or clients themselves.

6.2.1 | Indifference: Coping With Structural Limitations

Indifference, as conceptualised by Zacka (2017), describes a bureaucratic stance in which SLBs disengage from their clients' needs, often as a means of self-preservation. In both Switzerland and Finland, indifference emerges not necessarily from personal apathy but as a response to systemic constraints, such as limited financial and time resources that limit the tools available to SLBs. This form of disowning allows SLBs to cope with their professional limitations while maintaining institutional norms.

In Switzerland, SLBs adopt an indifferent stance when dealing with highly qualified refugees. They acknowledge the complexities these individuals face—such as degree recognition—but simultaneously recognise that their institutional tools are insufficient to address these challenges. As a result, they step back from involvement, framing these cases as beyond their professional reach. As a coping mechanism, they distance themselves from the perceived complexity of the situation and adopt the stance of the *"indifferent"*.

> The (organisation in charge of refugees) is not a professional reorientation centre for people who have already completed university studies, and it is a bit tricky because these people are aware that their paper, their diploma, which they often do not even have, because they were not able to take them, are not necessarily recognized. Or in any case does not have value, we have to go through a whole process of recognition of diplomas which is not supported and that is really a big problem because ultimately if we want to integrate people, we must implement means, and these means are under discussion because it is true that it is a relatively new phenomenon to have so many qualified people. And there, we are really discussing, well not me eh, but we communicate these needs to our superiors (SLB CH18).

By reframing their role as merely communicative rather than interventionist, SLBs absolve themselves of responsibility while shifting the burden of action to their supervisors or systemic limitations.

A similar pattern emerges in Finland, where indifference manifests as passive observation rather than explicit disengagement. SLBs often refrain from intervening in cases where refugees' aspirations align with labour market needs, treating these choices as self-evident and requiring no further scrutiny.

> Right now, I am thinking that quite often this practical nurse is like the profession for many so that okay, they think that I want to be a practical nurse. Then, what is my role there, is there any need to sort it out any further? (SLB FI4).

Here, indifference takes a slightly different form: rather than explicitly stating systemic limitations, SLBs justify non-intervention by assuming that the client's choice is already "realistic". This passive approach places the burden of decision-making solely on the client, effectively removing the SLB from the process.

While Zacka conceptualises indifference as a bureaucratic pathology, this study highlights how indifference often arises as a pragmatic response to systemic limitations. Both Swiss and Finnish SLBs use indifference as a mechanism, allowing them to navigate complex cases without engaging in ethical dilemmas or unrealistic expectations. By highlighting indifference as a structural rather than a pathological response, this study builds on Zacka's framework, illustrating how SLBs use disengagement as a form of professional boundary-setting rather than simple neglect. However, disengagement alone is not always sufficient. In some cases, SLBs go beyond indifference by actively shifting responsibility onto others, either to external institutions or to the clients themselves.

6.2.2 | Externalisation: Shifting Responsibility

While indifference involves distance, externalisation actively shifts responsibility onto other actors, whether institutions or the clients themselves. In both cases, SLBs delegate cases to external organisations for further assessment or encourage clients to take full responsibility for navigating bureaucratic hurdles. This strategy allows SLBs to maintain institutional efficiency while outsourcing complex decision-making to third parties.

In Switzerland, externalisation occurs when SLBs delegate cases to organisations responsible for implementing

integration policies. These organisations act as enforcers, evaluating the realism of clients' aspirations and directing them toward employment or training pathways that are more in line with policy orientations.

> I think the confrontation, it is also sometimes done in the (external organisations in charge of integration policy implementation) programs, I have the impression that sometimes they need to make this progress, not that we tell them ourselves "no you are not going to do a CFC (higher track of vocational training)", but say yes we will register you in a program, and then they will check with you whether the project is realistic (SLB CH19).

Here, SLBs use external organisations as an intermediary, avoiding direct confrontation with clients' aspirations. Additionally, some SLBs externalise responsibility onto the clients themselves, requiring them to independently navigate bureaucratic hurdles:

> And I find that sometimes, it's good for them to directly contact the university and introduce themselves, ask questions, to be able to know the program of studies, to see if it motivates them, drives them or if, on the contrary, he says to himself: "ah, maybe it's too complicated". I don't know what! But I find that it is a good approach which is absolutely not compulsory, but which also shows the determination of the person (SLB CH19).

This subtle shift places the responsibility on clients to prove their commitment to their projects, effectively filtering out those who lack the resources or persistence to pursue their goals independently.

In Finland, externalisation is also common. This strategy was used when the SLBs shifted the responsibility, sometimes even the blame, to elsewhere within the integration system. This could mean the employment office, migrants themselves, employers, or integration policy authorities. SLBs often externalised responsibility to third parties, particularly the employment office, which oversees integration training and decision-making. The SLBs felt it is the employment administration that has the authority to decide what happens with the students' aspirations:

> For instance, if someone is a dressmaker, many men say that they are dressmakers, then the employment office knows that we don't have many jobs as dressmakers. Then we suggest they consider whether they want to re-train themselves (SLB FI1).

In some cases, the SLBs tend to externalise decision-making and responsibility for their aspirations to the clients themselves. It appears as if the SLBs are stepping away from the situation, do not want to get involved, and prefer to leave the migrants alone in their pondering. Externalising echoes here a need for setting professional boundaries or reflecting upon professional ethics when it comes to giving advice to the migrants (Kekki and Linde 2022).

> Well, then the question: what is a good profession, do I need to answer that for you, it is a plumber? Is it right, do they take it as the path to follow and start planning it, that is always quite challenging. So, I cannot really answer that kind of question (SLB FI4).

This study highlights the multifaceted nature of disowning strategies, extending beyond indifference. By expanding Zacka's framework to include externalisation, it offers a new perspective on how SLBs navigate complex migrant and refugee integration cases—not merely as disengaged bureaucrats, but as active agents managing the challenges posed by systemic constraints and coping with moral dilemmas. Moreover, this study nuances indifference not just as mere distance, but also as a means of setting professional boundaries and testing clients' agency.

6.3 | SLBs Perspectives on Systemic Constraints

While Zacka (2017) focuses on SLBs' responses to bureaucratic pressures, this study highlights how structural barriers—degree recognition issues, labour market discrimination, and rigid policies—shape their coping strategies. These constraints limit SLB effectiveness and force ethical dilemmas regarding their role in supporting clients.

In Switzerland, one of the primary structural barriers SLBs encounter is the non-recognition of foreign degrees, which severely limits their ability to assist highly qualified refugees. Many SLBs acknowledge the mismatch between their clients' skills and the available integration tools, yet they often feel limited in addressing these gaps, as expressed by SLB CH18 in his above testimony.

While SLBs recognise the growing presence of highly educated refugees, the rigid Swiss framework for credential recognition leaves them with few alternatives. The inability to intervene effectively pushes SLBs toward a more passive role (disowning strategies), where their function is reduced to informing refugees of systemic barriers rather than actively guiding them on how to overcome them.

In Finland, labour market needs and sector-specific shortages further complicate SLBs' decision-making. SLBs often push their clients toward retraining as a practical solution, given the limited job prospects in many fields. This emphasis on retraining, however, raises ethical concerns about agency and long-term career satisfaction. This tension is evident in the example provided by SLB F1, where employment offices influence career choices by assessing job market demand.

In both cases we clearly see how systemic constraints create a fundamental tension between realism and respect for refugee aspirations. This tension leads many SLBs to question the ethical implications of their interventions. For example, skills assessment tests conducted in French or Finnish may misrepresent their migrant and refugee clients' actual abilities, leading SLBs to doubt the fairness of these evaluations. Similarly, the

practice of "protecting" refugees from failure by steering them toward "realistic" choices raises concerns about whether this inadvertently strips them of essential life experiences, necessary for them to shape their own journey in the host society.

Despite recognising these issues, their ability to challenge it is restricted by structural barriers and the need to maintain institutional efficiency. Indeed, SLBs often feel constrained by the requirements and constant change in migration and integration policies, labour market discrimination, and broader societal conditions, including racism and legal barriers. Additionally, resource limitations, particularly the high caseloads many SLBs manage, make it difficult for them to engage deeply with individual cases. As a result, they employ a combination of owning and disowning strategies—not necessarily as a sign of disengagement from their clients' aspirations, but as a means of navigating their professional limitations while addressing moral dilemmas.

Finally, while SLBs may appear to support clients' aspirations when these align with institutional pathways, it is rare for them to go beyond policy expectations or challenge the framework itself. Genuine support for highly ambitious or unconventional trajectories remains the exception, as most SLBs operate within systemic constraints that channel aspirations toward predefined goals.

7 | Discussion and Conclusion

This study highlights the moral dilemmas SLBs face in balancing policy enforcement with personal ethics. Aspiration management emerges as a key tension, as SLBs navigate systemic constraints while mediating client expectations.

Integration policies in both countries prioritise rapid labour market entry to reduce welfare dependency, reflecting a broader European trend (Lønsmann 2020; Vesterberg 2016; Konle-Seidl 2018; Valenta and Bunar 2010). However, this policy-driven urgency often conflicts with the higher aspirations of many refugees, creating additional challenges for SLBs who must mediate between structural constraints and clients' ambitions.

SLBs' coping strategies in dealing with these moral dilemmas fall into two broad categories: owning (paternalism) and disowning strategies. The owning strategy, which combines elements of caregiving and enforcement, is seen as a way to manage the expectations and ambitions of refugees in a manner that aligns with policy objectives while ostensibly safeguarding their welfare. This study builds on Zacka's framework by showing that SLBs do not simply enforce policies or provide care but rather navigate aspiration management through various degrees of intervention. Unlike Zacka's binary conceptualisation, SLBs strategically oscillate between caregiving and enforcement, shaping client expectations while mitigating ethical dilemmas. By framing their role as educators or mediators rather than strict enforcers, they attempt to balance institutional requirements with individualised support.

Conversely, the disowning strategy involves SLBs distancing themselves from the policy's moral implications or shifting responsibility to external forces. This study nuances Zacka's (2017) concept of indifference by introducing the notion of externalisation—where SLBs delegate responsibility to other actors such as employers, integration offices, or even the clients themselves. Rather than outright disengagement, externalisation allows SLBs to maintain institutional efficiency while minimising their personal involvement. SLBs using this strategy may still enforce downward aspiration management, but do so with a sense of detachment, acknowledging the policy's flaws without feeling personally accountable for them.

The tension between these coping strategies underscores the complex moral landscape that SLBs navigate. While owning strategies mitigate refugee frustrations by setting attainable goals, they reinforce inequalities by limiting their educational and occupational aspirations to pre-defined options. Conversely, disowning strategies may preserve SLBs' moral integrity by distancing them from enforcing policy requirements; however, it can lead to a lack of meaningful support for clients striving to achieve their educational and professional goals.

The use of disowning strategies is not necessarily detrimental. In some cases, expecting clients to proactively implement their projects may foster agency and self-sufficiency. However, this approach also presents challenges, as many migrants and refugees lack the necessary information to navigate complex bureaucratic and legal procedures, such as degree recognition. Administrative processes can be difficult to understand, especially when presented in technical terms and in a language unfamiliar to the client. Without adequate guidance, they may struggle to make informed decisions, leading them to give up on their aspirations. This dynamic further highlights the delicate balance SLBs must maintain in their efforts to navigate the moral and practical challenges of aspiration management.

Furthermore, our study extends Zacka's framework by highlighting the fluid transitions SLBs make between enforcement and disengagement roles. We also identify novel disowning strategies such as externalisation and show how systemic constraints shape the moral coping mechanisms available to SLBs. This dynamic role-switching is not random but reflects ongoing negotiation between institutional pressures and individual ethical judgement. These findings provide a more nuanced understanding of the moral and structural dilemmas faced by SLBs, particularly in the context of migrant and refugee integration.

Indeed, these coping mechanisms implemented by SLBs and their tendency to rely on aspiration management to further deal with their moral dilemmas highlight the limitation of integration policy in both countries, particularly in how systemic constraints shape refugee inclusion in host society. By prioritising short-term employment over long-term career development, integration policies risk limiting migrants and refugees to low-skilled jobs with scarce workforce demand or concentrating them in a single economic sector (Jørgensen and Schulze 2024; Otmani 2023). This, in turn, reinforces segregation and economic inequalities, further marginalising them within host societies. The lack of holistic integration programmes is evident: developing integration programmes that balance immediate employment needs with long-term career goals is challenging but can better align with migrants and refugees' aspirations and help mitigate the moral dilemmas faced by SLBs, promoting more sustainable integration outcomes.

Moreover, recognising the importance of collaboration between different stakeholders involved in the implementation of integration policy is crucial (Busengdal et al. 2023; Trein et al. 2021). Policymakers, employers, educational institutions, and migrant support organisations must work together to create a more supportive environment. This collaboration would enable the alignment of refugees' aspirations with policy objectives, thereby bridging the gap between individual potential and societal expectations. Addressing these recommendations can foster a more inclusive and ethically sound framework, benefiting migrants, refugees, and the host society.

Finally, a limitation of this study is that it does not incorporate the perspectives of migrant and refugee clients from both countries. This absence leaves certain questions unanswered, such as how clients react to SLBs' coping strategies and whether they conform to integration policy requirements out of necessity rather than personal choice. Prior research suggests that refugees often adjust their aspirations downward in response to institutional constraints, rather than based on intrinsic preferences (Morrice et al. 2020; Otmani 2023). Given that many clients rely on social aid and face both legal and economic dependency (Orav 2022), it is likely that they comply with the system rather than challenge it. Future research should explore client perspectives to better understand how these strategies impact their aspirations and agency within the integration process.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] "Refugees" refer to individuals with both refugee status (B permit) and provisional admission status (Refugee F permit and F permit). For simplicity, we use "refugees" throughout the paper to refer to these two profiles, which we expand on in the context section.

[2] The Canton of Vaud, one of Switzerland's largest and most diverse regions, offers numerous career opportunities across various economic sectors, from agriculture to advanced technology. It features a balanced mix of rural and urban areas and hosts many higher educational institutions, including the University of Lausanne and the Federal Institute of Technology (EPFL), providing extensive educational and career prospects.

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Appendix A

TABLE A1 | List of SLBs interviewed in Switzerland (Vaud).

SLB designation	Position	Organisation type
SLB CH1	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of refugee status
SLB CH2	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of refugee status
SLB CH3	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of refugee status
SLB CH4	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of refugee status
SLB CH5	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of refugee status
SLB CH6	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of refugee status
SLB CH7	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of refugee status
SLB CH8	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of refugee status
SLB CH9	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of refugee status
SLB CH10	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of temporary humanitarian status
SLB CH11	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of temporary humanitarian status
SLB CH12	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of temporary humanitarian status
SLB CH13	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of temporary humanitarian status
SLB CH14	Social worker	Public organisation in charge of temporary humanitarian status
SLB CH15	Job coach and career orientation	Public organisation in charge of temporary humanitarian status
SLB CH16	Job coach and career orientation	Public organisation in charge of temporary humanitarian status
SLB CH17	Job coach and career orientation	Public organisation in charge of temporary humanitarian status
SLB CH18	Job coach and career orientation	Public organisation in charge of temporary humanitarian status
SLB CH19	Job coach and career orientation	NGO in charge of the implementation of integration measures
SLB CH20	Job coach and career orientation	NGO in charge of the implementation of integration measures
SLB CH21	Job coach and career orientation	NGO in charge of the implementation of integration measures
SLB CH22	Job coach and career orientation	NGO in charge of the implementation of integration measures

TABLE A2 | List of SLBs interviewed in Finland.

SLB designation	Position	Organisation type
SLB FI1	Career counsellor	VET organisation in charge of the implementation of an integration training programme for migrant jobseekers
SLB FI2	Career counsellor	VET organisation in charge of the implementation of an integration training programme for migrant jobseekers
SLB FI3	Career counsellor	VET organisation in charge of the implementation of an integration training programme for migrant jobseekers
SLB FI4	Career counsellor	Private organisation in charge of the implementation of an integration training programme for migrant jobseekers