

Stereotyping Informs Finnish Career Counselors' Discretion as Street-Level Integrators

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Abstract

This research studies the work of Finnish career counselors who support migrant students and clients. Drawing on the street-level bureaucracy approach, it investigates how stereotyping is applied as a discretionary pattern of practice in career counseling and how this informs the role of career counselors as street-level integrators. The analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with career counselors from basic and secondary education and from an integration training program for adults. The main findings indicate that career counselors use stereotyping both to clarify structural complexity and to simplify personal encounters with migrants.

Keywords

career counseling, migrants, discretion, stereotyping, street-level bureaucracy

Integration and Migration in the Context of a Nordic Welfare State

Career counselors working with migrants implement national integration policies in practice and decide how to use limited resources to achieve goals

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often defined at higher policy levels. This applies to career counselors in both basic and secondary education who support individual career development as well as those working within the public employment sphere, who promote inclusion, equality, and migrants' decision-making. Thus, career counselors can be considered street-level integrators within the integration policy structure, exercising various forms of discretion: having the freedom to make decisions affecting their clients and the circumstances of their lives (Evans, 2010; Lipsky, 2010; Taylor & Kelly, 2006; Zacka, 2017). As a result, integration policy is shaped by career counselors' discretionary actions, which either reinforce or dampen individual integration processes (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017; Bouchard & Carroll, 2002).

Earlier research has shown that migrants are often treated as representatives of a generalized migrant group rather than as individuals with unique life trajectories (Elrick & Farah Schwartzman, 2015; Kurki, 2018; Masoud et al., 2021): in other words, they are stereotyped as "immigrants."¹ Previous studies have shown that minority groups such as migrants tend to be assessed more negatively in street-level contexts (Fording et al., 2011; Harrits & Møller, 2014; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). In our context, the negative cultural assumptions associated with migrants relate to their lower socio-economic or societal status, their role as newcomers expected to assimilate into the host country, their perceived lack of recognized skills and competencies, or their lack of a discernible and acknowledged identity as equal residents in the new environment. Collectively, these cultural assumptions verge on what has been termed the institutionalized suspicion of migrants (Borrelli et al., 2025). Despite considerable political investment in career guidance and counseling across many Western countries (Sultana, 2022), the stereotyping of migrants in this context has not previously been studied, particularly from the point of view of discretionary power.

Stereotyping migrants contradicts both the principles of a welfare state and the professional ethics of career counseling practices, which emphasize the importance of personalized services and encounters. In this article, we ask, "How does the stereotyping perspective inform the discretion of Finnish career counselors?" Empirically, we are interested in how integration goals frame and inform career counseling in practice and how career counselors can reconcile these political goals and tasks with the client's perspective in their work.

There is no agreed-upon scholarly definition of "integration." However, in the European context, integration often implies assimilation in practice: it is the individual migrant's responsibility to change and adapt through a linear, well-defined process according to the expectations of their new host society, which is assumed to be both cohesive and homogeneous (Garcés-Mascreñas

& Penninx, 2016; Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018; Inglis et al., 2019). This assimilation-centric reality persists despite EU member states having committed to implementing integration according to the principle of two-way, mutual accommodation (Council of the European Union, 2004), later expanded to a three-way process that also considers migrants' countries of origin (European Commission, 2011). Furthermore, migrants' compatibility with the new society is often seen as a key criterion for assessing whether they have successfully integrated (de Waal, 2021). In this assessment process, aspects such as education, employment, and health are emphasized over psychosocial needs, questions of identity or security, political or cultural participation, and religious recognition (Garcés-Mascreñas & Penninx, 2016; Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018).

More broadly, some scholars question the very notion of integration, arguing that it is inherently a process of essentialization that reinforces differences related to migration and ethnicity (Dahinden, 2016) or a practice that marginalizes migrants by distancing them from the nonmigrant population (Korteweg, 2017) and failing to examine the native population at all (Schinkel, 2018).

International migration, which can be considered the *raison d'être* for integration policies, has traditionally been regulated by national legislation, as integration has been viewed as the process of incorporating migrants into a "national imagined community" (Scholten & Penninx, 2016, p. 92). In the Nordic countries, including Finland, integration policy is framed in relation to the welfare state (Scholten & Penninx, 2016), wherein the welfare regime—shaped by the prevailing type of labor market in place—defines, among other things, the opportunities available to migrants, and the benefits to which they are entitled (Doomernik & Bruquetas-Callejo, 2016). Julkunen (2017) pointed out that welfare states are themselves historical constructs with shifting priorities. One particularly relevant historical shift in focus—which also helps explain contemporary integration and migration issues—is the one identified Eränta (2013) identified: the question of how economic growth can improve people's well-being, health, and equality has been replaced by the question of what well-being, health, and equality can do for the economy (p. 53). This shift has prompted a need to better adapt welfare policies to issues such as migration (Julkunen, 2017) while changing policy emphasis from income protection to promotion of labor market participation (Bonoli & Natali, 2012). Part of this broader transformation involves new functions adopted within social policy, such as a stronger emphasis on investing in human capital (Bonoli & Natali, 2012). Overall, there has been a trend toward i permanent retrenchment of the welfare state (Pierson, 2001), where neoliberal activation, the responsabilization of individuals, and economic

productivity have taken precedence (Mitchell, 2016), and the link between economics and social policy has grown stronger (Bonoli & Natali, 2012).

A national integration policy can be studied from various perspectives. In Finland, the official integration policy follows EU principles that promote societal receptiveness and migrants' skills development and employment (Ministry of the Interior, 2019). This policy has been criticized, however, for contradictions between its aims and outcomes, that is, for functioning as a mechanism of exclusionary inclusion (Masoud et al., 2021). In other words, although the policy claims to be based on inclusive practices, it in fact perpetuates various forms of exclusion. The policy has also been denounced for reinforcing the marginalization of migrants (Kurki, 2018) or even creating what has been termed misintegration (Kurki et al., 2018), in which migrants do not progress in their lives but instead remain trapped within integrative measures, facing ongoing uncertainty across multiple aspects of their circumstances.

Street-Level Bureaucracy and Discretion

In this study, we examined career counseling for migrants as one measure within the broader integration policy. We draw on the street-level bureaucracy approach (Lipsky, 2010) to capture and analyze the tensions and contradictions inherent in migrant counseling. As with any form of street-level work, career counseling is expected to meet specific policy goals, while its practical implementation requires improvisation and the ability to respond to individual situations (Lipsky, 2010). This often results in a gap between the service ideal and the personal or structural limitations faced by public employees. At the heart of this gap lies the tension between impersonal bureaucracy—designed for efficient decision-making—and the practical reality of street-level bureaucrats, whose work and decisions can significantly shape their clients' lives (Breidahl et al., 2024; Lipsky, 2010). In the context of this study, there is, on the one hand, a gap between the integration policy goal of placing migrants into educational programs or sectors with labor shortages and the counseling ideal of client-centeredness. On the other hand, a gap can also be observed between the integration policy's stated aim of two-way integration and the everyday assimilative practicalities faced by career counselors working with heterogeneous clients in diverse and ever-changing life situations. Career counselors operate within these circumstances as street-level integrators, translating integration policy into integration practices.

Within street-level bureaucracy, we use discretion as a conceptual lens through which to examine career counseling practices. Here, we adopt an understanding of discretion as an interpretive space (Tummers & Bekkers,

2014) and focus on how individual street-level bureaucrats interpret and apply discretion, rather than viewing it as something exercised or regulated in a uniform manner within a given context. We see discretion, then, as something career counselors negotiate and construct and that evolves over time in a fluid manner. Our starting point is that each career counselor applies discretion in various ways, including adapting their discretionary actions to each individual encounter with a counselee. Furthermore, we approach the exercise of discretion both as constituting the basis of welfare state politics (Brodkin, 2019) and as involving decisions about one's client, including determining applicable benefits and sanctions (Lipsky, 2010). Street-level bureaucrats are expected to exercise discretion as part of their duties (Borrelli et al., 2025), and in doing so, they are bound by both formal and informal norms while frequently encountering situations in which existing rules do not adequately support decision-making or service delivery (Zacka, 2017). The role of discretion becomes more significant as managerial control and legislative clarity diminish (Lipsky, 2010), given that street-level bureaucrats often face situations that are too complex for standardized responses (Breidahl et al., 2024; Loyens & Maesschalck, 2010).

The importance of discretion lies in its potential to produce patterns of practice (Brodkin, 2019) within street-level work, wherein the background of bureaucrats influences their decision-making (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018). Here, patterns of practice are understood as informal behavioral tendencies that help street-level bureaucrats manage their workloads and shape policies (Brodkin, 2019) and as the outcomes of a complex web of factors (Borrelli et al., 2025). Patterns of practice have consequences for what kinds of options people have, what services they can access, how they are perceived and defined by others, and whether their voices are heard within the street-level services they engage with (Brodkin, 2019). Our primary interest is to investigate how career counselors appear to perceive and define the migrants with whom they work.

In the context of our study, we considered stereotyping to be one discretionary pattern of practice. Stereotyping has been conceptualized in various ways. For Lipsky (2010), stereotyping represents a mental shortcut used in street-level work, as bureaucrats aim to simplify their tasks. Harrits (2019) saw stereotypes as tools that could be utilized in discretionary reasoning, asserting that they are evident not only in decision-making but also in the interpretation of information and the justification of discretionary choices.

In Lipsky's (2010) framework, stereotyping can take the form of either a coping or a categorization approach. Coping refers to reducing informational uncertainty through various strategies, often intended to alleviate stress and manage heavy workloads. These strategies can be understood as routines

developed to deal with work-related and work-induced stress, to maximize agency effectiveness, or to enhance client responsiveness (Lipsky, 2010). Coping strategies can also be seen as ways to manage limited resources (Brodtkin, 2012), to aid street-level bureaucrats in their decision-making processes (Taylor & Kelly, 2006), and to increase their practical independence (Loyens & Maesschalck, 2010).

Categorization, on the other hand, refers to instances in which stereotypes are based on shared cultural assumptions focused on the moral characteristics of specific groups (Lipsky, 2010). In the context of integration, scholars have conceptualized categorization in different ways. Kurki (2018) used the concept of immigrantization to describe the process of producing a category of “immigrants” through integration policies and educational practices. This process has also been referred to as ethnicized employability (Vesterberg, 2016) or decapitalization (Lønsmann, 2020), in which individuals’ skills or employment potential are emphasized in ways that reduce their identities to a single dimension. What coping and categorization share is that, as patterns of practice, they contribute to either clarifying or simplifying street-level work.

Career Counseling as a Street-Level Integrative Practice

Providing career counseling (referred to as “counseling” henceforth) to migrants can be seen as a tool for promoting and implementing integration and represents an institutionalized part of both the educational structure and labor market policy (Kalalahti et al., 2020). Simultaneously, counseling has been criticized for its embedded controversies, such as promoting individual responsibility and the ideal of continuous self-development (Hooley et al., 2019; Prilleltensky & Stead, 2012). However, career counselors who implement integrative practices in educational and employment structures have been shown to play an important role in migrant integration (Sultana, 2022; Udayar et al., 2021; Yakushko et al., 2008). In a sense, counselors represent the welfare state in their everyday encounters with clients, turning integration policies into lived realities.

A typical feature of counseling as a professional activity is that it involves a dual tension. Professional and ethical principles emphasize that counseling should support both individual agency and clients’ social inclusion (Watts, 1996). Therefore, counseling is a balancing act between individual and societal needs and aspirations.

From an integration perspective, earlier studies have examined the counseling of migrants primarily from the clients’ point of view—for instance, how young migrants experience the importance of language proficiency and

higher education for entering society (Sharif, 2017) or how migrants seeking accreditation for their teaching qualifications find themselves in a marginal labor market position (Ennerberg, 2022). From a structural perspective, the counseling of migrants has been studied through the lens of how integration measures reinforce the marginalization of migrants, contribute to creating segregation and othering (Borrelli, 2021b; Kurki, 2018), and construct employable subjects (Masoud et al., 2021). Less attention has been given, however, to the perspective of counselors. Research shows that counselors do not always fully consider the interests of the people they work with (Bjuhr, 2019; Kekki, 2022; Vehviläinen & Souto, 2022) or that they direct clients toward occupations and sectors with labor shortages (Kekki & Linde, 2024; Linde et al., 2021).

In the street-level bureaucracy literature, a few studies have focused specifically on migrants, integration, and the discretionary actions of street-level workers. Regarding the relationship between organizational pressure (e.g., workload) and anti-immigration attitudes, it has been shown that greater perceived discretion decreases the likelihood of experiencing work with migrants as difficult (Schütze & Johansson, 2020). At the same time, racial classifications have been found to inform discretionary actions, leading to increased sanctioning of non-white clients (Schram et al., 2009). Categorization has been identified as a component of exclusionary practices, contributing to the othering of clients and reinforcing distinctions between those who “belong” and those who do not (Borrelli, 2021a). Categorization also serves as a tool for managing complexity in street-level work by operationalizing cultural awareness through implicit processes (Volckmar-Eeg, 2021).

In more general terms, these dynamics may stem from organizational premises that lead to the social construction of client categories (Rosenthal & Peccei, 2006) or to the disentanglement of groups—such as asylum seekers in the United States—through exclusionary practices (Lens, 2024). Discretionary actions of street-level workers have even been found to shape asylum policy rules (Miaz, 2024) and child protection policies for unaccompanied refugee minors (Sichling, 2024).

Several Nordic studies have illustrated how counselors navigate the tension between organizational requirements and client-centeredness. For example, employees at the Swedish Public Employment Service working in an introduction program for migrants employed both client-centered and authority-centered coping strategies, either adopting a holistic view of clients’ lives or prioritizing organizational rules (Eriksson & Johansson, 2022). Caseworkers at Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration offices used a strategy known as emotional creaming to favor migrant clients they judged more likely to succeed (Volckmar-Eeg & Vassenden, 2022). Sundbäck (2024)

has shown how street-level bureaucrats position themselves between migrant clients and the institutional system through their sensemaking of trust.

Our research complements this picture by introducing the concept of discretion specifically into the field of career guidance and counseling as street-level work and by elaborating on how stereotyping informs discretionary patterns of practice within this context. Rather than focusing on street-level clients, we shift the gaze toward the street-level bureaucrats themselves, examining Finnish counselors working in educational and labor market settings. We are especially interested in how the phenomenon of stereotyping manifests in counseling encounters and practices and how it informs counselors' discretion in decision-making, goal setting, and professional ethics in these situations.

Empirical Context

The annual number of nonnational migrants to Finland grew from 6,500 in 1990 to 28,000 in 2021 (Statistics Finland, n.d.), when migrants accounted for 8% of Finland's total population (Integration Database, 2022). The largest migrant groups include EU citizens, their family members, and third-country nationals who moved to Finland for family reunification (Kazi et al., 2019). According to Finnish legislation, the aim of integration is "to provide immigrants [sic] with the knowledge and skills required in the society and working life and to provide them with support" (Ministry of Employment and the Economy, 2012, sec. 3). This aim applies to adults, families, and children, including unaccompanied minors (Ministry of Employment and the Economy, 2010). Children are entitled to participate in basic education, regardless of their residence permit status. Adult migrants registered as unemployed jobseekers are required to attend a national integration training program. This applies to foreign nationals who hold valid residence permits and have the right to reside in Finland for the purpose of seeking and obtaining employment (Ministry of Employment and the Economy, 2010, 2012).

This article draws on two datasets from Finland that were studied as empirical contexts for counseling, forming a continuum from children and teenagers to adults. The first dataset comprises interviews with counselors working in basic and secondary education (including adult education). The second dataset concerns counseling practices within an integration training program aimed at adult jobseekers with migration backgrounds. Both contexts share the goal of supporting individuals' integration into Finnish society through education and employment, and thus both represent components of the national integration policy. In both settings, counselors' work is guided by the ethical guidelines of the International Association for Educational and

Vocational Guidance (International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance [IAEVG], 2017).

The goals of both basic and secondary education include supporting the integration of pupils and students with a migration background into Finnish society (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2014, 2019). This is accomplished by familiarizing them with Finnish society, strengthening their civic skills, and providing them with second-language instruction (Finnish or Swedish, depending on the region). In Finland, all students in basic and secondary education are entitled to receive personal guidance and career counseling. In addition, although counseling is expected to support the development of students' educational and employment skills, there is no requirement to create specific integration plans. The emphasis is on readiness for lifelong learning, self-knowledge, self-reflection, agency skills, and, in the case of migrants, actions that promote integration (A. M. Souto, 2020).

In the integration training program, the main subjects taught are Finnish (or Swedish) language and civic skills. Civic skills include work try-out periods and counseling; the latter consists of face-to-face discussions between the counselor and the student, focusing mainly on the student's educational and employment choices but also on topical personal issues relevant to the student. Although there are no formal national requirements for the qualifications or educational backgrounds of counselors, each program provider defines counselors' tasks locally in a counseling plan (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2012; Ministry of Employment and the Economy, 2010). The integration training program curriculum defines career counseling as promoting inclusion and social equality and supporting migrants in making decisions about their own lives, education, and employment (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2012). While the program's main focus is on language acquisition, there is also a strong emphasis on securing employment.

Counseling provides a valuable empirical example of discretion, as it falls under both educational and labor market policy domains; however, counseling practices are not explicitly regulated or managed by either policy. Thus, the role of discretion can be expected to expand under such circumstances (Lipsky, 2010). On the one hand, there is a clear gap between the integration policy goal of placing migrants into educational programs or labor-shortage sectors and the counseling ideal of client-centeredness. On the other hand, a gap also exists between the policy's aim of two-way integration and the everyday practicalities faced by counselors working with diverse clients in constantly changing life situations.

The organizational tasks of counseling combine the provision of services to clients with the fulfillment of clearly defined regulatory duties (Jensen, 2018). The service-providing aspect of the counselor's work consists of the

expectation that each client will progress to the next educational level. Nevertheless, counselors have both the responsibility and the authority to carry out the counseling process as they deem appropriate. Counseling outcomes are monitored through quantitative measures, such as clients applying for an educational program or securing a job. In this framework, the client's personal goals or preferences may not be prioritized; rather, the focus is on aligning with a forward-moving integration process. The regulatory side of counseling can be seen, for instance, in relation to employment administration. Counselors working in the integration training program report back to the employment office on whether their clients are taking the anticipated steps forward. Failing to make the desired progress may affect clients' access to unemployment benefits and services. Thus, counselors can be studied as street-level bureaucrats who implement broad and often vague integration policies through their discretionary actions, which influence the lives and choices of their clients.

Data and Methodology

Our research includes two complementary datasets collected in 2019 to 2020, comprising 28 interviews with 14 participants working in two different counseling contexts and with different age groups. The first, collected by Author 2, consists of 10 semi-structured interviews with 10 counselors (three from basic education and seven from secondary education) working in different organizations in southern and eastern Finland. Three of these counselors had migration backgrounds themselves.

Counselors working in basic or secondary education are required to hold a master's degree. Seven of the interviewed counselors had formal counseling qualifications, while the rest held a teacher qualification or a degree in social work. In basic education, the counselors worked with pupils in the final two grades (eighth and ninth). In secondary education, including both general upper secondary education and vocational education and training, the counselors represented both sectors and worked with students aged 16 to 60. In both basic and secondary education, the counselors also worked with native-born students. The thematic interviews focused on the counselors' work with migrants, with a special emphasis on societal inequalities and the challenges involved in integration work. Altogether, the first dataset contains close to 15 hours (14 hours and 56 minutes) of interview material.

The second dataset, collected by Author 1 from the integration training program, includes 18 semi-structured interviews with four counselors from different organizations in southern Finland. These counselors worked with students aged 17 to 60; all had higher education degrees and had worked in the program for varying lengths of time. None had a migration background or

a formal counseling qualification, but all held teacher qualifications. All counselors in the integration program worked exclusively with migrant students. In the integration training program, interviews were carried out using a background dataset of 18 recorded counseling sessions between the same counselors and their students. These sessions were analyzed together with the counselors using the stimulated recall method (Bloom, 1953). This means that when collecting the second dataset, each of the four counselors participating in the interviews watched and analyzed their own counseling discussions from the background dataset. Each of the 18 counselor interviews focused on one video-recorded counseling session. The discussions in the background dataset centered on establishing the students' career paths and supporting them in making the necessary educational and employment decisions. In the second dataset's counselor interviews, the focus was on student counseling and the educational and employment support provided to students, including the next career steps to be taken. Altogether, this second dataset contains 15 hours and 48 minutes of interviews.

In developing this article, we jointly discussed the interview data, built a common analytical framework, and formulated the findings. We conducted a thematic analysis that emphasized the dialog between theory and data, drawing on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019). In our analysis, we alternated between data-driven and theory-driven readings, with the role of central theoretical concepts becoming more prominent as the analysis moved forward. First, we read through our data, identifying and coding sections in which we interpreted that the counselors used discretion in their work: for example, how various goals framed their work, what kinds of decisions they made in different situations, or how they responded to uncertain professional circumstances demanding some kind of action.

After the initial round of analysis, we discovered that the themes describing the counselors' use of discretion were both highly diverse and remarkably similar across the two datasets. To narrow the scope of our analysis, we focused on discretion involving professional ethics, as it emerged as the most compelling dimension. The counselors expressed the greatest uncertainty and conflicting views about their actions in circumstances requiring this type of discretion. We further analyzed the interviews to identify what made these situations professionally challenging from an ethical perspective and how counselors chose to proceed in such cases.

Using stereotyping as an analytical lens, we investigated how counselors responded to the tension between anticipated integration goals and their own everyday responsibilities when working with migrants. We examined how the counselors coped with this tension and how stereotyping manifested in the counseling situations. We subsequently searched for themes that best characterized both datasets and looked for connecting factors and differences

between the two in relation to value discretion. Finally, we constructed a synthesis based on our findings.

Empirical Findings

As already stated, earlier studies of integration policies have shown that within the integration framework, people are often not met as individuals but rather as archetypal migrants—"immigrants"—defined and shaped by the integration policy. This categorization (and the simultaneous othering of people) was also present in the counselors' interviews. According to our analysis, this kind of stereotyping (Harrits, 2019; Lipsky, 2010) functions both as a framework for integration policy and as a condition for counseling within its sphere. The counselor interviews revealed stereotyping operating on two dimensions: one regarding the integration structures, where it served as a clarifying pattern of practice for counselors, and the other the counseling encounters, where it served as a simplifying pattern of practice. Additionally, the counselors described some modest signs of resistance to the stereotyping approach, which in turn revealed the socially and culturally organizing power of stereotyping in the implementation of the integration policy.

Stereotyping as a Pattern of Practice to Clarify Structural Complexity

A crucial point in counseling is the ethical tension between implementing holistic practices (i.e., considering a person's entire life trajectory rather than only selecting aspects) and integrating policy goals into those practices. Counselors need to reflect on how compatible the policies are with their work realities (Brodkin, 2012) and subsequently perform what Zacka (2017) refers to as "gymnastics with themselves," choosing how to proceed professionally and ethically in counseling situations when faced with structural complexity. In the counselor interviews, this tension was evident in moments when counselors described hesitation in a particular situation or when deciding which course of action to take. Thus, counselors expressed uncertainty, which can be a source of discretion (Zacka, 2017). For example, one counselor described the professional dynamic that characterized encounters in the integration training program:

There are probably some problems just related to whether one succeeds in being fair and, especially, equal. It is a question of whether I am here [indicates an equal position] or there [indicates a hierarchical relationship] and will students have it the way they wish. It is not just [my viewpoint as] the counselor, but there is somewhere firstly the employment office and all the instructions they give, and all the bureaucracy. (Counselor, Integration Training Program)

Here, the counselor indicated a need to focus more on reflecting on the counseling encounter itself rather than on its technical aspects. On the one hand, they accentuated the importance of treating each client ideally on an equal basis. On the other hand, the counselor expressed the difficulty of carrying out counseling autonomously, given the various organizational and systemic constraints influencing it: the institutional framework of integration training with its labor market policy goals, bureaucratic regulations, and the duties of other professionals involved. These factors shape not only the counselor's opportunities but also the treatment that clients ultimately receive, as the necessity of efficiently following the rules often takes precedence over implementing an individualized approach. Thus, structural complexity directs counselors to handle students by stereotyping them through their migrant status within the employment system.

Stereotyping as a discretionary pattern of practice also becomes visible in the justifications and solutions counselors describe using when exercising discretion. The following quotation illustrates how the counselor uses the client's unfamiliarity with the Finnish system to justify their discretion in deciding how to proceed and what direction to take in the situation:

As our clients do not know the existing causalities, they do not know how the system works and how those things work [. . .] But then, in my opinion, the professional has a duty to make sure whether all the prerequisites are met [for getting a job]: is it possible, is it useful, or would it be better to help the client toward some other goal instead? (Counselor, Preparatory Education for Vocational Education)

In these types of situations, stereotyping was based not only on the client's lack of knowledge of the Finnish system but also on their Finnish language skills and residence permit status, both of which are defining factors in a person's ability to seek employment in Finland. (These were the prerequisites to which the counselor was referring.) Thus, checking these aspects (rather than addressing the issues potentially raised by the students themselves) became the primary pattern that directed the counselor's work and defined the student's possibilities for action. Simultaneously, observable client characteristics were used as a quick pathway to understanding their identities (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018). Stereotyping the student primarily as an immigrant informed the counselor's discretionary actions.

Choosing an appropriate pattern of practice to deal with real or anticipated structural complexity is not always straightforward for counselors. This may involve maintaining a certain distance from the client and using various forms of stereotyping as leverage in this process (see also Belabas & Gerrits, 2017). Thus, a counselor described a student interested in finding a work try-out position in the construction business:

It is difficult to get a work try-out place at a building site, as this requires all sorts of taxation documents. It is easier [to secure a place] in a restaurant. I could have been better [when counseling the student], as I could have continued the discussion about the work try-out period, as the student ended up going [to a completely different place]. So, I think it was a bit of a lost opportunity, since one should have a chance to try what one is interested in. . . I could have acted in a better way. (Counselor, Integration Training Program)

The pattern here appears to be the choice *not* to support the student in pursuing the more difficult path (i.e., securing a try-out placement at a construction site) but instead to guide them toward an easier option. The outcome of the more difficult route was uncertain and would have required significantly more effort from both the student and the counselor. Therefore, it did not seem like a worthwhile endeavor. Instead of tackling the challenges posed by the construction sector, such as taxation document requirements, the counselor opted for a less burdensome route that avoided structural complexity altogether.

This incident reflects what Watkins-Hayes (2009) termed “efficiency engineering,” in which street-level bureaucrats avoid addressing the real issues their clients face. In this instance, stereotyping manifests as a mental shortcut (Lipsky, 2010) by narrowing the client’s choices. In this way, it becomes a form of governing, echoing the bureaucratic disposition of indifference (Zacka, 2017): the counselor distances themselves from deep involvement in the client’s situation. Yet, the counselor later reflected on how the session could have been improved: by resisting labor market constraints and engaging more deeply with the client’s personal goals. The situation therefore involved an implicit ethical tension that remained unaddressed during the actual counseling discussion.

Stereotyping as a Simplifying Pattern of Practice for Personal Encounters

Stereotyping also appears to function as a pattern of practice on which counselors rely when navigating and coping with ethical tensions and interpersonal conflicts in their work. In addition, adopting stereotyping as an operational pattern appears to involve elements of managing client expectations and reframing situations. Previous research has shown that some street-level bureaucrats use such strategies when confronted with difficult encounters (Trappenburg et al., 2022). Our data likewise contain examples of counselors describing how they adjust counseling goals and content more according to students’ anticipated circumstances than their personal aspirations. For instance, some counselors would change the counseling goals to less ambitious ones if

the student had only elementary Finnish skills, focusing instead on taking the next step rather than engaging in a more comprehensive counseling discussion about the student's life trajectory and future direction. This seemed to occur particularly when interpretation services were unavailable and time resources were scarce:

I am always quite unsure whether the topic we are dealing with becomes understood [by the student], so often I think that it is like talking to a child: one should ask many times whether one has been understood. That is really a challenge. (Counselor, Integration Training Program)

This counselor chose to approach the student as someone not fully equal in order to ensure that the encounter retained some degree of meaning for both parties. Positioning the student as lacking sufficient Finnish language skills became the pattern that directed the counselor's discretion. Thus, stereotyping the student and viewing them primarily through the lens of their immigrant status—manifested here by insufficient Finnish proficiency—guided the counselor in determining how to channel their professional engagement. This may also be interpreted as an example of opportunity-centered (Bassot, 2021), rather than client-centered, counseling, in which the counselor determines which opportunities are available and realistic within the context of the encounter.

Basic and secondary education as well as the integration training program are all regulated by the Finnish integration policy, which steers migrants specifically toward sectors experiencing labor shortages, often in low-income occupations (Ahmad, 2019; A.-M. Souto & Sotkasiira, 2022). These policy goals were clearly present in the counselor interviews. The counselors found it particularly challenging to work with clients who did not fit the normative profile of a migrant jobseeker. This occurred, for example, when a person with a migration background arrived in Finland with a higher education degree and set their personal educational or employment goals accordingly:

If a person has a higher education degree, then it is really challenging [. . .] For example, if someone is a lawyer then they probably have quite high expectations: how does one then counsel them in a more realistic direction, as there can be quite a threshold for a lawyer [to overcome], to start thinking they would need to become a bus driver instead; that's what causes conflicts and troubles in the counseling. . . (Counselor, Integration Training Program)

Here, the counselor was trying to find a way to reduce the student's expectations. Such reduction also meant making these expectations more realistic, as deemed by the counselor. The student's "immigrant status" created an unwelcoming situation for the counselor, who was expected to succeed in directing

the student into a suitable career instead of enabling them to continue in their chosen profession in Finland. Adhering to the anticipated norms of the labor market and ensuring that supply and demand in this market are aligned led to the othering of the student (Sultana, 2018). The student's prospects were assessed through their anticipated compatibility with Finnish society, reflecting the ethnicized labor market situation—as seen by the system and by the counselor, who represents the system as a street-level integrator. The counselor ended up, even if reluctantly, stereotyping the student as lacking the correct aspirations and manipulating them on behalf of the system (Lipsky, 2010), thus subjecting them to a process of decapitalization by discouraging capital formation in high-skilled jobs (Lønsmann, 2020).

Modest Signs of Resistance to Stereotyping

In our data, both students and counselors resisted the standard integration process or counseling norms, including its embedded practices of stereotyping and client processing. For instance, some students operated on their own terms or followed their own goals and, by doing so, did not position themselves as targets or subjects of the integration policy or submitted to stereotyping. Paradoxically, both in the Finnish context in general and in counseling specifically, individual freedom and autonomy are highly valued, sometimes to the extent that a self-cultivating, entrepreneurial individual is seen as the ideal (Paju et al., 2020). In the context of migration, however, students who behave in this way may be perceived as potential “integration risks” or “integration problems” by counselors and as lacking the appropriate devotion or gratitude often expected from clients in a migrant position (Kurki, 2018). At the same time, counseling becomes difficult and even futile in such cases because it does not produce the expected outcome: clients can “disappear” from the organization or the counseling relationship and fail to make the “proper” next move by applying to an education program, a job, or a practical training program. One counselor discussed their relationship with former students:

Another thing that annoys me every day in this job is that some of the students do not want to make any effort, nothing interests them. . . then it is nice when sometimes you meet a person in town, especially one of these who were never interested in getting further in their lives, and then they say that they have got a job. (Counselor, Integration Training Program)

The counselor interpreted the student's initial low engagement as unexpected and disappointing. Instead of participating, the student withdrew from the

process, despite available support. The student ended up being stereotyped by the counselor as a problem based on the counselor's judgment of the migrants they were counseling. The behavior of this student can be interpreted as non-submission to becoming a subject of the integrative, bureaucratic process or as resistance to being funneled into the labor market according to the system's needs (Kekki & Linde, 2024; Masoud et al., 2021). From the counselor's point of view, it could be viewed either as a failure of the social control element embedded in the counseling process, a breakdown of the client-processing function of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010) or as a potential source of conflict due to the perceived noncompliance on the client's part (Nguyen, 2020).

Some of the counselors we interviewed questioned the predestined nature of the integration process and its associated practices. More specifically, they appeared to challenge both the institutional rules embedded in their work and the pattern of practice many counselors commonly employed: the stereotyping of their students, which includes the assimilative assumption of proper integration. Instead, these counselors practiced client-centeredness according to their own professional ethics and aimed to listen more attentively to the client. In doing so, they also questioned the culturally assimilative assumptions underlying integrative and educational practices. Yet, this approach seemed to jeopardize their sense of belonging within their work communities. One counselor discussed their relationship with some students and how it may have differed from their colleagues' relationships with the same students:

For example, now in May, it was Ramadan, but the students were ashamed to tell the teachers that they did not feel well at all, so they came to my office to rest a bit, as it was really hot, and they were not eating anything. [. . .] I would spend all the breaks in the corridors and speak with the students and ask how they are doing; so I sought active contact with them. But all that means I don't spend much time in the staff room, so I am a bit of an outsider in the work community. (Counselor, Basic Education)

The normative approach to counseling students with a migration background would be to block out the spiritual or cultural aspects of their lives within the school context. In contrast, this counselor chose to embrace the more personal aspects of the students' lives as part of their work and relationships with the students. The counselor seemed to reflect on the standard of reasonableness (Zacka, 2017), which functions as an internal constraint on the proper use of discretion. By setting themselves slightly apart from their coworkers, this counselor also appeared to inadvertently criticize the normatively adequate or acceptable way of dealing with students, one in which priority is

given to adherence to organizational rules and loyalty to colleagues. The counselor also ended up feeling lonely in their workplace. This demonstrates how the regulatory side of the work outweighs the service-providing side in this context (Jensen, 2018). This conventional professional approach also appears to define how migrant students are expected to be and behave, often with a strong, culturally assimilative assumption (Kurki, 2018). These expectations can easily clash with the lived realities of migrants (Kekki & Linde, 2024), and the counselor must exercise both vigilance and courage to act against the prevailing norm. Choosing such a “radical” pattern of practice seemed to grant the counselor more space to see the students beyond their immigrantness but added a different kind of burden to their work.

As seen above, there appear to be limits to accepted autonomous actions, not only for counselors but also for migrant clients (Masoud et al., 2021). Another counselor made a cautious observation about how students were unavoidably expected to participate in counseling and were not encouraged to display autonomy in this regard. In this context, autonomy appeared more as a sign of failure to comply with the expected integration process or its sequence:

Surely, those counseling situations are also a bit like the students are nervous to come to them, so the starting point is not an equal one. There is the counselor, and then the student, who replies to questions as if needing to please [the counselor]. For me, it would be totally ok if someone said that they don't know what they want and that it's really none of my business, so that would also be both fair and true. . . (Counselor, Integration Training Program)

The counselor's comment shows that students seldom refuse to engage in counseling. At the same time, the quote illustrates how the integration process is expected to follow a certain route in which the stereotypical roles and positions of both counselor and student are more or less predetermined. The student is expected to be integrated according to the system, and the counselor is expected to act as an active integrator in that process. Both parties assume their roles in relation to these stereotypes. The difficulty in resisting these positions demonstrates the power of stereotyping as a pattern of practice in the implementation of integration policy.

Discussion

Counselors do not seem to have opportunity to a person-centered, neutral space within their institutional settings, regardless of whether they work in an educational institution or in an integration training program. The integration

policy ideal of two-way, mutual dynamic integration is overruled by the harsh realities of the counseling practice: maintaining a goal-oriented approach in line with employment objectives takes precedence. Counselors experience not only a responsibility to deliver but also uncertainty and, ultimately, loneliness when trying to follow their own professional ethics. Here, leaning on stereotyping as a pattern of practice helps clarify the structural complexity and integration landscape for counselors.

As demonstrated above, the political and organizational framework regulating counselors' work does not acknowledge alternative migrant realities or other possible life paths. Because the integration policy defines who its clients are, there are instances in which migrant students do not fit the prevailing definition. Instead, they may be something else, or more, than this "ideal" client profile (Hooley et al., 2019; Kekki & Linde, 2024). Counselors are often left alone in such situations and find it problematic to direct individuals toward occupations in which they are not interested. Simultaneously, the political and organizational goals set for migrant counseling include certain forms of successful educational transitions. This compels counselors to offer students options that may conflict with their own aspirations but align with the integration policy. In this process, stereotyping becomes a convenient pattern of practice that simplifies personal encounters, making them more manageable for counselors.

Refusing the expected role of integrator is rare among counselors. In our dataset, such instances were exceptional, and the examples presented here represent a radical professional approach to the work. However, being a radical outsider may result in frustration or feelings of isolation (A.-M. Souto & Sotkasiira, 2022). In such situations, there appears to be little space for reforming or improving counseling practices, as the organizational structure or the anticipated integration process does not support such efforts. Therefore, the gap between professional ideals and daily challenges widens, reinforcing the counselor's role as a street-level integrator. The client's nonsubmission can be seen as criticism of or a challenge to the stereotyping embedded in counseling, a phenomenon that may take various forms or be enacted through different mechanisms. In our data, this may involve being too autonomous or adopting alternative cultural approaches to organizing one's life. For the counselor, the outcome may be an experience of failure or inconvenience in their role as a street-level worker. The client's nonsubmission weakens the counselor's professional identity by blurring professional boundaries and creating tensions between organizational and professional goals (Nguyen, 2020). In response, the counselor may feel pressured to develop informal patterns of practice, such as othering, to cope with the ambiguity of the situation (Borrelli, 2021b) and to reduce their own workload.

Conclusion

Discretion is inevitable and essential to street-level work because bureaucrats operate in complex contexts that lack standardized solutions and, by the nature of their work, are tasked with constructing solutions and making decisions (Loyens & Maesschalck, 2010). This also describes the reality of counseling migrants, in which—despite the institutional and systemic integrative paths sketched out and available for migrant clients—counselors must find individual solutions to each client's situation and make decisions preferably with them or, if necessary, on their behalf. Here, their chosen discretionary actions inevitably play an important role.

In a sense, the integration policy is a given circumstance for counselors; they do not perform their duties in a neutral space. Our analysis shows how counselors strongly operate within the integration system and on its terms and need to adjust their own work according to these terms as they see appropriate. Since counseling encompasses challenging and therefore complicated situations that are not recognized at the level of work rules—and thus are not regulated or supervised at the institutional or organizational level—counselors often find themselves in professionally isolated positions that require them to exercise discretion to a greater extent. From the counselor's perspective, one does not necessarily know to whom to listen or how to proceed: the work involves constant deliberation about whether to prioritize regulatory tasks or focus on providing services to clients (Jensen, 2018). This reflects a process of calibrating one's personal involvement in the work or adjusting the nature of one's engagement (Zacka, 2017), thereby intensifying the challenges counselors face, particularly in terms of ethical considerations and value discretion. Although the ubiquitous nature of discretion is a core feature of their work as street-level bureaucrats (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), it is also a source of uncertainty (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018). Overall, while the use of discretion may serve as an important source of motivation for counselors, it can also become a constraining pattern of practice that situates them between policy directives and client realities.

Counselors' discretion is often exercised in defining professional goals and determining the roles available to migrants, both of which are derived from the policy goals. In doing so, counselors rely on the welfare regime's considerations about access to opportunities and the benefits to which migrants are entitled. Our findings show that this practice often coincides with counselors attaching certain cultural assumptions to migrants and, in the process, turning them into "immigrants." Migrants are then perceived as lacking the necessary or anticipated skills or documentation, or as having failed to make realistic plans—as judged by the counselors. Migrants are also seen as not being equal to native-born students or clients or, in some cases, as

problematic for the counseling process (and potentially for the integration structures more broadly). Based on these assumptions, whether conscious or unconscious, counselors may adopt a pattern of practice rooted in stereotyping the people with whom they work, whether students in school or adult learners in integration training programs.

The adoption of a stereotyping perspective—generally treating people as simply “immigrants”—enables counselors to exercise discretion, as it helps them clarify structural complexity and simplify the counseling situation into a more manageable task. At the same time, stereotyping serves as a framework that defines professional boundaries and functions as a tool to help counselors navigate their daily responsibilities by creating space and distance from their students’ complex life situations. For those being counseled, however, this strategy yields a negative outcome (Lipsky, 2010) by reducing them to one-dimensional figures: “migrants,” “immigrants.”

This situation places counselors in a contradictory position. Although the overarching Finnish integration policy defines reciprocal integration as the goal, and holistic, client-centered counseling is seen as an instrument to achieve this goal, actual practices diverge. When counselors, as street-level integrators, rely on stereotyping as their discretionary pattern of practice—using it to clarify structural complexity or simplify personal encounters, it flattens the integration landscape. The focus shifts to education and employment as the central elements of integration and assimilation. Consequently, an assimilative approach becomes embedded in counseling encounters, positioning migrants as passive recipients of integration measures.

This dynamic further creates a built-in double standard: the range of opportunities and options narrows, with only certain paths becoming accessible to migrants. This contributes to sustaining an unequal distribution of resources in society and reinforces inequalities (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018). In this way, the lived realities of integration practices conflict with the goals the integration policy articulates. The result for counselors, as street-level integrators, is a lonely professional space with few opportunities to challenge or resist normative assumptions, forcing them to seek informal ways to cope with the situation.

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Ethical Considerations

All the persons involved in this research volunteered to participate and provided their written consent. For the Finnish data, the ethical principles defined by the institutions

involved were followed. No ethical review was conducted, as there are no research design elements that required it.

Author Contributions

Both authors contributed to the study conception and design. Both collected and conducted the primary analysis of their own data: Anne-Mari Souto for the basic and secondary education, and Miika Kekki for the integration training program. Miika Kekki has, as first author, been responsible for the deeper analysis beyond the joint discussions for the combined dataset as well as the text production. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to preserving individuals' privacy under the European General Data Protection Regulation.

Note

1. In this article, we use the term “migrant” to refer to people who migrate from one country to another for any given reason and the term “immigrant” to refer to the stereotyped migrants to whom certain cultural assumptions are ascribed.

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