

# Professionally Trusting by Default? Notions of Trust in the German System of Welfare support for Families

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# Professionally Trusting by Default? Notions of Trust in the German System of Welfare support for Families

Stephanie Schneider and Ulrike Zschache

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The welfare state regime and the organisation of social assistance in Germany

Esping-Andersen's classic typology considers the German welfare state as the archetypal example of the conservative model (1990). It features a contribution-based and status-centred system, introduced as early as the 1880s by Bismarck, reaching a relatively high degree of decommodification at its peak development. At the same time, the conservative German welfare state regime has been shaped by an explicit family policy where the state feels responsible for the protection and support of families (Kaufmann 2002: 429-430), but in comparison to more comprehensive welfare states, this support is "more narrowly focused" (Gauthier 1996: 6). Following the subsidiarity principle, the level of state support for families has been traditionally moderate and has privileged financial support over service provision, pointing to a relatively low degree of defamilialisation (Gauthier 2002: 452-453; Pfenning and Bahle 2000: 24). After the Second World War, however, the German welfare state underwent a remarkable expansion and differentiation proceeding until the 1970s, including, among others, the development and expansion of various job markets and qualification policies, health and care services and a broad range of social services, including child, youth and social work (Schmid 2012). In the newly emerging Keynesian social welfare state, safeguarding of individual welfare became public responsibility, and the social welfare state was viewed as an "addressee of expectations of protection, support demands and calls for help" (Lessenich 2009). At the turn of the century and after a long debate about the inability of Germany to reform its model, significant changes took place (Seeleib-Kaiser 2016; Blank 2020). Activating features and means-tested tax-funded elements (instead of contribution-based) gained importance. Most famously, the 2010 Agenda of the Social-democratic and Green coalition government of 1998-2005 introduced the principle of "demanding and promoting", aimed at interlinking welfare-state benefits with measures that activate beneficiaries' self-responsibility and seek to (re)build their self-reliance by returning them to gainful employment as quickly as possible. Moreover, activation and promoting self-responsibility became relevant in many other areas of the social security system. This also includes social work, where support measures became more strongly oriented towards empowerment, capacity building and the idea of providing help to self-help (Lehmann and Dick 2016; Lutz 2008).

In terms of organisation, the German welfare system is unique in its corporatist structure, conceptualised as a dual system of "free" and public welfare (Boeßenecker and Vilain 2013: 25). The general principle of both this relationship and the federal system is summed up under the notion of subsidiarity based on conservative-catholic social

teaching (see Pilz 2009: 101), including the obligation to self-help, on the one hand, and the primacy of the lowest level as well as the non-public over the public institutions of welfare, on the other. In other words, the state is seen as the provider of the last resort. For example, municipalities, not the regional or federal government, are tasked with administrating and financing social assistance, child care, and many other services, and they do so by partly channelling funds to non-profit organisations, which then run, for instance, kindergartens, retirement homes or care services. However, all municipalities and providers have to follow the federal social security code (SGB) which codifies and integrates the social benefit and social services system.

Due to the vertical and horizontal diversification of the German system of social assistance and welfare provision, benefits and services for families who find themselves in financial or psycho-social difficulties are varied and spread across institutions (Mätzke and Ostner 2010). Depending on the particular life circumstances of a family, they might, for example, apply for financial benefits or social services at the Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, BA, responsible for child benefits and unemployment benefit I), the Jobcentre (responsible for unemployment benefit II and social benefits for members of the 'community of need' who are not capable of working), the Social Welfare Office (in the following: SWO, responsible for housing benefits and for social assistance pursuant to SGB XII, i.e., benefits for people not capable of working), and the Youth Welfare Office (in the following: YWO, responsible for child and youth welfare according to SGB VIII), or the pension, accident or health insurance funds. The institutional diversification of the German social system is inextricably interlinked with a strong legal fragmentation into distinct systems of social law, while there is also a plurality of different financing models (Boeckh, Huster and Benz 2011: 135).

## **1.2 Organisation of research in A-Stadt and B-Stadt**

The findings presented in this chapter are based on interviews that were conducted in two German municipalities which, for the purposes of this report, we will call A-Stadt and B-Stadt.<sup>1</sup> A-Stadt is a small-sized city located in the west of Germany, B-Stadt a medium-sized city located in the east. While overall vulnerability in both A-Stadt and B-Stadt is low, there are districts in both cities in which relative vulnerability is rather high.

Between February and November 2020, we conducted 21 interviews with frontline workers of social assistance in both municipalities.<sup>2</sup> In order to recruit social assistance employees, we first approached the respective heads of YWOs, SWOs, and Jobcentres. After official permission to conduct fieldwork was given, they supported us in approaching employees working on the frontlines of these institutions. Most of our interviewees are from the YWOs, which had a particularly strong interest in our study. While SWOs and Jobcentres were also supportive and interested, they appeared to be massively affected by the surge of people applying for social benefits during the Covid-19 pandemic which made it more difficult for them to arrange interview meetings with us. Overall,

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<sup>1</sup> We decided to anonymise locations since some of our interviewees occupy rather unique positions within the local social security system and could be identified by insiders of the institutions.

<sup>2</sup> Since we conducted research in two different municipalities, we decided to slightly increase the number of interviews to allow for future comparative analyses.

our sample is quite evenly distributed concerning age, and length of professional experience. Among the staff we interviewed, employees with a university degree (mostly in social work) dominate our sample, as do female employees (14 female, 7 male). In the context of the pandemic, we were still able to conduct the interviews with frontline workers face-to-face, mostly in larger meeting rooms on the premises of the institution under investigation. The interviews lasted between 75 minutes and 165 minutes.

Recruiting citizens using social assistance to participate in the study proved rather difficult.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of nine months (between June 2020 and February 2021), we used various recruitment strategies and different kinds of incentives (shopping vouchers, as well as a remuneration in cash that was financed by the university). The youth welfare offices of both municipalities supported us in our recruitment efforts by including our call for interviewees in their mailings to citizens, but the response rate was very low. In addition, we circulated our call among social service providers, social department stores (“Sozialkaufhäuser”), “Stadtteilbüros”, and social and family counselling organisations, and posted it using social media. At the time of writing, we had conducted 23 interviews with citizens. The vast majority of interviewed citizens are female (19, and 4 male). Most interviewees are between 20 and 40 years old, some are in their mid-40s and one person was 18 years old. Most of the interviews took place in public places, such as parks and cafés, a few at our office at the university, and some interviews were conducted online. Interviews with citizens lasted between 45 minutes and 160 minutes.

The interviews were conducted and subsequently coded and analysed by the two authors of this report, collaboratively. We regularly exchanged information on the progress of fieldwork and data analysis. After a first round of individual open and inductive coding, we coded two of each other’s interviews using the finalised coding scheme and engaged in intensive and fruitful debate to harmonise coding. Memos and discussions about the draft report served to develop the analysis further and reach agreement on the main findings of this report.

As regards our analysis of interviews with municipal frontline workers, we concentrated mostly on interviews with YWO-staff rather than presenting a general picture of the German social security system. Where appropriate, interviews with Jobcentre and SWO staff are used to complement or contrast the findings. A comparison between the different institutions would certainly be interesting, but our data basis is not sufficient to render reliable results in this regard. Furthermore, we found that the differentiation of tasks *within* institutions might be just as important in shaping the logic of casework as differences *between* institutions. In comparison, the empirical material from interviews with citizens is more inclusive of experiences with different offices providing support for families, especially with regard to the YWOs and the Jobcentres. However, also in this case, we are not able to present a proper comparison between experiences with different institutions because the perceptions and opinions of interviewed citizens appear to be highly shaped by their encounters with individual staff members. In fact, “it depends” is an expression often used at the beginning of answers.

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<sup>3</sup> We assume that issues of shame and the particular psychological and financial strains put on families played a role here, probably aggravated further by the pandemic.

## 2. Interviews with social assistance frontline workers

### 2.1 Frontline workers' professional background

All of our interviewees have face-to-face contacts with citizens on a regular basis<sup>4</sup>. In addition, some of them exercise leading functions (as team leader, leader of a particular department, etc.). Most of our interviewees work at the YWO and are professionals with an **academic background in social work or social pedagogy** (mostly at Master's or diploma level). Staff working in the general social service (Allgemeiner Sozialer Dienst, ASD) of the YWO are **responsible for case management**, i.e. steering support measures for individual families and monitoring outcomes in regular meetings with families and service providers. Their responsibility is focused on social psychological issues, with the protection of child welfare and wellbeing as the overarching goal. Other employees within the YWO are responsible for various forms of counselling, guardianship, foster care or adoption procedures, and issues relating to divorce and separation, including maintenance claims.

In addition, we spoke with Jobcentre and SWO staff responsible for administering the **financial aspects of family support** or providing **counselling and services in the area of employability**. Some of them also work in more specialised areas, such as housing, neighbourhood management, or social security benefits for asylum applicants and refugees. Regarding their professional background, most of them are **administrative civil servants** by training. In addition, some of them had studied social work or business administration at university, or studied at the commercial school. Two also have a background in industrial or office management.

The professional experience of our interviewees ranges from five to 37 years of work in the same institution. YWO staff often **express a personal interest** in working with people, they stress the responsibilities and challenges associated with working at the YWO, and some mention that it is the variety of tasks and the combination of social work and administrative tasks that made the job attractive to them. Although interviewees from the Jobcentre or the SWO also mention a personal interest in working with and supporting people, **job security and stability** feature as further important aspects of their occupational choice.

### 2.2 Granting benefits and services: Overview of the system

Probably the most defining and consequential characteristic of the German system of social assistance is the differentiation of institutional responsibilities (see the introductory chapter), both according to the principle of subsidiarity and according to the different books of the Social Code. Across institutions, our interviewees often describe as their first task the **determination of whether their institution is responsible for a particular case**. At the YWO, central criteria are the presence of minors or young adults, and proof of current place of residence. Further important documents are birth certificates,

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<sup>4</sup> During Covid-19 related lockdowns, however, these were temporarily suspended and replaced by contact via phone and e-mail.

documents on parental custody and acknowledgment of paternity.<sup>5</sup> The socio-educational support and counselling services of the YWO are not means-tested and are thus available to all families in need of support. At the Jobcentre or the SWO, the determination of responsibility involves detailed **means-testing and in-depth enquiries** into health issues, employment status and history, and personal circumstances. This is not only to identify needs, but above all to clarify which claims take priority: Are applicants eligible, for example, for ‘unemployment benefit I’ under SGB III (paid to employees who have contributed to compulsory social insurance for at least twelve months during the qualifying period of 30 months preceding job loss)<sup>6</sup>, ‘unemployment benefit II’ according to SGB II (paid to people not or no longer eligible for unemployment benefit I, but who are fit for work), social assistance according to SGB XII (for people who cannot support themselves by their own means or efforts, nor with the help of a third party), or could they claim child supplement or housing benefits, and thus avoid having to rely on social assistance? Due to these differentiations and the different definitions of who belongs to the household, family or ‘community of need’, families or individual family members might receive social **support from several different institutions**. The ensuing complexities can turn the application process into a quite challenging endeavour, and application procedures are not always readily understandable to users. A social worker who supports citizens in filling out the application forms describes her approach thus:

*It is like this, for example, the person who receives unemploy- / Hartz IV cannot apply for housing benefit. And no child supplement either. Because it's always about the priority, right? And sometimes it's so close together that you don't know what the priority is, right? And then I submit the applications in parallel, because if I apply for unemployment benefit II now, for example, and they then say, no, no, they have to apply for housing benefit or child supplement, that's priority, right? Then the application would have to be re-submitted and then we would have to wait for the result again, and if I submit all three at the same time, hopefully one will pay. You know? (DE SLB 4/SWO).*

While the Jobcentre and the SWO act on application only, interviewees at the YWO emphasise that it is important to differentiate between cases where families seek contact **voluntarily, and cases where families are forced into contact** with the YWO:

It is important that you know beforehand in which area you are moving. Whether it is in the area of assistance needs, endangerment, or review (DE SLB 6/YWO).

If the YWO receives information about potential child endangerment from third parties (e.g., schools, kindergartens, paediatricians, or neighbours), it has a duty to check whether the information is reliable and whether the child is indeed endangered. If so,

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<sup>5</sup> In the case of maintenance claims, the YWO (or the family court) will also enquire into the financial situation of the person liable for maintenance payments.

<sup>6</sup> The entitlement period is limited to a minimum of six and a maximum of 24 months, depending on the length of contributions paid and on age at the time of becoming unemployed.

parents are forced into cooperation with the ASD and the main rationale of early contacts is risk prevention and control.

However, no matter how first contacts are initiated, in departments concerned with providing services by means of social-work methods, interviewees describe the actual work with citizens as being **focused on the identification of the problem**, an **inventory of available resources**, and the identification of adequate support measures. The latter often takes the form of building-up support networks, or providing families with the necessary information about where to seek support. YWO-staff, in particular, emphasise the importance of citizens' motivation to participate and cooperate in support measures. In the interviews, the notion of **self-help, or of empowering families to help themselves** constitutes a central expectation or goal to be achieved in the process of casework. That is, the overarching principle of **subsidiarity** not only applies to the institutions of the system of social service provision, but is also reflected in interviewees' accounts of their interactions with families: The **safeguarding of the family** as the basic and primary unit responsible for childcare features as a central system goal. The family is conceived as a provider of first resort, before all state or charitable intervention. At the YWO, however, the child protection mandate, according to §8a SGB VIII, can sometimes conflict with parental rights as enshrined in the German basic law. Next to the tension between help and control characterising social work in general, this is a conflict frontline workers have to resolve on the ground (and sometimes in court). It is their legal duty to check whether the parental household provides a suitable environment for child development and growth. Concurrently, our interviewees emphasise that, although their work is **child-centred**, they have to consider the needs of all members of the family system in order to develop solutions that help to keep the family intact.

Speaking in general terms, our interview partners emphasise that the users of their services are a diverse and **heterogeneous group** of people. Typical issues mentioned in the interviews are unemployment, economic hardship, housing problems, divorce or separation, drug problems, violence, and social or psychological problems of children and/or parents. Frontline workers at the YWO most often refer to citizens in terms of their function within the family system (families, children, youths, parents, mothers, fathers), or in terms of their role vis-à-vis the office, e.g., as "Hilfeempfänger" (i.e., recipients of help/support), applicant, addressee, or "Ratsuchender" (somebody seeking counsel/advice). Alternative and more general terms are citizens, clients or (particular types of) cases. Interviewees tell us that within the YWO, the term "Hilfedynastien" (roughly: assistance lineages) is common to denote families receiving support over several generations. The term "multi-problem-families" is used to highlight the complexity of issues many 'typical' families receiving YWO-support are faced with.

Employees of the Jobcentre use the term "customers" (in line with the institution's official jargon). Staff at the benefits department handle unemployment benefit II applications, while case managers at the job placement department focus on 'profiling', i.e. on assessing citizens' 'employability', on identifying potential obstacles, and on offering adequate training measures and potential job placements. Since only persons who are not fit for work, who cannot help themselves and are not entitled to other forms of social benefits are entitled to social assistance according to SGB XII, interviewees of the SWO describe their work as being more focused on **identifying basic material needs** and on providing possible solutions to overcome difficult life situations rather than 'activating' families in need to work on their employability. When talking about the users of their

services, they use a number of different terms, including clients, customers, people, citizens, human beings, foreigners, etc.

In all three institutions, the differentiation between the **administration of granting financial benefits and that of social services implies a fundamental and consequential distinction** regarding both frontline workers' tasks and duties and the procedures that citizens have to follow when applying for support. Our interviewees frequently mention how they are responsible for service provision while other units within the institution deal with financial matters (or vice-versa).<sup>7</sup> They sometimes describe the different departments as if they constituted different worlds, each with their own kind of logic. At the risk of oversimplifying, one could summarise that, according to our interviewees, the **granting of financial benefits follows a more purely bureaucratic logic** (with a strong focus on complete and accurate paperwork), while the granting of social services is characterised by a dominance of professional (social-work or pedagogical) considerations (with a strong focus on the individual case, and more profound personal encounters with citizens).

**Contractual elements** are important features of the procedures at the Jobcentre (where 'customers' have to sign an 'integration agreement') and, in part, at the YWO (e.g., where families have to agree to 'support plans' and 'protection plans'). Citizens' failure to cooperate (e.g., in providing documents, in applying for jobs, or in working towards the goals defined in the agreements) can result in the termination of benefits and support services. Sanctioning of insufficient cooperation is particularly formalised in the provision of financial support. In the payment benefit department of the Jobcentre, this follows a strict protocol (a written request, followed by two reminders), with fixed time limits and clearly **defined sanctions**. In case of non-compliance, pending incomplete applications are stopped, or ongoing benefit payments reduced<sup>8</sup>. When applying for means-tested support from the YWO (e.g. stationary housing benefit for minors), applicants have the duty to disclose **funding-relevant information** and the provision of basic **documents**, and a lack of cooperation may lead to the rejection or termination of support. In comparison, in areas of both the Jobcentre and YWO, where non-financial, social-work-based assistance is granted, there are **no clearly defined** strategies of how frontline workers should react to and sanction insufficient cooperation. It rather depends on individual frontline workers' assessments of the case, of the necessity and adequacy of support and of how they perceive the individual citizen's motivation and ability to meet certain aims and expectations. However, if parents' failure to take action leads to child endangerment (e.g., in the event of an action of eviction), the YWO has the power to switch from voluntary support to mandatory protection measures.

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<sup>7</sup> *'Well, I'll put it this way, when they come here first, then we have the big division, the benefits department, there are the colleagues with the financial background who do everything, and then there is us from the job placement department, right? And the colleagues from the benefits department clarify whether there is a need for help, while I am responsible for the job placement part.'* (DE SLB 10/Jobcentre)

<sup>8</sup> However, in November 2019, the German Federal Constitutional Court declared longer-term cuts of more than 30 percent as unconstitutional. In the following, sanctions have been somewhat relaxed through directives of the Federal Labour Ministry and the Federal Labour Office, while the legal reform is still pending. In addition, during the Covid-19 pandemic, controls and sanctions concerning beneficiaries of Hartz IV were partly suspended.



Regarding the **vignette**, our interviewees agree that it describes a case constellation they encounter frequently in their daily work. The multidimensionality of a family's problems is described as something very typical:

*There is usually somehow a conglomerate of different areas needing improvement on different levels, which influences the family's problematic situation and has effects on all forms of living together (DE SLB 1/YWO).*

Interviewees emphasise that they would need more information and longer personal conversations with the family in order to evaluate what kinds of **financial benefits** the respective family could possibly claim.<sup>9</sup> Regarding **social support services**, interviewees say it is important to identify the most pressing **needs** and work on stabilising the situation. With regard to the mother, they would first enquire into her health situation and, if necessary, provide her with information on where she could get psychological support. To unburden her and to improve the children's situation, they mention the possibility of seeking educational guidance, or of applying for family assistance, or a parenting counsellor. In the case of the 16-year-old, they would also contact the school to enquire further into the situation. Regarding the rent arrears, they would refer the family to a debt advice service and the unit responsible for housing problems at the SWO. Furthermore, interviewees refer to services such as the Employment Agency's or the Jobcentre's profiling instruments and training measures to check and potentially increase the parents' employability. Social workers, in particular, emphasise the importance of enquiring into the resources that the family has at their disposal, too. Establishing a network of support between the different institutions and service providers is a common and recurring theme in the interviews and, according to our interviewees, forms an important part of their work.

### 2.3 Frontline workers' organisation of work, routines and values

The interviews provide rich accounts of daily life at the office, a dominant theme being a **perceived imbalance between paperwork and actual encounters with citizens**. While the **general workload** is not problematised as such, interviewees complain about not having enough time to meet with citizens due to all the paperwork involved in the processing of cases. A perception shared by many of our interviewees is that the requirements concerning careful documentation of each contact and each step of casework are constantly being raised. Some of them experience this as a conflict:

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<sup>9</sup> Interviewees list a range of financial benefits that the family could possibly be entitled to: unemployment benefit I, unemployment benefit II, social assistance, top-up benefits for the working poor, child supplements, sickness benefits, accident insurance benefits, housing benefits... While unemployment benefit I is calculated as 67% (with children) or 60% (without children) of the previous net assessed earnings, the amount of unemployment benefit II, social benefit, and social assistance according to SGB XII is calculated by means of the so-called standard needs rate (reduced by available income and assets after deducting exempt amounts), plus assistance with additional needs, including accommodation, heating, health care and benefits for "education and participation" of children. In 2021, the monthly standard needs rates are 446€ for a single individual, 401€ for each partner of a couple, 373€ for a teenager between 14 and 17 years old, 309€ for a child aged six to 13 years, and 283€ for a child below the age of six.

*We always have to remain in this official dilemma that we need a lot of documents, even though we are actually social workers who advise a lot. But then there is all this paperwork (DE SLB 13/YWO).*

An overload of cases and a **lack of personnel resources** are a recurring theme in the interviews, in those with YWO-staff in particular. According to some of our interviewees, this contributes to a high staff turnover which, in turn, constitutes a problem with regard to the quality of work, and working with citizens.

In the context of the **Covid-19 pandemic**, this situation was further exacerbated. Our interviewees mention the reduction of face-to-face contact with families as the most important consequence of the pandemic for their daily work. While YWO-staff appreciate that the lockdown gave them a chance to catch up on all their paperwork, they voice concerns about a lack of information concerning the details of how a particular case is developing. They could still meet citizens in cases of emergency, and were available via phone, but did not have regular contact with families. They consider this as a potential problem especially because information about child wellbeing and welfare from third parties (such as schools and kindergartens) was missing in the context of the lockdown.<sup>10</sup>

Concerning the organisation of their own work, most interviewees at the YWO emphasise the **freedom and flexibility** they have in making appointments with families, service providers, and network partners. This often relates to having to be available in crisis-situations. Interviewees stress how some elements of casework are not foreseeable and cannot be planned, but rather require the capacity and willingness to react quickly and readjust the working day to the circumstances at hand. This kind of availability is a value shared by many of our interviewees (even though some of them stress that their work would become much more difficult if citizens could just call or walk in anytime without an appointment). YWO-staff say that, depending on the circumstances of the case, they are **free to decide where to meet families** (in their homes, at the office, in some neutral place), and to respect families' or staff preferences. This kind of relative autonomy in the spatial and temporal organisation of work is among the things they appreciate about their job. In other respects, though, they have to follow very strict rules, such as: sticking to fixed deadlines, following a strict protocol regarding the steps that need to be taken and in which order, keeping their case records in order, but also taking into account concerns about public spending and cost pressures:

*Of course, you're only free to a limited extent. Administration is far too well structured for that, and far too hierarchically structured to be able to speak of free social work. And then that is naturally [...] a curse and a blessing at the same time. On the one hand, it is of course a clear specification and a clear order delegation in the end, on the one hand, to keep an eye on the cost pressure and, on the other hand, to pass on the corresponding help according to the legal needs or statutory claims and, on the other hand, to move within the realm of one's profession and to keep that permanently in balance. The*

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<sup>10</sup> Jobcentre staff even speak of a reduction of contacts to almost zero. Sanctions were temporarily put on hold, i.e. when somebody missed a meeting or was not willing to participate in job training measures due to concerns about Covid, benefits were not reduced as they usually were before the pandemic.

*other side is, of course, that these specifications and these structures that are required here also give you a sense of security, and very clearly define room for manoeuvre and, especially in grey areas, sometimes clarify things (DE SLB 1/YWO).*

Some of the social workers in the YWO describe this mixture of professional and bureaucratic tasks and requirements as one of the things that attracted them to the job in the first place. As the quote above illustrates, they **value the security the bureaucratic rules and procedures can offer, and the freedom and autonomy to act professionally** within the confines of these rules. Others, however, perceive this as a tension or contradiction.

The ways in which conversations with families are conducted, the interpretation of their statements, the overall assessment of the case, and the choice of suitable support measures are described as a matter of professional discretion. Although interviewees mention that they always have to stick to the standards and rules defined by law and the relevant administrative guidelines, they stress the importance of their personal **professional approach** in the encounters with citizens:

But I do think, as far as evaluations are concerned and the assessments that we make in a professional context, I would say that I have a relatively large amount of leeway at this point, but that does not imply that I can extend any standards (DE SLB 1/YWO).

Regarding institutional influences, the courts are of central importance for the work of the YWO and the ASD, in particular. Our interviewees repeatedly emphasise how their work must always be **transparent**, and how every step taken during casework must be carefully documented in order to be accountable in the event of litigation.<sup>11</sup> Some stress how essential it is to cover their backs at all times. Having a **good, well-functioning team** and supportive superiors is highly valued in this context. In the YWO, the “four-eyes-principle” and formal as well as informal **collegial consultations** form an integral part of the organisational culture.

The ASD is one of the YWO departments with the most long-lasting and intense relationships between frontline workers and citizens. Thus, we wish to sketch out in more detail what a typical process looks like. Opening a case follows a protocol that is based on social work methods and involves developing a genogram together with the family, discussing the case with colleagues, and coming to a consensual agreement on solutions appropriate to the individual issues, life circumstances and problems of the family. The initial assessment may also include contacting other institutions (schools, kindergartens, doctors, etc.), provided that parents have waived confidentiality. After having devised and agreed on a support or protection plan (that is signed by all the parties involved, i.e. parents/guardians; YWO; social service provider), the professionals of the ASD mainly act as case managers. They are brokers between the family and other actors and institutions, and are responsible for steering, but not for delivering the actual help/support:

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<sup>11</sup> Interviewees from the Jobcentre, too, mention how particular work strategies (such as complete documentation, but also efforts to clarify things in personal encounters) help to avoid legal disputes.

*According to necessity and suitability, we check what kind of support the family can get from us, our department, so to speak, [the] youth welfare office, our office. To what there is a legal entitlement, so to speak. And other support options, they would either have to organise themselves with other service providers or, if they cannot do that, that would also be something where we say that this is, so to speak, for the benefit of the child, that parents are able to ask for support. If they cannot do that, then we would, for example, either through counselling ourselves or through family assistance, try to enable them to apply for funds, to apply for benefits. That they deal with health insurance if necessary, right? That's what the people to whom we delegate tasks are there for (DE SLB 14/YWO).*

Once a support plan is put into action, the **rationale of further contact with the family is mainly to monitor their progress and to check on the children's situation**. Personal meetings for this type of monitoring (so-called "Hilfeplangespräche", HPGs) usually take place every three or every six months. In the meantime, families are in close contact with the service provider (through family assistants, for example), but not so much with the YWO, except for crisis-situations and cases of emergency.

Across the various departments within the YWO, **values** described as important by our interviewees are, first and foremost, **being transparent, showing respect and understanding, and being helpful or giving empowerment**. Interviewees emphasise how providing full information and explaining the different steps of work, the duties and responsibilities of all parties involved in an understandable way are important to forming good work relationships with families. An expression they frequently use is to "get the parents on board". According to our interviewees, this is particularly important in coercive contexts, and can help avoid having to take children away from their families. They say it is vital that families reach an understanding of their own problems, the different options available, and possible consequences. They describe this as an important first step towards the development of insight into the necessity to change, and acceptance of the support offered by the YWO. As mentioned above, self-motivation, voluntariness, and willingness of families to cooperate are described as a basis for working relationships and casework, in particular, to progress successfully. The overall aim, according to our interviewees, is geared at **empowering families to conduct their lives in ways that are in the best (or better) interest of their child(ren)**.

Concerning **face-to-face relations with citizens**, our interviewees frequently mention **openness and transparency** as important factors for improving relationships with citizens. Some of them describe this as showing authenticity to citizens, 'only human' or 'a human being like them', a person doing their work. Others emphasise that transparency is also about communicating in a very direct way, without sugar-coating things. A further aspect that interviewees deem important in their interactions with citizens is **showing respect and understanding**. They often use expressions like "meeting on an equal footing", or "not looking down on somebody", and emphasise that status differences between frontline workers and citizens should not be too pronounced (or at least, should not be acted out as such). Communication strategies reported by interviewees involve using a **language that is authentic, understandable and close to the life-worlds of citizens**, rather than using administrative or socio-pedagogical jargon. To some of our

interviewees, meeting on an equal footing concerns not only frontline workers' manner of talking and acting, but also their outer appearance.

Obstacles frequently mentioned during the interviews are citizens' **fear or mistrust** and their lack of understanding regarding frontline workers' expectations or procedural requirements. Several interviewees from the YWO underscore that their capability to help is considerably hampered when citizens try to present an embellished, polished-up image, or even seek to manipulate or deceive YWO staff.

*Basically, I've learnt that parents always present themselves in a better light, so to say. Often, they aim to present an image, and are then affronted when I explicitly say that I take what they just presented as an ideal image and that this is not necessary because I don't need that. What I need is the real family and not an image. [...] Relations with families get difficult when they present an image and stick to it under all circumstances. (DE SLB 19/YWO)*

An interviewee at the Jobcentre points out how citizens' fears may be related to the fact that the Jobcentre as an institution requires very detailed, **very intimate information from citizens**:

*Because we know everything, so in the end they have to do a total / well, I'll say a total 'striptease' here. From bank statements, rental agreements, personal circumstances, who is the father of the child? Does he pay maintenance, does he not pay maintenance? Such things. Where did you work, how long, why not anymore? That's already / you get very, very close. (DE SLB 12/Jobcentre).*

From her perception, citizens are often anxious about the purposes and possible uses to which this information may be put. Interestingly, she distinguishes citizens she describes as 'mistrustful-insecure' from those she calls 'mistrustful-confident'. For the former, she says it suffices to explain everything in a transparent, friendly manner. For the latter, she has to offer "hard facts", that is, to present them with the relevant sections of the law stipulating their duty to provide all required information.

In the YWO, situations concerning **child endangerment** are experienced as particularly tense by interviewees:

*There is always an alarm on all sides, because everything can be interpreted. It's about the nitty-gritty, can my child come here or not, or does it have to stay in care. Do I have to let someone into the family now? Am I being controlled for drugs now. So, it's really about the very biggest guns that we have, because then it can also be about the public prosecutor and the police, and all sorts of things. Exactly, the situation is super tense there (DE SLB 13/YWO).*

In cases where drug abuse or **violence are an issue**, interviewees often ask for police support. Difficult or tense situations are always dealt with in the team. Our interviewees stress the importance of collegial support and advice, and of having a space to reflect on their interpretation of the situation or even just to let off steam. Some interviewees

mention supervision as a further element in the professional handling of dangerous or encumbering situations.

## 2.4 Trust understanding, sources and functions

In general, our interviewees describe trust as a **mutual relationship that slowly evolves over time** and is dependent on the behaviour of both parties involved. It is associated with feelings of **warmth and security**, the absence of fear and the knowledge that disclosed information will not be used to one's disadvantage. Some interviewees also mention that trust involves a form of **dependency on the other person's behaviour** and that hierarchies and power or status inequalities may be detrimental to the development of trustful relationships.

Applied to the work context, our interviewees frequently mention parties' **reliability and truthfulness** as important elements of trust. YWO-staff, in particular, stress that being authentic is essential, to mean what one says, to keep one's word. Truthfulness and reliability in this sense are strongly related to concepts of transparency and authenticity:

*I think I am perceived as trustworthy and I also know that [...] they appreciate the fact that I am very clear in what I say. So, I'm not wishy-washy. Exactly. Because I know that they know exactly how things stand. This is very important to me. And I don't inspire hope if there isn't any. That also has something to do with respect and appreciation (DE SLB 21/YWO).*

**Mutual respect and appreciation** are repeatedly mentioned in the interviews as further important elements of trust: *'So for me it has something of / or that you somehow also feel and know the person takes you, well, takes you seriously, doesn't judge you'* (DE SLB 5/YWO). In the context of their tasks and responsibilities, developing respect and an understanding for different, sometimes deviant, lifestyles, values and orientations seems of particular importance for their daily casework, and closely related to trust as a foundation for their work with citizens. Interviewees mention that it is part of their professional ethos **not to be judgemental** concerning citizens' behaviour, but to maintain a neutral, yet empathetic stance.

Across institutions, our interviewees describe trust as an **important requirement for establishing rapport with citizens and for doing good work**.<sup>12</sup> They perceive the initial stages of their work with citizens as often being characterised by caution or apprehension, sometimes even mistrust, on the part of citizens. Regarding their own stance, they stress that they have a kind of **basic trust in citizens and the information they provide**. Without such a basic trust, doing the work would not be possible or at least it would be much more difficult: *'So I have to believe a lot of what they tell me, right? Otherwise, I won't get anywhere, will I?'* (DE SLB 4/SWO). Concurrently, our interviewees emphasise how **important it is that citizens open up** and disclose the information that is relevant to the case. For this mutual trust to develop, frontline workers need to signal to citizens that they are professional, reliable and actually interested in helping and supporting

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<sup>12</sup> However, difficulties may arise when citizens misinterpret caseworkers' "professional trust" as a personal, intimate form of trust (DE SLB 1/YWO; DE SLB 4/SWO).

them: *'They know, okay, we're trying our best. They know, if I go there, I will be helped as long as I stick to certain rules of the game. I am being taken seriously as well. (...) That is important'* (DE SLB 12/Jobcentre).

Based on the interview material, the default setting that characterises frontline workers' stance towards citizens might therefore most aptly be described as "**professionally trusting by default**". By "professional trust" we refer to a kind of basic trust (in human beings, in human kindness, in a general willingness to aim for the good or for the better) that coexists with a critical, sceptical and vigilant eye with which interviewees encounter citizens from a professional distance. This is particularly important when it comes to the YWO, where child wellbeing is at stake and the YWO has to function as a custodian. While, according to our interviewees, a generalised distrust would severely hamper the accomplishment of tasks, professionally trusting means remaining open to irritations and accepting that citizens might not always be telling the truth with regard to certain facts, but not letting this affect the generally positive outlook on people and their willingness to change. Professional trust in this sense also implies that caseworkers do not experience it as a personal affront when citizens do not reciprocate their trust:

*Those are things that I can actually/ if I do my job the way I want to do it and how I understand it, I cannot turn off trust. And, of course, I have to take into account that my trust may sometimes run into the void* (DE SLB 1/YWO).

In principle, therefore, our interviewees from the YWO are willing to accept parents' statements or the documents they provide as true. Often, they describe this form of a "**credit of trust**" as something that they give in exchange for citizens' trust, openness and sincerity. Hence, they are aware that trust building develops in reciprocity and that their own attitude is likely to have an impact on citizens' behaviour:

*But if I were just so suspicious all the time, I think that would have an effect on the collaboration. Namely, that this will not be a really good and sustainable collaboration. And maybe that is something too, to come back to the question of what somehow also defines me; I am also willing to give my clients a certain advance credit of trust. You know? So that they can also, well, prove to me to a certain extent that they are not playing games with me* (DE SLB 5/YWO).

Even when there are indeed indications to the contrary (e.g. when a police report contradicts citizens' statements), this does not necessarily imply a fundamental rupture of trust in citizens. On the contrary, some interviewees tell us that when citizens do not open-up, when they withhold information or even lie outright, this can be a prompt for caseworkers to reflect on their relationship, their own behaviour and improvement options. Social workers, in particular, conceive trust as an important element of professional work relations with citizens, and often **connect issues of trust with citizens' motivation to change** and cooperate. Some of the younger interviewees also put this in the larger context of a change in approach in social work. This change, they argue, consists of reframing the dual mandate of help and control, and moving away from control towards an emphasis on the voluntariness and willingness of citizens' participation in support measures.

However, according to our interviewees there are cases where a certain extent of (mutual) distrust never seems to disappear. This is related to the YWO's central task, the protection of child welfare and wellbeing. In this context, *'blind trust would be fatal'* (DE SLB 14/YWO). As one of our interviewees put it, the youth welfare office is always either too early or too late, but never on time. Many interviewees in the YWO have the impression that, in the context of judicial scrutiny and media attention, caseworkers need to be on the alert most of the time:

*And it is especially in cases where drugs play a role again and again, or violence and that is not named, I just stay suspicious for a long time and actually forever, because I think to myself that if they cannot express that, then I don't have a handle here either. Because then I can't address it myself, but I know for sure that there is something going on. And as long as there is no voluntariness to talk about it openly, I am a bit restricted in my actions, too. And then I remain suspicious because of this restriction of action, because there is always this sense of, where is the next danger now, where could it pop up now and who could now prove to me that I did not act correctly. There I probably have to remain suspicious, ex officio [as a result of my status/position] (DE SLB 13/YWO).*

As the last sentences of this quote illustrate, institutional influences and relations to third parties may also affect trust relations on the frontlines of social service delivery.

**Time** plays an important role in the dynamics of trust and distrust. While trust may be eroded at some stage and in exceptional cases, our interviewees more often describe it as something that needs to be built up gradually – either by conscious effort on the part of caseworkers, or by the parties getting to know each other better across time. In this regard, interviewees stress that both the time available for each individual meeting with citizens and the length of sustained overall contacts are important for building-up reliable and trustful relationships. Some interviewees problematise the **high staff turnover** and describe a stronger continuity of responsibilities as a desideratum. High caseloads and too much paperwork are mentioned as further factors negatively affecting time resources for personal encounters with citizens. Time therefore constitutes an important mediating factor between trust and frontline workers' organisation of work, routines and values (see section 2.3 above).

Among the factors affecting citizens' trust or distrust, the **emotion of fear** plays a prominent role in our interviewees' accounts. They tell us that they frequently encounter citizens with either a fear of the unknown or fear based on previous negative experiences. According to our respondents, such fear can lead to distrust on the part of citizens, and is something that needs to be dealt with before trustful relationships can develop. Previous negative experiences with the social security system are perceived as particularly challenging in this regard. Interviewees stress that in such cases, citizens need time and they need confirmation that frontline workers are reliable and are actually there to help (and not to control or harass) citizens:

*And there the trust is much, much more intense. That customers also said, yes, it took me a long, long time to see that you really wanted to help me. But then it's just really consolidated. Yes. They then really have to experience*



*that it works and is going well, that they are being helped (DE SLB 11/Jobcentre).*

While this is an impression shared by interviewees across institutions, it is of particular importance in the case of the YWO, where – according to our interviewees – many parents are **afraid that their children might be taken away**. Even if they trust the individual caseworker, they might stay distrustful of the institution and its powers as such:

*So I think if I were to refer to a family, for example, (...) the family has now understood that I don't even want to get to the point where their children are taken away. But a certain, maybe not mistrust, but a certain worry remains, or I do believe that a certain residue remains with this family that it could still happen, right? (DE SLB 5/YWO).*

Another important factor that interviewees think impacts citizens' trust is frontline workers' **transparency and openness** about steps taken and, importantly, the reasons why. That is, caseworkers perceive particular communication strategies (providing full information in an understandable manner, being transparent, being authentic, being reliable) as having a positive effect on citizens' belief in their trustworthiness. Again, this is all the more important when citizens have had **past negative experiences** with the institution, or have heard relatives or acquaintances talk about such experiences: *'That doesn't happen overnight and they first have to recognise you as a reliable partner'* (DE SLB 10/Jobcentre).

Interviewees also state that it makes a difference **whether they share certain characteristics** (such as gender, age), or particular experiences (such as having children) with citizens. According to their experience, it helps to build trustful relationships if citizens get the impression that frontline workers can truly relate to their problems and that they are not alone. This may also involve a certain opening-up on the part of frontline workers, including the sharing of personal details while maintaining professional boundaries. The reciprocity of trust is central in this regard:

*And when I say like, yes, I have children too, and I've got through that, too, then I trust my parents quite a bit. Because that's really something personal. [...] I'm not a robot. And the parents also open up and then, when they open up, I can trust them a little and can open up a little, too (DE SLB 16/YWO).*

One interviewee also mentions how **trust among colleagues affects** his own behaviour towards citizens. He opens up a causal chain between a perceived lack of security, bonding and warmth in the workplace, and a lack of empathy with citizens. Even though this interviewee is the only one expressing this in such explicit terms, the relationship between frontline workers' working conditions and institutional influences (see 2.2 and 2.3 above) and their behaviour towards citizens is mentioned in more subtle terms in other interviews, too.

Regarding the functions of trust or distrust, a recurring theme is that **mutual trust makes work with citizens easier** or, in the case of the YWO, even provides a basis for successful casework in the first place. Interviewees who are mainly responsible for administering financial benefits frame this in a rather instrumental way: Trust is not strictly necessary, but it makes their life easier since citizens who trust the institution (or rather, the

individual frontline worker) will be more willing to provide caseworkers with all the necessary information. **The more information caseworkers get, the more efficiently they can go about their work.** Trusting relationships also help to avoid legal disputes, since unclear or complicated matters may be clarified in personal encounters before citizens enter a formal objection to administrative decisions. Interviewees in departments that contain a mixture of bureaucratic and professional logics perceive trust more fundamentally, as a necessary foundation to proceed with casework:

*I believe this is also our relationship work hub. Without such a small amount of trust in what we are doing here, we cannot act. Because then neither colleagues could take each other seriously. Then we wouldn't be able to decide anything because there would be no consensus; it's very simple. And the clients might come to the consultation and then let it go immediately, so let go of all the recommendations, accept nothing. Then we would have to go via the court all the time because without trust, there is no relationship and without relationships, we cannot provide help. Then everything would take place in a coercive context. And then a lot of help would come too late, not come at all or, yes, for everything the road would be bumpier (DE SLB 13/YWO).*

As the quote above illustrates, in the YWO, trust among colleagues is just as important as trust between citizens and caseworkers. Since decisions can never be taken by individual caseworkers, but must be based on a consensus reached in collegial consultation within the team, social workers have to have a **reciprocal trust in each other's professional competencies**, especially when dealing with difficult and complex cases. This also involves admitting to mistakes and misinterpretations, and trusting that colleagues will not turn such information against them.

Regarding distrust, we have already demonstrated that a certain measure of caution, or even suspicion, is important for the work, too. Professionally trusting also means staying vigilant. In the context of the YWO, a certain form of mistrust is functional in its role as guardian and protector of child welfare and wellbeing. With regard to the SWO and the Jobcentre, mistrust serves as a prompt to crosscheck citizens' statements and verify eligibility criteria, i.e. to prevent abuse of the system.

### 3. Interviews with citizens using social assistance

#### 3.1 Social background of interviewees

The citizens we spoke with in A-Stadt and B-Stadt are a diverse group of people in terms of socio-economic status and the reasons they came into contact with the institutions. The majority of our interviewees speaks of (at times severe) **financial difficulties**, but some of them are in relatively comfortable economic situations and are in contact with social assistance institutions for other reasons (e.g., because of separation/divorce, or disabilities, or their children's psychological problems). Many have experienced **job-losses and phases of unemployment**; some were in **precarious or part-time employment** and dependent on top-up benefits. Slightly less than half of our interviewees are married or live with their partners, the rest are **single parents**. One interviewee was

pregnant at the time of the interview, all the other interviewees have children. Separation and divorce led to economic difficulties for quite a few of our interviewees. Some interviewees speak of **past or present experiences of domestic violence**, including sexual abuse; some also mention (their own or their partner's) drug-abuse. A couple of our interviewees or their family members have **health problems**, some mention that they suffer from depression or burn-out.

Regarding interviewees' stance towards **politics**, some of our interviewees have no or very little interest in politics and are too preoccupied with other problems and issues to follow political debates and events regularly. The majority has some interest in politics, but finds that parties or politicians often talk excessively without acting or taking on responsibility. Some of the interviewees explicitly relate this to trust, and underscore the importance of having some information about the individual politician:

*Because I think that the actual implementation ultimately also depends on that [the individual person]. Well, I think that a lot of people can sit down together, developing a great concept is relatively easy. But then to find concrete personalities who really want to take on responsibility and risk sacrificing their careers for a good general purpose. That, I think, creates more trust to support something like that (DE CIT 15).*

Our interviewees mostly use the internet or new social **media** to inform themselves about politics, some watch television (mostly public channels), while very few read particular newspapers regularly. In general, our interviewees express scepticism about the motives and intentions of politicians:

*Nobody believes anymore in any/ In the past, it was always very clear: some CDU [Christian Democrats], the others SPD [Social Democrats]. And today they are all ..., [...] who should you vote for? So most of them are completely undecided and have no real trust, I think, no longer. A lot is always promised before the elections. And with some things that are promised there you actually already know they cannot be implemented at all. I also find it difficult. Difficult for politicians, too (DE CIT 2).*

Despite this sceptical stance, most interviewees **vote**, considering it important. Many use the "Wahl-O-Mat" (a voting-advice application) when forming their voting decision, and some also look at parties' election manifestos. Quite a few mention that they base their decision at least in part on their sympathies for individual candidates and not only on party preferences, some make their decision spontaneously on election day. Regarding **support for political parties**, most interviewees express preferences for the greens or other left-wing parties. The right-wing party "Alternative for Germany" is mentioned explicitly in several interviews as a party that interviewees distance themselves from, as a party that one simply does not vote for. Some interviewees also express criticism of the Liberals (FDP) and, in part, of the Christian Democrats. They are seen as not caring enough about people with little or no income and as serving only the interests of those with high incomes.

Concerning the **EU**, roughly a third of our interviewees have a decidedly positive stance towards the EU whereas the rest are rather ambivalent, or feel uninformed and

incapable of saying anything substantial on the topic. One interviewee is explicitly against Germany remaining in the EU. Among the positive aspects mentioned during the interviews, peace features prominently, followed by solidarity, freedom of movement and the monetary union. Negative aspects mentioned are, among others, that the EU is too far removed from people's life realities, serves the interests of big companies, is somehow artificial and that its members only have their own interests in mind.

### 3.2 Applying for benefits and services and opinions on the social assistance system

Our interviewees are **related to a number of institutions** and many of them report about personal experiences with more than one of these institutions. Most interviewed citizens are in contact with the YWO (receiving family or educational assistance or counselling related to separation and divorce), many are also with the Jobcentre (receiving unemployment benefit II, or top-up benefits for the working poor), or the unemployment agency (receiving child benefits, federal child support for needy families, or unemployment benefit I), and some are with the SWO (receiving housing benefits, or other services, like the financing of early intervention measures or therapies for their children).<sup>13</sup> As we mentioned in the preceding sections, contacts with the YWO may be structured and experienced differently by the parties involved, depending on whether they take place in a context of coercion or voluntariness. This is also reflected in our interviews with citizens. Furthermore, according to our interviewees' accounts, **procedures** also differed depending on whether they had applied for financial benefits or social services.

When applying for financial benefits, interviewees had to provide an extensive number of **documents**, particularly at the Jobcentre. Whereas applications for child or housing benefits are described as rather straightforward and not going into too much depth, the application procedures at the Jobcentre are described by many as a kind of "making oneself naked", as a process during which interviewees were forced to reveal a great deal of intimate information (including documents on all kinds of property and income, from all members of the household, employment, living, and housing conditions, health issues, etc.). Interviewees differ concerning their assessment of the difficulty and complexity of the procedure, but they agree on describing it as time-consuming and exhausting. Some of them fail to understand why the different institutions repeatedly ask for the same documents, even though – from our interviewees' perception – they must already know everything about them:

*Why, if you are a Hartz IV person anyway, you are examined down to the last detail anyway. Yes? Why don't the individual authorities communicate with each other, dammit? Why do I have to go to the Jobcentre when I have filled out the whole shit, sorry, because it's really a lot, I copied 70 pages. But then I change from the Jobcentre to the job / employment agency and then I have to start all over again. Why can't the employment agency, which is even located in the same building, just fetch it? If I just sign a declaration of consent, for all I care. Maybe we can still introduce that. But you're screened anyway.*

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<sup>13</sup> Due to health problems, some were also in contact with the pensions or the health insurance funds.

*Those are things, it makes it that easy. And it / yes, it's written everywhere, anyway. If the Jobcentre wants to, they can look at my account. They don't even need me for that. They click, click, call, let us have a look and that's it* (DE CIT 1).

With regard to **personal encounters at the institutions**, interviewees describe their first contacts with the benefits department of the Jobcentre as rather impersonal and detached. They say this is reflected in the architecture of the welcome space of the institution, too, in the sense that staff (who can always vary) are seated behind large counters, whereas applicants have to stand. Interviewees sometimes experience this as being forced into a position of having to beg for benefits. In comparison, interviews with the job placement department are perceived as more personal, friendly and characterised by greater respect and understanding for the individual applicant. Concerning applications for counselling, or family assistance at the YWO, our interviewees speak of having to provide only a few documents (mostly birth certificates and proof of residence). The administrative procedure itself is described as relatively easy and not time-consuming.

Similar to frontline workers' description, the **personal interview** with social workers of the YWO (at home or at the office) features prominently in citizens' accounts of the procedure. Interviewees tell us that these interviews mainly revolve around the reasons for applying for help, and around trying to identify the issue, the problem that is at stake for all the parties involved. Often, the YWO met them and their (ex-)partners in separate meetings first, and then invited both parents to a joint meeting. Interviewees describe this mostly in terms of a chance to detail their perspective on the problem. In many cases, citizens experienced the YWO as open and supportive when they had asked for help of their own account. They describe the interview atmosphere as friendly, trustful and open. Some interviewees (especially those in forced contact with the YWO), however, compare the interview setting at the YWO to a police interrogation. Yet others tell us about very frustrating and disappointing experiences where their requests for help and support were turned down. They describe feelings of having to justify their need for help, of not being understood by caseworkers, of being left alone and having to wait or even fight for receiving support. As one interviewee put it: *'I found it, yes, quite humiliating, how we were treated as if we wanted to sneak something, yes, that we are not entitled to'* (DE CIT 8). In such cases, interviewees themselves brought in information from external sources (medical reports, statements of paediatricians or psychologists/psychiatrists, etc.) to prove to caseworkers that they or their children actually do have special needs. In other interviews, it was the institution that commissioned expertise from doctors or psychologists, or referred to reports from neighbours, relatives, schools, kindergartens, or the police.

In terms of interviewees' **assessment of offices' organisation**, case overload and lack of personnel (and the ensuing lack of time to have sustained contacts with, or to deal with cases on an in-depth basis, as well as a lack of information and delays in receiving support) are a recurring issue in the interviews. Regarding their **opinions on the system of social service provision** in general, interviewees are appreciative of the help and support they have received. They also express an understanding for the bureaucratic requirements of the procedures, and say they are conscious of the fact that the state has to take precautions against fraud and a misuse of the system. However, interviewees are critical of the perceived opacity of differentiation of tasks and institutional

responsibilities. Many of our interviewees recount that they had not been proactively informed by the institutions about possible entitlements they might be eligible for:<sup>14</sup>

*The Jobcentre should educate more. Even if they might have to spend more money as a result, they definitely need to educate more. They would have to sit down very clearly and say, you now have such and such a case, you have such and such rights. And not just say you have such and such duties. So, they really have to educate people about everything and more, much more. And give a lot more help. Without this air of condescension: We are something better, we are working. (...) You all just want to rake in the money anyway, like that. Well, that negative feeling again (DE CIT 20).*

Furthermore, interviewees are critical of the fact that they have to provide the same information repeatedly and to different institutions even though they feel they are being screened and controlled excessively anyway. Many interviewees express the wish for more centralisation with the hope that this would lead to easier procedures, increased transparency, and a more holistic and individually-tailored approach to service provision.

Regarding their **own attitude towards the system**, many interviewees are thankful for the help and support they receive, but some of them also state that (at least initially) they felt embarrassed and ashamed of applying for help even though it is a legal entitlement. For some, this feeling is further exacerbated by the perception of the institutions (the Jobcentre and the YWO, in particular) as powerful and monolithic. Such experiences can evoke feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, and many interviewees tell us they were anxious and fearful of the outcome of procedures. Interviewees are of the opinion that assessments of their case depend to a large extent on the individual front-line worker and that it is largely a matter of luck whether one gets “the perfect caseworker”. Some explicitly speak of what they perceive as elements of arbitrariness in the procedures. Furthermore, single mothers, in particular, describe feelings of being left alone by the institutions, of being told by the YWO that they had to shoulder the responsibility for dealing with difficult situations in the family.

Many interviewees recount instances where they felt they had to fight to receive the help they were entitled to. In the context of a perceived lack of information, many feel they had to engage in extensive research and become experts themselves. Other forms of insisting or fighting consist of questioning frontline workers’ assessments of their case, of contacting superiors, of getting third persons to accompany them to appointments at the office, and of filing complaints against administrative decisions. Some experienced the necessity to fight as a form of unfairness:

*I would say it's unfair in that you have to fight extremely hard for things that you actually have a right to. And if you don't know that you have a right to it and can vouch for it and still have the strength, then you probably won't do it and that's why I think it's unfair that, yes, benefits that you can actually get by law, sometimes are denied, because a Jobcentre is upstream there to*

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<sup>14</sup> Some interviewees suspect that this lack of transparency is a deliberate strategy by the institution to reduce the amount of benefits paid out to citizens.

*implement these legal levels or not. And the Jobcentre is not an office that treats people and their concerns in a benevolent manner (DE CIT 17).*

Strategies to deal with this situation also include learning how to handle the system. Interviewees told us how they have started to communicate in writing only, always asking for a confirmation of receipt, and collecting and keeping copies of documents important to their case. Some even keep their own excel-files to check the accuracy of the institution's calculations. That is, interviewees have learnt to adapt and conform to the bureaucratic elements of the procedures, sometimes going beyond the usual requirements as a means to retaining some form of control. Other forms of dealing with the system include actively trying to control one's emotions, of maintaining a neutral or even friendly stance during the interactions with frontline workers, even when things get difficult.

### 3.3 Relations with frontline workers

When describing their relations with frontline workers, our interviewees distinguish between encounters with staff working at reception desks during general consultation hours, and frontline workers who are personally responsible for a client's case. Encounters at reception desks were experienced by the interviewed citizens as rather formal and impersonal, and when speaking about the respective staff, they often refer to them as **'the man/woman from the [...] office'** or **'the staff member from the [...] office'**. This kind of contact is typically experienced in the Jobcentre's benefits department, where general office hours are used to hand in requested documents, or to discuss running applications or benefit payments. In contrast, our interviewees' encounters with frontline workers in charge of their case have been shaped by more personal interrelations. They involve personal meetings in the frontline worker's office upon appointment, and allow citizens to get to know the person responsible for them, at least to some extent.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, interviewees often refer to them as **'my clerk in charge'**, **'my caseworker'** or **'my (personal) advisor'**. Interviewees who had direct encounters with frontline workers upon appointment consistently say that **they were assigned to them** on the grounds of a predefined criterion, mostly related to their (child's) family name or living address. Sometimes, interviewees were assigned to a new person, for instance, when the previous caseworker left the department. In a few instances, interviewees underline that their responsible caseworker was replaced due to unbridgeable differences, and after interviewees had complained to the respective supervisor.

The **frequency of meetings**, and thus also the intensity of relationships, with a frontline worker in charge varies according to the issue at stake. In many cases, questions were solved in the course of a few appointments. However, our interviewees were involved in more regular meetings as soon as they had to commit to an action or support plan, for instance with the Jobcentre's job placement department or with the YWO's ASD. According to our interviewees, they are in (personal or phone) contact with the frontline

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<sup>15</sup> However, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, interviewees report an enhanced use of telephone and e-mail communication.

worker from the job placement department once a month or every few months.<sup>16</sup> Meetings with ASD caseworkers to evaluate developments with regard to the agreed support plan usually take place every three or six months.<sup>17</sup>

Regular meetings with frontline workers allow citizens to **get to know the person responsible** for them somewhat better. Nevertheless, more often than not, interviewees say they still do not really know their frontline workers, or cannot really predict or understand their behaviour. At the same time, many consider continuity in the working relationship as important in order to know what to expect and learn how to cope with the demands and individual working style, as exemplified by the following statement about an ASD caseworker:

*Sometimes I wish that the other one would go to hell, please a new one! But in the meantime, I got so used to him, to his way of speaking and reasoning, that I am sometimes already able to see through him (DE CIT 22).*

Our interviewees consistently highlight the **heterogeneity of experiences with different frontline workers**, and the importance of being assigned to a helpful, open-minded and committed person. They perceive this as all the more important since the frontline worker's attitude is considered not only to affect the interaction as such (e.g. in terms of friendliness, openness, respect and appreciation), but also the responsiveness to their individual needs and the extent of support they receive. Many interviewees share the feeling that their caseworker has considerable **leeway when taking decisions**. On the one hand, they perceive them as having a certain freedom in the way they organise their work, for instance, in terms of the frequency, place (in the office or at home) and character of meetings (face-to-face or by phone). On the other hand, our interviewees point to frontline workers' **discretion when it comes to granting benefits and support**. As to the granting of benefits, a repeated observation is that some frontline workers are very strict and formal when it comes to citizens' obligations to cooperate, for instance, in terms of providing documents or fulfilling other requirements, such as applying for a monthly agreed number of jobs or attending trainings, while others show more understanding of a citizen's particular situation, less rigidly apply the rules and make concessions. Furthermore, our interviewees report remarkable differences between individual frontline workers' willingness to provide information about citizens' rights and entitlements (e.g. which income sources are relevant for means-testing, what other cost categories can be declared under what conditions, which other support schemes exist), which to some degree directly affects the extent of benefits they receive. In comparison to the granting of benefits, the discretion of frontline workers who have to decide over non-financial forms of support is described not so much as a question of reducing or suspending support, but rather as a question of how much influence they exert on the definition of the objectives of a support plan, or how much autonomy they grant to the citizen involved, and how benevolently they assess citizens' cooperation and motivation

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<sup>16</sup> Particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, phone conversations increased and replaced many of the face-to-face meetings according to our interviewees. E-mail communication, particularly for handing in documents and proofs, also gained importance.

<sup>17</sup> During the Covid-19 pandemic, and particularly during strict lock-downs, such discussions were also partly led over the phone.



to change before turning to more coercive measures (e.g. threatening to take their children away).

Based on their heterogeneous experiences with various frontline workers from several institutions or departments, or with various frontline workers from the same institution or department, interviewees often compare and distinguish between different experiences and characterise their relationships with frontline workers in different ways. Overall, their reported experiences show traits of relationships that can be associated with five basic types. First, interviewees report about rather **harmonic, personal and friendly relations** with certain frontline workers. In this context, they express feelings of sympathy, gratitude, openness and trust towards the person dealing with their concern. Interviewees express such positive attitudes mostly with regard to personally assigned caseworkers from the YWO, or the job placement department at the Jobcentre. They explain that in such relations, they feel more comfortable and find it easier to open-up, tell their story and reveal problems and reservations because caseworkers are perceived as being 'relaxed', 'cool', 'non-intrusive', 'open-minded', 'human' and 'understanding', which is well illustrated by the following quote:

*My contact person at the Jobcentre is very cool [...] and relaxed. He barely meddles in anything. He says what's going on. That at some point I have to look for a job again [...] And he then said that one always finds a solution. [...] I then speak point-blank to him. [...] I always tell the truth. It is not necessary there to beat around the bush. [...] And then he says, okay, this is understandable (DE CIT 21).*

Secondly, some of the interviewees' descriptions point to **pragmatic relations** with caseworkers. In this context, various interviewees underline the reciprocal character of working relations, explaining that frontline workers' attitudes are influenced by the way in which interviewees approach them. According to interviewees' experience, certain types of behaviour such as being polite, respectful, calm and factual are important in encounters with frontline workers in order to be treated well, but also to avoid conflicts, and to have requests dealt with as smoothly as possible.

In addition, having a pragmatic attitude involves complying with caseworkers' expectations and demands, and cooperating as much as possible in order to receive help, even if this makes them uncomfortable and requires some effort. One aspect of such a pragmatic cooperation incident some interviewees draw attention to is being open and honest, telling the whole story and avoiding presenting a whitewashed picture for merely strategic and non-trust-based reasons, as is reflected in the words of this interviewee:

*I disclose everything he wants. And I go in there like an ice block. [...] Meanwhile, I also go in there unbiasedly, simply sit down [...], listen to him, give him the answers – all the faster can I leave again. [...] At the Youth Welfare Office, to be open and sincere is one of the most important things to do, [...] to really pull yourself together. [...] A lie always comes out in the wash (DE CIT 22).*

Another example is the provision of complete, unredacted bank account statements for means-testing. Here, interviewees say they would prefer to black-out entries relating to

their own expenses in order to preserve a minimum of privacy, and some of them even claim to know that formally, they are only obliged to provide information about income. However, in order to avoid conflict and delays in the processing of their request, they give in and submit fully transparent bank account statements for pragmatic reasons.

A neutral, pragmatic stance towards frontline workers is also reflected in the opinion that the single clerks are simply applying laws and institutional rules, and thus cannot be blamed for their decisions. On the contrary, an unsatisfactory decision is not perceived as a matter of a clerk's low commitment, malevolence or other personal characteristics, but as a matter of professional judgement, against which a citizen has the right to appeal in order to have it revised. This idea is underscored, for instance, in the following statement:

*When I am of the opinion [...] that I was entitled to a benefit and it was declined, then [...] I would not be disappointed in the clerk. [...] I would treat this independently from the person. [...] I know that this has nothing to do with it, and that a friendliness during a consultation has nothing to do with the eventual decisions. Those are two separate things. Even the friendliest clerk is [...] bound by existing legal regulations (DE CIT 10).*

Thirdly, various interviewees explain having rather **formal, weak or distant relations**, most typically in encounters with the changing, non-personally assigned frontline workers in general reception offices. Here, they feel that meetings are particularly shaped by the institutional environment, which they perceive as being impersonal and bureaucratic. In this context, frontline workers are often described as behaving in a strictly fact-oriented, and partly schematic, detached and brusque manner.

In this regard, some interviewees complain that they feel like "a number", while others express their understanding of the frontline workers who have to deal with a large number of citizens. Occasionally, interviewees also report rather distant and cold relations with the caseworker assigned to them, whom they describe as being emotionless, cold and without empathy for their problems and situation. In such cases, the lack of empathy is, for instance, linked to the assumption that the respective caseworker is too inexperienced and thus unable to put themselves in the shoes of the person seeking help, as expressed by one woman we interviewed:

*To start with, she was very emotionless. No cordiality. [...] I tried to explain my feelings, my fears [...]. No emotions. Absolutely nothing. Instead, [...] someone is sitting there who has a catalogue of questions, who makes all the queries and assesses them. [...] No compassion. Perhaps she could not have it as she just came from university, did not have her own child. [...] For me, totally out of place (DE CIT 2).*

In addition, some interviewees describe themselves as being careful and distanced because they are afraid of disclosing something that could be used against them, or could be misinterpreted. Overall, distant and impersonal relations largely seem to be a matter of the number and frequency of contacts. In many cases, citizens refer to experiences of weak and detached relations when their contact with the frontline worker in question was only fleeting and superficial, while they tend to be less so when they had the chance

to build up a more constant, longer-term working relationship. However, the intensity of contacts does not appear to be the only relevant factor here. Next to the aforementioned workload of staff, some interviewees suggest that the detached manner in which some of the meetings took place might also be due to the anonymity of staff working in reception offices.

Fourthly, a theme that is very salient in many of our interviews is citizens experiencing **power asymmetries** in their relations with frontline workers. This involves feelings of limited or lacking opportunities of codetermination, dependency, anxiety, and of being forced to comply with requirements and accept measures conflicting with their own interests.

Power asymmetries are particularly felt in contexts of coercion, when, for instance, children are being taken away from a family by the YWO, or when parents are told that their child's wellbeing is at risk, and that it may be taken away unless parents comply with the caseworker's requirements. Besides the actual use of coercive measures, different interviewees emphasise that they feel particularly pressurised by caseworkers who repeatedly threaten them with a potential imposition of coercive means. According to them, the permanent fear of their children being taken away substantially shapes their relation towards their caseworker and the institutions as such, as exemplified by the following:

*In this current situation with the Youth Welfare Office, I cannot lead a relaxed life because of the fear that they stand in front of my door always every five minutes, because, if it happens that my home is untidy, [...] everything disturbs the Youth Welfare Office. Even if a napkin lies on the floor, [...] they moan, they grumble. That really gets on my nerves, constantly living in fear (DE CIT 22).*

Apart from more evident circumstances where institutional power is at play, the perception of inequality and the lack of interaction 'on an equal footing', as well as the feeling of being small, help- and powerless appear to be experiences that variously arise with frontline workers. Some interviewees underline that they felt treated in an encroaching manner when a caseworker evaluated aspects of their living, working or health conditions, and took decisions in ways that interviewees regard as inappropriate and/or unfair. Particularly with regard to individual experiences with the YWO, different interviewees express concern about caseworkers having a great deal of freedom and discretionary power in interpreting their observations in light of the question of what is best for the child.

When it comes to the application for benefits or other forms of support, witnessing power asymmetries involves the impression of being 'petitioners' who have to justify their requests in front of clerks who may or may not accept the reasons and explanations presented. Decisions made are perceived as incomprehensible, non-transparent and arbitrary. An example repeatedly mentioned is the assessment of unemployment benefit II entitlements:

*You simply receive a letter and then it is suddenly written "You have been blocked" or "You cannot receive benefits any longer" and then you are simply helpless. [...] No one cares and you are totally surrendered and then you are*

*also really in despair. [...] You are really afraid of them. Also, because they have such uncanny power, right? And also, this arbitrariness, right? This is just the worst (DE CIT 5).*

The feeling of being at a frontline worker's mercy is perceived all the more as a problem when interviewees know that there is a legal entitlement to the requested type of support. Experiencing power asymmetries also comprises feelings of being controlled, compounded by having to give up one's right to privacy and self-determination. Moreover, some interviewees describe imbalances because they were requested to complete their applications swiftly while the clerk in charge took a long time to revise an incorrect decision and showed little understanding of the matter's urgency. In addition, some interviewees see themselves in a disadvantaged position because of their experience that the burden of proof lies on them, and that they may only defend themselves if they attend meetings together with a 'witness', or have agreements or documents countersigned by the frontline worker on the spot.

Finally, some interviewees report about relations with individual frontline workers that are shaped by **conflict**. According to our interviewees, conflict partly occurred when they sought to complain, openly expressing their opinion and defending their position self-confidently, and when frontline workers took offence and reacted rigorously, for example by threatening them with a ban on entering the building. In other instances, interviewees explain that conflict with their caseworker arose due to their own unwillingness to cooperate, their own impolite or capricious behaviour, or obstructionist mindset. In very few cases, conflict is attributed to a negative, either uncomprehending or even malevolent attitude of caseworkers who, in the interviewees' view, aimed to work against the citizen and, in order to follow their own agenda, even twisted the facts and misused citizens' statements against them.

When asked about their perception of frontline workers' characteristics, interviewees provide detailed descriptions of features they find beneficial or detrimental in their relations with administrative staff. Several interviewees mention **age** or the length of professional **experience** as relevant factors. Some interviewees prefer younger caseworkers because they are perceived as more liberal, open-minded and relaxed, and more empathetic towards citizens who are (relatively) young themselves. Others believe that relations are better if the caseworker is older and more experienced in both their private and professional life, instead of being fresh from university and having a rather theoretical understanding of the matter at stake. In the context of relations with YWO staff, some also regard it as important that their caseworker has children, as they assume this enhances understanding and empathy, while others find this less relevant.

Moreover, **knowledge, know-how and competence** are regarded important for a fruitful working relationship, while their perceived absence is considered detrimental. Often, interviewees link their judgement of a caseworker's knowledge and competence to the question of age and experience. Again, views are divided as some believe that younger caseworkers are better informed and more competent because they are equipped with up-to-date knowledge from university, or are more motivated to acquire new information, while others find it more important that their caseworker has acquired longer-term practical professional experience.

When speaking about beneficial or unfavourable characteristics, interviewees most extensively address aspects relating to frontline workers' **engagement and communication style**. Here, the most salient issue is the extent to which frontline workers are considered **helpful, open and willing to offer explanations and advice**. Frontline workers are regarded helpful when they show sincere interest in and assume responsibility for the citizen's particular case, are willing and motivated to engage with them, and are committed to adapting support instruments and solutions to the citizen's individual living realities, specific challenges, circumstances, needs and capacities. This is expressed by one interviewee in the following way:

*Also, the readiness of the clerk to be willing to take on responsibility. And not simply to rationally work it through and to say, "Well, it was just a number, it does not imply anything to me, also no responsibility", or so – and such a feeling I did not have with her. With her, I really had the feeling that she has a sincere interest, or also has good motivation: "I really want to help and take on responsibility", to give me good advice and to guide me on my life's journey [along] a way that effectually is expedient (DE CIT 15).*

Adequate support also involves frontline workers offering support measures that help citizens in the long run, like finding stable and suitable employment, rather than focusing on short-term solutions and measures that only serve 'to remove someone from the statistics' (DE CIT 15). Frontline workers are also considered helpful when they do more than is required – instead of working 'in a dull, mindless' way –, for example, by suggesting or even contacting other institutions or organisations in order to assist citizens to get additional support measures underway, by providing practical recommendations or when they take the time to explain the procedures or decisions comprehensively and in an easily understandable manner. Frontline workers are also regarded as helpful and open when they allow citizens to participate in decision-making, for instance concerning the aims of support measures, or the choice of service providers. More specifically with regard to YWO staff, different citizens appreciate that their caseworker mediated in conflict situations within the family, or with a former partner.

In contrast, a problem repeatedly addressed is that some frontline workers appeared to be unwilling to take the citizens' concerns seriously and to further process their requests, or to deal with a cause in a timely manner. Moreover, citizens are dissatisfied when frontline workers are curt and provide no information beyond the absolutely necessary minimum, and hence do not give any advice that could be advantageous to the citizen. In such contexts, interviewees also argue that frontline workers **act in schematic, procedural or superficial ways**, just following the rules without adapting to the individual case, and do not do more than what is formally required.

Next to helpfulness, our interviewees underscore **kindness and empathy** as crucial characteristics of frontline workers. Interviewed citizens often give examples of experiences with frontline workers they perceived as 'nice', 'friendly', 'easy-going', 'relaxed', 'cool', 'warm and sincere', 'positive', 'human', 'comradely' or 'like a buddy'. In addition, being 'empathetic', 'sensitive' and 'respectful', 'taking concerns seriously' and 'showing understanding' for a citizen's particular problems, life circumstances and choices are forms of behaviour valued highly by our interviewees. In many cases, kindness and empathy

are closely intertwined with the perception of a frontline worker's helpfulness, as the following statement exemplifies:

*She is simply very friendly. And eager, as I said, to provide support. Sympathetic, also empathetic, she can put herself in one's shoes very well. [...] Well, she always [treated] me very kindly, respectfully, thus, I never had the feeling there that I am a second-class person or so. I just had the feeling that I am a person in need of help and that this help is granted to me (DE CIT 5).*

In comparison, there are various examples where citizens report about opposite experiences. Here, interviewees either emphasise that they missed the above-described kindness and empathy. Or they point out that frontline workers appeared to be '**unpleasant**', '**cold**', '**heartless**' or '**insensitive**'. In our interviews, such experiences mostly emerged in contexts where citizens had applied for financial benefits. More often than not, such negative experiences are witnessed when relationships with frontline workers are weak and contact sparse. Sometimes, frontline workers are also described as 'repellent', 'detached' or even 'hard-nosed', 'impudent' or 'cunning', an impression which is described by one interviewee in the following way:

*As regards the second caseworker, there I have to say [...] that is a witch. [...] In the sense that she was absolutely dishonest. Devious. And I believe she was very clever and because of this, she was put in this position, especially for us. She appeared to be really hard-boiled. [...] And I found this very very hard. In a place [...] where I go with a problem and where I hope for help, where I wish that there is someone who shows sympathy and who offers something on their part, then I must say that this was the complete opposite (DE CIT 8).*

Furthermore, interviewed citizens repeatedly complain about frontline workers they perceive as **biased, partial and having double standards**. Sometimes, interviewees refer rather generally to the way in which they have been treated (e.g. do citizens have the feeling of being regarded as 'inferior', 'lazy', as a 'slacker' or as 'hysterical', or simply as a person seeking help in a difficult situation in an unprejudiced, open-minded way). Other times, biased behaviour, examples of (im)partiality, of taking sides and having double standards are discussed as a matter of partisanship. Often, such experiences are linked to situations in which frontline workers operate as mediators between two or more conflicting parties (e.g. between separated parents, or between parents and foster families). In these instances, some interviewees claim that (consciously or unconsciously) their caseworkers took sides with one party, or applied their considerations about a child's wellbeing one-sidedly. This view is shared, for instance, in this statement:

*At the moment you enter the Youth Welfare Office, very much is about sympathy. Either the sympathy lies with the mother or with the father. [...] And then it is mostly acted accordingly. [...] And often decisions are taken based on sympathy. And that I always dislike because it is not about the child (DE CIT 2).*

Moving beyond biased behaviour, various interviewed citizens complain about frontline workers who **look down on them, are judgemental and patronising**. While the overlaps between the previously-mentioned attitude and this one are rather fluent, judgemental and patronising behaviour seem to be even more normatively charged. Moreover, such behaviour appears to have a stronger impact on frontline workers' decisions with regard to requirements they impose on citizens, be it in relation to job-seeking issues, the upbringing of children, housing choices, or other aspects of a citizen's life choices, customs and values. In such instances, interviewees perceived a lack of respect for their own living conditions and decisions, reinforcing the impression that their frontline workers seek to enforce their own standards and ideas on them, illustrated by the following statement:

*And then I gained the impression that depending on how you present your request and how relevant the staff finds what you put forward and why you need a certain benefit, that this also has an influence on the extent to which you receive help or not. [...] [I was] also criticised with regard to personal decisions that are none of the staff's business. In fact, often I had the feeling that it was interfering in my lifeworld and my lifestyle, and that staff were evaluating how reasonable my life choices are with regard to my professional future (DE CIT 17).*

Interestingly, interviewees seldom criticise their frontline worker for being **controlling, intrusive or nosy**, while the system as such, or a specific institution, are more often described as controlling (see 3.2 above). Only in a few instances, interviewed citizens complain that their frontline worker behaved like an "inspector", asking them a battery of questions which, from their perspective only partly related to their request, and encroached on very private matters.

In addition, an aspect occasionally addressed is the extent to which a frontline worker is perceived as **honest and transparent**. In several instances, interviewees underscore how much they appreciate their frontline worker being clear about the rules, providing comprehensive information and speaking openly about both opportunities and limits, instead of nurturing overly-optimistic expectations. Sometimes, interviewees complain that they miss sufficient clarity and transparency in a frontline worker's communication style. Finally, in very few instances, positive or negative characteristics are discussed in light of the question whether frontline workers are **responsive and keep their promises**. While some interviewees have had positive experiences in this regard, others were dissatisfied, for instance, because a frontline worker failed to deliver a supportive written comment, or did not keep in touch with the citizen in order to follow up the progress of the support measure as promised.

### 3.4 Trust understanding, sources and functions

Our interviews comprise a variety of meanings and definitions of trust. Most frequently, interviewed citizens understand trust as a **possibility to reveal and to open up towards one's counterpart**. Often, they make a clear distinction between private relationships and relations with frontline workers. In private relationships, interviewees find it much

easier to talk about their own problems, weaknesses or other personal matters. This understanding of trust is expressed by one woman in the following way:

*To me, trust means when I can reveal my weaknesses, that this will not be used against me. This is a very crucial point for me. That means trust to me. This is the umbrella term of trust for me. When I reveal [...] something about myself then it is usually something that might cause me harm. Because I undress myself. And if the other person guards this well and treats it respectfully, then I speak about trust (DE CIT 2).*

Still, they widely agree that the circle of persons to which they can open up completely, reveal everything no matter what, be authentically oneself and 'drop one's mask' is very limited. In relationships with frontline workers, many interviewees describe themselves as rather inhibited or resistant to opening up and revealing sensitive details about their private life and other personal issues for fear that such information might be used against them. In various cases, revealing information to frontline workers is thought to be used in a strategic, tailored manner, calculating the possible benefits and disadvantages. Yet, as previously said, a friendly and longer-lasting relationship with one's caseworker that is based on empathy and respect can help to overcome such barriers.

Closely related to the concept of trust as the possibility to reveal is the understanding of trust as a **confidential sphere**. In this context, opening up, 'confiding something to someone' and sharing sensitive or private details is inextricably linked with the expectation that the other person(s) will keep everything secret and not disclose it to third parties.

Furthermore, trust is often understood as a matter of **closeness, feeling a bond or at ease, feeling sympathy or empathy**. Generally, this is expressed by emphasising that trusting relationships are something 'intimate' that only exist with very close family members and friends. With regard to frontline workers, interviewees highlight that sympathy plays a crucial role for building a certain degree of trust. Yet, trust relations based on bonding are said to be very rare and confined to single individuals among the frontline workers. More than in any other understanding, the personal characteristics of one's counterpart are described as crucial. When asked about the role of trust in the working relationship with frontline workers, one interviewee explains:

*Every time you have a caseworker, it is a question of sympathy, when you meet each other personally the first time and talk with each other face-to-face for the first time. [...] For me, it is important that you understand each other [...]. You need to feel understood somehow, or at least feel that the person, the caseworker really wants to help you (DE CIT 23).*

A further meaning repeatedly addressed is the idea that trust involves a **mutual relationship** in which one's own readiness to trust is influenced by the extent to which the other person is perceived as open and trusting. Moreover, some interviewees discuss trust as a matter of reciprocal relations particularly with regard to symmetric communication. For them, trust is given in encounters where both parties meet each other on an equal footing and are thus able to treat each other in a humane, open-minded way, as is exemplified by this interviewee's description:



*For me, trust is when the basis is provided that you can be in harmony with each other [...] And that you behave in a way that is on an equal footing at least to some extent. This will never be the case because [...] one person is the petitioner and the other one the person who grants the benefit, or not. But at least you can deal with each other in a humane way (DE CIT 17).*

In this context, they also mention attitudes such as mutual “respect”, “thoughtfulness” and “acceptance”.

In addition, trust is often perceived as a matter of **reliability**, of (explicit or implicit) agreements being kept. Reliability is often described as dependability, for instance, as “*the feeling to work jointly and not against each other, and to be able to rely on agreements*” (DE CIT 17), or as relying on another person “*to always be there [for you] when needed*” (DE CIT 3), no matter if there are differences of opinion or other conflicts or challenges. With regard to relations with institutions, reliability is also considered a question of benefits being paid regularly and on time.

For several interviewees, **truthfulness** also plays an important role in their understanding of trust. Closely related to reliability, it concerns the accuracy, completeness and veracity of information provided by others, and is closely intertwined with honesty, sincerity and authenticity.

Next to these dominant understandings of trust, there are a couple of further meanings that emerge in the reflections of interviewees. A number of interviewees highlight that trust is closely intertwined with **support, help giving, loyalty** and solicitude. With regard to encounters in public offices, trust is experienced when frontline workers show sincere interest and commitment to helping and giving citizens the feeling that they are taking responsibility for the case. In addition, trust is also discussed in terms of **carefulness**. In this context, it is mostly argued that being mistrustful means to be careful or cautious. While there are considerable overlaps with concepts of trust as having to do with the possibility of revealing and with the confidentiality of information, dis-/trust as carefulness is used in a somewhat broader context. With regard to public offices, some examples refer to one’s carefulness with the provision of personal data and information, in general, in order to protect oneself from data misuse. In other examples, citizens report being careful and prudent in how they behave towards frontline workers, raising the question of whether it is wise or not to complain or make unfair treatment public, for fear of repercussions.

Finally, and somewhat related to the former, trust is occasionally discussed in terms of **giving up control**. In the few instances where this idea is explicitly addressed, interviewees tend to speak about long and complex benefit notices, highlighting that they prefer to trust in their correctness rather than invest time and energy in crosschecking the calculations and decisions.

Our interviews provide a multifaceted picture when it comes to the question of how interviewees reflect on **trust and distrust as a default position with regard to themselves and the frontline workers** they met. In both cases, interviewed citizens sketch out various positions between the two extremes of being always trustful and always distrustful. With regard to their own position, very few citizens describe themselves as generally trusting. What is more widespread is that citizens trust if certain conditions

are met. This form of conditionally trusting takes different shades depending on citizens' expectations about their counterpart's trustworthiness. There are interviewees who tend to trust more often than not because the factors that make them trust can be met relatively easily. Then there are those who sometimes trust and sometimes do not. And then there are citizens who seldom trust except under very specific conditions, otherwise are rather cautious. Finally, a few interviewees underline that they never trust as a default setting, while none of them clearly states they distrust as a general default setting. When it comes to citizens' trust towards public offices or frontline workers, ambivalent positions and cautious positions with a tendency to 'better not trust' prevail, while there are also optimistic stances where citizens are rather inclined to trust an institution or frontline worker. In comparison, few interviewees express a basic distrust in a specific public office or frontline worker (e.g. due to negative experiences or the institution's negative reputation), while none of the interviewed citizen said they always trust in institutions or frontline workers.

Similar to the variety of personal trust and distrust positions, interviewees are of the opinion that some frontline workers are rather trustful and others appear rather sceptical, or even distrustful. When citizens speak about frontline workers they perceived as trustful, their descriptions remain relatively vague and short. Following their experiences, trust in citizens is barely made explicit by frontline workers. Thus, assumptions about trustful frontline workers are often interrelated with perceptions of friendliness, helpfulness and the absence of additional inquiries. When it comes to non-trusting or distrust as a default setting, the picture is more complex. On the one hand, interviewees make a clear distinction between an institution as such and the frontline workers they met. In this regard, it is salient that particularly those institutions where means-testing and controlling of proofs play a crucial role are assumed to have distrust institutionalised as a default setting. On the other hand, interviewed citizens make a differentiate between a sceptical, cautious attitude of frontline workers *ex officio*, what we called "professionally trusting" (see above), and a distrustful stance they consider to be motivated by a frontline worker's personal attitudes or experiences. Typically, interviewees conclude that (a certain extent of) distrust is at play when they have to fill out very detailed forms and to deliver a broad range of proof, when frontline workers call their documents or statements into question, inquire a lot and seek to dig deeper, or when frontline workers were perceived as unfriendly, suspicious, disparaging and having prejudices towards citizens. One interviewee, for example, describes her experiences in a Jobcentre the following way:

*They do not trust their people. [...] With most of them I had the feeling that they think this is a workshy bunch of people. [...] It is not necessary to say this. It is simply such an atmosphere that prevails there. Also, this snappish behaviour [...] how they treat you (DE CIT 5).*

According to our interviewees, the **time factor** plays an important role for adjusting initial default positions. Particularly with regard to sceptical, less trustful stances, the continuity of relations helped to improve trust. This is particularly true for those cases where a low level of trust is based on uncertainties and carefulness. In this context, citizens underline that repeatedly changing contact persons in public offices was an obstacle to improving trust relations over time. However, if low trust or even distrust are grounded in more deeply rooted negative experiences (e.g. in a citizen's private life or past

experiences with public offices), or when citizens and frontline workers do not find common ground, then it appears to be more difficult to overcome these obstacles. And sometimes, distrust is even fuelled and cemented as the working relation between a citizen and a frontline worker proceeds.

When reflecting about trust and distrust in their relations with public offices and frontline workers, interviewed citizens address a broad range of **factors that shape these trust or distrust relations**. Most of the time, our interviewees refer to aspects having to do with their perception of frontline workers' attitudes or forms of behaviour, while they barely speak about own personal factors. The factors that are most frequently said to influence interviewees' trust or distrust in frontline workers strongly overlap with the features interviewees find most important with regard to frontline workers' engagement and communication style (see Chapter 3 above). In our interviews, the most salient factor affecting (dis)trust is interviewees' assessment of whether a frontline worker (or the system as such) **granted or refused help**. This finding corresponds to the prominent role interviewees assign to a person's helpfulness when evaluating their experiences with frontline workers. Hence, citizens are more likely to trust the system, a specific institution or individual frontline workers when they receive what they requested, or feel that their caseworker is supportive and seriously committed to helping them. In comparison, they find it more difficult to build trust (or they even develop some form of distrust) if their request for help was – fully or partly – declined, as this goes along with the impression of being disappointed and let down. This is particularly true when a decision is not plausible, when citizens assume they are legally entitled to support or when, for instance, a frontline worker appears to be biased and to take sides with another party:

*It was the only time that I complained and said "Listen! Now I want to talk to someone else, it does not work like this!" And this person then really helped me. And on the spot, she also gave me very good advice in terms of where I can turn [...]. In this regard, I must say, with one person trust was destroyed, and with the other person it was rebuilt. [...] And this time I was not disappointed, and I am quite happy about it (DE CIT 18).*

Secondly, interviewees often explain that a frontline worker's **honesty, truthfulness and transparent behaviour** significantly influenced the extent to which they could open up and build trust towards them. In comparison, distrust was fuelled if citizens had the impression that a frontline worker was dishonest, followed a hidden agenda, kept secret files or concealed information (e.g. about other possible forms of support, or how pre-conditions for a successful application process can be met). In the following example, one interviewee describes how the lack of information about citizens' rights and entitlements fed her distrust of the Jobcentre as an institution:

*I just distrust them because I know exactly that they seek to enforce their tricks, so to say, so that they have to pay less, can get money back in one way or the other. [...] In general, that's the Jobcentre, [...] if one does not know his rights and the foundations and does not know what form of money one can keep – they stay there "Here, give me!", right? So, when it comes to getting money, the Jobcentre is quite quick (DE CIT 20).*

Occasionally, interviewees also reflect on their own trustworthiness and state that they have to be honest and truthful themselves in order to build a good working relationship with their caseworker.

Thirdly, our interviewees often mention that the extent to which they trust or distrust is affected by a frontline worker's **responsiveness and feedback**. Here, interviewees underscore that they are more likely to trust if a frontline worker is perceived as approachable, committed and understanding and gives good feedback in a pleasant, personable, unbureaucratic way. In contrast, they are less inclined to build trust, or even establish some sort of distrust, if frontline workers are unresponsive, detached, do not take time to listen and understand, brush them off with superficial comments, disregard citizens' concerns and hence do not deal with their request as expected.

Moreover, many interviewed citizens also find it important to be treated with **respect, acceptance and appreciation**. When they feel that a frontline worker accepts and respects their opinions and life choices, deals with them as equals and appreciates what they have achieved, then they can more easily trust them. Yet, if their counterpart appears to be judgemental and prejudiced, to look down on them and to lack respect and understanding, trusting becomes more difficult and unlikely, while some also take this as a reason to distrust a frontline worker, and to protect their privacy as much as possible. One interviewee reports about a positive example in the following way:

*I felt comfortable with her/ in the meeting with her. And this was the most important thing. [...] She was very human in her dealings with me. That means, she did not behave as if she were "I am everything, you are nothing". [...] And I found this very pleasant because it is important that when you are supposed to work with each other, then this should happen on an equal footing. Not that one thinks "I am the Croesus and you are.../ Come, crawl at my feet!" or so. Then I do not trust and am not willing to talk, really not (DE CIT 18).*

In addition, a repeated (dis)trust factor mentioned is frontline workers' **reliability**. According to several of our interviewees, the experience that everything proceeded as agreed helped them to trust their frontline worker(s), while situations where a frontline worker did not stand by their pledges and did not act as agreed made citizens feel uncertain, doubtful, disappointed and less trusting or, depending on the issue at stake, even distrustful.

Particularly with regard to relations with YWO staff, a number of interviewees also highlight that their relations with the YWO and individual YWO frontline workers were shaped by poor trust or even distrust because of their **fear that their children might be taken away**. This concern is fuelled by frontline workers' threats, the interviewees' own negative experiences, or experiences of family members or friends, or by negative media coverage and public opinion.

Another noteworthy trust factor brought into the discussion several times is **face-to-face meetings**, which are regarded relevant to assessing if a frontline worker is sympathetic and to establishing a personal level of interaction, to gain a more personal impression and to revise and reduce prejudices. Furthermore, it appears relevant to citizens if

they are treated in a tailored rather than in a schematic, superficial way, or if frontline workers are able to admit and correct their own mistakes.

Finally, when reflecting on the functions of (dis)trust in their relation with public offices and frontline workers, interviewees have divided views. For some, trust is an important precondition for a good and fruitful working relationship, while distrust is regarded as detrimental. For others, trust or distrust play a minor role because they perceive the working relationship and the behaviour of frontline workers from a very pragmatic perspective according to which everything proceeds on the basis of institutionalised rules, which are only professionally applied by frontline workers to their best knowledge, and based on available capacities.

#### 4. Summary and conclusions

The analysis of the empirical material has revealed a number of ways in which trust and distrust become salient in the interactions between citizens and institutions. Our main findings may be summarised as follows:

- The institutional differentiation and fragmentation of the German system of social service provision have a tangible and direct impact on trust relations on the ground. Since frontline workers first have to determine whether their institution is responsible for a particular citizen's concern, it often implies that (at least from citizens' perspectives) the initial focus of attention lies more with the procedure than with the citizen. The relatively low level of coordination and information exchange between the different institutions results in citizens having to provide the same information repeatedly, making procedures complex and exhausting. In the face of uncertainty and opaqueness regarding institutional responsibilities and the experience of frequent referrals from one institution to another, citizens tend to feel abandoned in the system, but also hampered by a system that dispossesses them from fully exercising their rights and making use of their entitlements. In this respect, the lack of sufficient assistance and transparency emerge as important factors that negatively affect citizens' perceptions of the institutions' trustworthiness.
- The administration of financial benefits seems to follow a very different (and more bureaucratic) logic compared to the provision of social services (in which notions of professionalism are of greater importance). This observation applies across institutions. Distrust seems to play a comparatively greater role when it comes to means-tested benefits. In fact, in view of the extensive control mechanisms, a certain degree of distrust appears to be institutionalised in the system of benefit provision. Citizens applying for or receiving financial benefits seem to react to the distrust they meet with some suspicion on their part, and own empowerment and control strategies. In comparison, the areas of the social security system responsible for social services and social work are shaped by a professional approach where building trustful relations with citizens is a core principle.

- Trust is very much conceived as a mutual relationship based on reciprocity, and the same applies to distrust.
- Time is a major factor contributing (in mostly positive ways) to the development of trustful relations.
- Sustained and reliable contacts and clearly defined responsibilities attributed to individuals (not to anonymous institutions) seem to improve trust relations in most cases.
- Trust is functional in a number of ways. For frontline workers, it can help to make interactions run smoothly and proceed with casework quickly and efficiently. Especially in social work contexts, getting citizens to trust and open up is essential for developing good working relations, and is a necessary precondition for achieving the aims of casework. For citizens, trusting 'their' frontline worker can have a disburdening function. Especially when procedures seem very intricate and not readily understandable, trust in an institution or the frontline worker reduces complexity.
- Mistrust or distrust are also functional. As we have highlighted with regard to "professionally trusting by default", scepticism and vigilance form important parts of frontline workers' work ethos and coexist with a fundamental form of basic trust in their counterpart's willingness to aim for the good. As regards citizens, a certain measure of mistrust seems prudent as a precautionary measure, especially when frontline workers are perceived as acting in arbitrary or unforeseeable ways.

Regarding commonalities and differences between frontline workers and citizens, we would like to highlight that there is considerable convergence regarding the importance of reliability, transparency, honesty and sincerity. Both citizens and frontline workers agree that for trust to develop, it is vital to know that confidential information will not be shared with third parties without consent, or used to one's disadvantage. Citizens also emphasise that willingness to help and provide support are important components of trust relations. While this aspect also appears in interviews with frontline workers, it is not as explicitly featured as an important factor – possibly because, to frontline workers, it is self-evident that they are there to help.

Another way in which the statements of the two groups of interviewees converge concerns the importance of the norms and values guiding interactions. Respect, appreciation, transparency and the absence of prejudice are important aspects of caseworkers' interpretation of being professional (cf. for instance Bohler 2013) and, at the same time, they are among the things that citizens expect from frontline workers. However, citizens reveal various experiences where these expectations were not fulfilled, where they felt disappointed and let down by the institutions or individual frontline workers. Hence, while it belongs to the professional self-conception of caseworkers to be "professionally trusting of citizens by default", failures to conform to professional norms may negatively affect citizens' trust in the system of social assistance. This points to the importance of the mutuality of trust relations. At the same time, the tendency to trust or distrust is not solely determined by the character of face-to-face relations. Structural characteristics and institutional influences seem to be just as important. Among the factors affecting

trust relations on the ground are media portrayals of the institutions, and organisational problems such as understaffing, case overload and staff fluctuation. Both frontline workers and citizens agree that it is detrimental to trust relations when caseworkers are changed regularly, negating follow-through and trust building opportunities. From the citizens' perspective, this is further aggravated when, systemically, individual contact persons are not provided for – as is the case at the reception area and the benefits department at the Jobcentre. The anonymity of the institution and its staff make it difficult for them to trust.

When it comes to differences, one interesting observation concerns the importance of trust in general: While frontline workers unanimously find that mutual trust is of vital importance in their work (also Senghaas, Freier and Kupka 2019), citizens often have a more pragmatic approach and do not always find it necessary to trust the individual caseworker. In many cases, it suffices for them to rely on the institutional procedures and the professionalism of the staff, while keeping a certain 'healthy' degree of carefulness and vigilance. This finding resonates well with a debate in social work about "trust antinomy" or "paradoxy" (Helsper 2016). Here, it is argued that in (social-)pedagogical working relations, cooperation and co-production of professionals and clients are essential for the achievement of results. Yet, such cooperation requires that trust is mutually granted and implied between two parties who are actually not familiar with each other and, what is more, whose relationship is typically characterised by power asymmetries, one-sided dependencies and interventions that may directly affect the clients' integrity (Helsper 2016: 55). Thus, "professionals have to demand trust [...], which their clients can only assume and grant on a very fragile basis because in view of the asymmetry and dependency outlined above, there would be a lot to speak in favour of 'healthy mistrust'" (ibid., transl. UZ; also, Schütze 1992: 136; 2000). Developing strategies to cope with this tension appears to be particularly important since the German social security system is currently characterised by a policy of activation and empowerment steps toward self-help, where cooperation and co-production by social assistance users play an essential role. Accordingly, recent social work research points to a shift from more coercive-controlling working approaches toward more affective and trust-oriented approaches in worker-client relations in activation-centred welfare regimes (e.g. Penz et al. 2017).

Overall, our findings indicate that the dispersion of responsibilities and the importance of the subsidiarity principle in the German system of social assistance have a strong impact on trust relations on the frontlines of service delivery. While citizens tend to be tolerant of the shortcomings of the system, they feel badly treated when, in the face of the complexity of the system, they are not fully informed about their rights and entitlements by the institutions, but feel they have to accumulate the relevant information and knowledge themselves. This gains a particular salience in situations where citizens find they have not received the benefits and services they are legally entitled to. While the multiple differentiation of the social service system that we have described in the introductory chapter might seem straightforward and familiar to caseworkers, it seems opaque and unnecessarily complex to citizens (cf. Boeckh, Huster and Benz 2011: 135). Importantly, some of the interviewees do not see this as a neutral fact, a given feature of the system, but suspect that fragmentation and a lack of transparency are part of a strategic withholding of services and benefits, a state manoeuvre to reduce expenditure.

That is, citizens may sometimes feel deceived and defrauded in very personal ways.<sup>18</sup> In addition to the institutional-legal diversification, the principle of subsidiarity and the primacy of self-help, with their particular focus on the individual family as the primary unit responsible for safeguarding the wellbeing of all family members, can sometimes be experienced as an inappropriate subjectification of responsibility. As we demonstrated above, single mothers often feel abandoned by the system; they are left to fend for themselves and are forced to deal with precarious living conditions, health issues within their family, or destructive behaviours of their ex-partners on their own.

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<sup>18</sup> It has to be noted, though, that many of the citizens we interviewed had had negative experiences and have a rather critical stance towards the institutions. One of the motivations for participation in the interview could have been to share their disappointment and frustration. Therefore, the sample might be somewhat skewed.



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