

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272847215>

What explains frontline workers' views on poverty? A comparison of three types of welfare sector institutions: Frontline workers' views on poverty

ARTICLE *in* INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WELFARE · MARCH 2015

Impact Factor: 0.88 · DOI: 10.1111/ijsw.12144

READS

89

4 AUTHORS:



[Helena Blomberg](#)

University of Helsinki

17 PUBLICATIONS 226 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



[Johanna Kallio](#)

University of Turku

23 PUBLICATIONS 23 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



[Christian Kroll](#)

University of Helsinki

15 PUBLICATIONS 54 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



[Mikko Niemelä](#)

University of Turku

68 PUBLICATIONS 89 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

What explains frontline workers' views on poverty? A comparison of three types of welfare sector institutions

Blomberg H., Kallio J., Kroll C., Niemelä M. What explains frontline workers' views on poverty? A comparison of three types of welfare sector institutions

The study analysed views on poverty among Finnish frontline workers in three welfare sector institutions. Two different institutional logics, universal and selective, and two sectors, the public and the voluntary, were represented. A nationwide survey among social security officials, municipal social workers and diaconal workers was utilised (N = 2,124). The methods applied included factor analysis, the examination of means and multivariate analysis of variance. Frontline workers were found to support structural reasons for poverty regardless of institutional affiliation. Analyses, however, also revealed significant differences between the institutions, but not of the kind expected. Social security officials, working in a universal institution, were less likely to endorse structural factors and more likely to endorse individualistic poverty explanations than were social and diaconal workers. Type of education and personal political ideology, respectively, were also found to be of significant importance for poverty perceptions, independent of institutional logic.

**Helena Blomberg¹, Johanna Kallio²,
Christian Kroll¹, Mikko Niemelä^{3,4}**

¹ Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

² Department of Social Sciences, Kuopio Campus, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio, Finland

³ School of Health Sciences, University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland

⁴ Research Department, The Social Insurance Institution of Finland, Helsinki, Finland

Key words: frontline workers, views on poverty, welfare sector, universal institutions, selective institutions

Mikko Niemelä, School of Health Sciences, FI-33014 University of Tampere, Finland

E-mail: mikko.arvo.niemela@uta.fi

Accepted for publication 14 September 2014

Attitudes towards welfare programmes, the role of government and income redistribution have long held a prominent place in social policy literature. In recent years, interest towards perceptions of poverty has grown also in social policy, even though empirical research on the issue has attracted more interest from scholars in the field of social psychology. Perceptions of poverty reveal the status of a particular part of the population and are, therefore, an important aspect of the prevailing welfare culture and the moral economy (Mau, 2003). Secondly, individuals' perceptions of poverty influence their interactions with the poor and, therefore, causal beliefs about poverty have consequences for the poor in their daily lives (Bullock, 1999). Thirdly, poverty perceptions have implications for the legitimacy and viability of specific types of anti-poverty policies (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001, p. 208; Kallio, Blomberg, & Kroll, 2011).

Most of previous research has focused on *popular* perceptions of the causes of poverty (Feagin, 1972; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lepianka, 2007; Lepianka, van Oorschot, & Gelissen, 2009; Niemelä, 2008; Saunders, 2003; van Oorschot & Halman, 2000). However, from a

policy-making point of view, it seems important not only to focus on the general public but also to examine the views of frontline workers responsible for implementing policies directed at economically disadvantaged population groups, as the decisions they take have a direct impact on the individual clients' lives (Keiser, 2010). Clients experiencing economic difficulties often come into contact with a variety of institutions providing welfare benefits and services. This makes it important to focus upon questions regarding the factors that might influence the way clients are viewed and treated by the frontline workers handling their cases in different types of institutions. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to examine and compare views on poverty among Finnish frontline workers within three institutions. Two different institutional logics, universal and selective, and two sectors, the public and the voluntary, are represented.

A common feature among the distinctions that have been made in previous research between explanations for why there are poor people in society is the inclusion of explanations emphasising structural reasons, on the one hand, and individualistic reasons, on the other hand,

usually alongside some explanation referring to the role of fate (see further below). According to the structural type of explanation, the poor are victims of considerable injustices in society, including, among other things, inadequate institutional solutions. Thus, society is also responsible for alleviating existing social problems. The individualistic view emphasises personal responsibility of the poor for their predicament. Poverty is here understood as a result of individuals' laziness, lack of thrift or dubious morals, among other things. (For a more detailed discussion about different causes of poverty, see e.g., Kallio & Niemelä, 2014; Lepianka, 2007; Niemelä, 2008; van Oorschot & Halman, 2000.) From a policy perspective, these two explanations also stand out as the most relevant as they relate to the dominating distributional principles in welfare policies towards the poor: to universalism and selectivism, respectively (Albrekt Larsen, 2006). Also, this study will focus on these two explanations.

The following section discusses the institutions included in this study, with a focus on frontline workers and their characteristics. To better understand the possible variation in views among frontline workers more generally, various other explanatory variables, in addition to institutional affiliation, are considered. This is done in the section that follows, in the context of presenting some hypotheses regarding variations in frontline workers' views. Then, after a description of methods and applied research tools, the main findings are reported. The article ends with a summarising discussion of the results and their possible implications for the implementation of the principles of the Nordic welfare state model in relation to benefits and services for the economically most vulnerable groups in society.

Frontline workers in the welfare sector

Since the classic examinations of street-level bureaucracy in the 1970s (Lipsky, 1980; Prottas, 1978; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977), a number of scholars have examined how frontline workers' actions have influenced policy implementation (for an overview, see Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003). Street-level bureaucrats are defined by Lipsky (1980, p. 3) as 'public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution in their work'. Thus, many studies have emphasised that street-level bureaucrats, or frontline workers, by implementing public policy, are important actors in policy change because 'they translate institutional policy into daily, situated practice on the ground level' (Hjörne, Juhila, & van Nijnatte, 2010, p. 303; see also May & Winter, 2009).

Although the work of these frontline workers is controlled and directed by legislation and their organisation's rules and goals, by factors such as ambiguous

policy objectives and by their position in the 'cross-fire' of shortages, high and sometimes conflicting public expectations allow some degree of discretion in most welfare state institutions (cf. Evans, 2010).

Thus, frontline workers act as gatekeepers in welfare programmes by processing individual cases and placing them in administrative categories to provide services, treatment, benefits and other forms of assistance: 'They process large numbers of people and make decisions that label citizens as deserving or not deserving' (Keiser, 1999, p. 94; see also Prottas, 1979). Consequently, as Lipsky (1980) argued, their influence is particularly powerful in the case of the poor, who are more likely to be the clients of (various types of) social security programmes.

One type of critique of Lipsky's theory has focused on the fact that the theory sees street-level bureaucrats as a rather homogenous group, thus not taking into account the fact that frontline workers make decisions within differing institutional contexts (Evans, 2010; May & Winter, 2009). Therefore, the question arises whether and how such institutional differences might affect the views of their respective frontline workers.

The first institution studied is the Social Insurance Institution (Kela), which provides a large variety of primary social security benefits covering the entire population 'from the cradle to the grave', starting from benefits for families with children and including financial aid for students, basic unemployment benefits, housing benefits, sickness and disability allowances, rehabilitation, national pensions and survivors' pensions. Thus, the economically disadvantaged are only one of many client groups, although in practice many basic universal benefits mainly cover people who lack income-related social insurance. Kela's social security officials have limited authority for making independent decisions. They have to adopt a bureaucratic stance where following the rules is essential, and thus their flexibility to respond to clients' needs is also limited. Their educational background is diverse: Some officials have vocational education either in commerce or social sciences while some hold bachelor's or master's degrees in various fields. Although they do not necessarily meet their clients face to face when handling applications, they can be regarded as street-level workers whose tasks still may include a certain amount of discretion. They process people and make judgments about people's situations through reading applications and asking further information from clients (cf. Keiser, 2010, p. 250).

The second type of institution, municipal social work, is a part of municipal social services, which, as a whole, provide a variety of services ranging from (often weakly) universal services such as elderly care, through child welfare services, to various, more traditionally selective policies directed at adults suffering from

social problems, such as long-term unemployment and addictions. They also provide social assistance, means-tested economic support of last resort, in cases where primary social security is not sufficient. Also, the more selective types of municipal social services, often provided within municipal social work, are regarded as being an integrated part of the welfare system, thought to promote the general goals of the Nordic welfare state. However, it has sometimes been pointed out that municipal social work partly originates in the municipal poor relief system of the pre-welfare state, which was ideologically based on individualistic rather than structural views on poverty, as opposed to the universal policies characteristic of the (rest of the) Nordic welfare state, and that this way of thinking still might have an influence on municipal policies related to 'the poor' (see Sunesson et al., 1998). In tasks requiring a large amount of discretion, social workers are often assigned an important role. Municipal social workers are by law required to have a master's degree in social work from a university (although temporary employees are exempted). Social workers holding a degree in social work have an academic and professional training in the field (which includes studies in social risks and processes of social exclusion).

The other selective institution included is the diaconia of the Lutheran Church of Finland (which has no official role in the Finnish welfare system). One of the tasks in diaconal work, determined by the Church Order, is to help those whose distress is the greatest and who have no other source of help. Since the early 1990s, this financial support has become permanent and essential as a working method. Thus, the clients of diaconal financial help are the disadvantaged who are not helped sufficiently by public social welfare. Most of the clients of diaconal work are permanently left outside of the labour market and suffer from severe material deprivation (Juntunen, 2011). Diaconal workers have large discretion when providing financial help.

In historical perspective, the Lutheran church has been seen to represent a rather individualistic view on the causes of poverty because of a strong ethos on the individual's own responsibility to work and support himself (see also Ditch, 1984; Hunt, 2002). Since the economic recession of the early 1990s, the Lutheran church in Finland has, however, had an active role in anti-poverty policies (see Kuivalainen & Niemelä, 2010). It has become the most important actor in the voluntary sector, and diaconal work in Finland has a considerably more significant role in social welfare than it has in the other Nordic countries (Juntunen, 2011). Deacons are required to hold a relevant bachelor's degree from a university of applied sciences. The studies include theology as well as studies either in the field of social services at a more practical level than studies in

social work at universities, or in nursing. Despite the less academic educational basis, also these studies include issues related to poverty and they, too, aim at promoting professional identity for diaconal workers.

Frontline workers' views

Surprisingly little is known about frontline workers' views on welfare, especially in the Nordic countries. Prior research on frontline workers' attitudes towards the poor has mainly focused on social workers' attitudes (e.g., Blomberg, Kroll, Kallio, & Erola, 2013; Weiss & Gal, 2007; Weiss-Gal, Benyamini, Ginzburg, Savaya, & Peled, 2009), while analyses including other groups of street-level workers have been rather rare.

The results concerning social workers have shown that they are more likely to support structural than (any) other explanations for poverty (Blomberg et al., 2013; Bullock, 2004; Rehner, Ishee, Salloum, & Velasquez, 1997; Weiss & Gal, 2007; Weiss-Gal et al., 2009). Studies of social work students' attitudes show similar results. This has been explained as a reflection of social work education, possibly having a bearing on students' perceptions. It is also possible that social work students initially hold structural beliefs more than other students (Schwartz & Robinson, 1991; Sun, 2001; Weiss, 2003). In this regard, the normative views within social work can be seen as generally concordant with Nordic welfare policy as well: A structural view on the reasons for social problems, including poverty, has been a part of the normative basis of the Nordic welfare state model favouring universalistic policy solutions (Kautto, Fritzell, Hvinden, Kvist, & Uusitalo, 2001). Because there also are findings showing that structural explanations for poverty are a part of the nationally embedded beliefs of the Finnish population (Niemelä, 2008), it seems fair to hypothesise that (HI) the majority of Finnish frontline workers in the field of social welfare support structural reasons for poverty.

However, we further assume that there are differences between the groups of frontline workers investigated. One reason for this is provided by theories that emphasise the impact of the adherence to the goals or mission of the institution in question. In this line of thought, the impact of institutional design and of attempts of managers to create a sense of shared values are often emphasised (see Keiser, 2010, p. 250, for a discussion). In our case, the theory regarding the impact (on regime level) of the dominant distributional logic of welfare state institutions on popular attitudes provides a starting point for making an assumption about the impact of institutional design on the employed in welfare institutions. It has been shown that the dominating distributional principle in welfare policies towards the poor (selectivism or universalism, respectively) influences public perceptions of the causes of

poverty (Albrekt Larsen, 2006; Kallio & Niemelä, 2014; Lepianka, 2007). This type of effect is due to the diverging messages regarding deservingness that the institutional solutions convey to the general public (Albrekt Larsen, 2006). Following a similar logic, regarding the employed within welfare sector institutions, working in an organisation administering benefits based on universalism would seldom result in situations where frontline workers come to question whether clients *deserve* the benefit or service, or whether they are personally responsible for their situation. This issue is more likely to be at the fore in institutions administering selective benefits and services that are subject to a wider discretion of the frontline worker. Thus, the hypothesis (H2) would be that social security officials are more likely than social and diaconal workers to endorse structural reasons for poverty.

However, there are other factors which might be of importance and which lead to differing assumptions as to the views of frontline workers. Firstly, due to diverging client structures of the institutions, social and diaconal workers are likely to have more frequent contacts with economically disadvantaged clients than are social security officials. Various forms of personal exposure have been shown to result in a decrease in the likelihood among the general public to confirm stereotyped views of groups, such as the poor being deviant, which implies blaming their predicaments on individual shortcomings and flaws (Lee, Farrell, & Link, 2004; Lepianka, 2007), instead of stressing structural causes. If we assume that such a logic includes frontline workers and that client structures of the respective institutions are decisive, we might, thus, hypothesise (H3) that social and diaconal workers are more, not less, likely to endorse structural causes of poverty than are social security officials.

Furthermore, one might also consider the impact of the differences between individual frontline workers as regards their working experience in their respective tasks (in all three institutions). Also, working experience may be regarded as a measure of 'exposure'. To the extent that working experience is more decisive for views on the poor than reasons related to institutional principles, it could instead be assumed (H4) that frontline workers with a longer working experience are more likely to endorse structural causes of poverty than are those with a shorter working experience (Blomberg et al., 2013).

Another possibility to be considered is the impact of the education of frontline workers. Despite (varying) formal requirements for working within the three institutions, there are variations in the factual educational background of frontline workers, for various reasons (cf. above). Academic training in the social sciences may be expected to increase scientific knowledge concerning social phenomena such as poverty, and to

shape, reinforce or alter the views, especially among those who have received an academic *professional* education, such as trained social workers. In social work education, there is, both in the Nordic countries and elsewhere, an emphasis on structural explanations for social problems, including poverty (Blomberg et al., 2013; Weiss, 2003). This results in the hypothesis (H5) that those who have an academic professional education within the social sciences are more likely to endorse structural reasons for poverty than those who do not have an academic professional education in the social sciences.

Finally, also political values and beliefs that people hold, regardless of education or work, may be of importance for how frontline workers will interpret information about different social phenomena (Keiser, 2010). Previous research among the general public has indeed identified the importance of political ideology on attitudes: Political conservatives, or those who place themselves on the right of the political spectrum, are more likely to endorse individualistic causes of poverty, whereas political liberals or those on the left of the political spectrum attribute poverty to structural forces (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Lepianka, van Oorschot, & Gelissen, 2010; Zucker & Weiner, 1993). Similarly, social workers who identify themselves as right-wing voters support more individualistic causes of poverty and a less extensive welfare state (Rehner et al., 1997). Therefore, we hypothesise (H6) that those frontline workers who vote for left-wing parties are more likely to support structural causes for poverty than are right-wing voters.

Method

Sample

The data used derive from a nationwide survey collected among frontline workers in the autumn of 2011. In regard to social insurance officials, the sample was drawn from the employee register of Kela. It was a random sample of social security officials working in local offices with the job title of customer secretary, insurance secretary or customer adviser. The sample size was 1,500, and 887 respondents filled in the electronic questionnaire, giving a response rate of 60 per cent.

In regard to social workers, all social workers who were members of the Union of Professional Social Workers (Talentia) and had an e-mail address (about 70% of all members) were sent an electronic questionnaire. The effective sample size of the survey concerning social workers was about 1,600, and 530 respondents filled in the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 33 per cent. However, a non-response analysis did not reveal any systematic bias associated with demographic or professional variables.

The survey of diaconal workers of the Lutheran church was sent through electronic questionnaire via the central administration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The survey reached all (1,240) diaconal workers of the Church. The response rate was 57 per cent ($N = 707$). Altogether, the data thus included 2,124 cases.

Research tools

Dependent variables. Previous research has provided different categorisations for the causes of poverty. The most widely used is a three-tier typology, originally proposed by Feagin (1972), which distinguishes individualistic, structural and fatalistic reasons for poverty. Later, van Oorschot and Halman (2000) proposed a four-tier typology of poverty explanations (social/individual, blame/fate), Gallie and Paugam (2002) distinguished between factual and ideological reasons, and Albrekt Larsen (2006) between internal control and external reasons for poverty.

In the present study, we focused on the division between structural and individualistic explanations for poverty. In other words, we were interested in the extent to which frontline workers perceive poverty as being caused by individuals' own actions and to what extent they blame society for poverty. Because it is possible that the respondent can simultaneously support both (multiple) causes, it is justifiable to use both categories instead of one. Prior studies have illustrated the split consciousness of public perceptions, which means the coexistence of both dominant and potentially challenging beliefs (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). In the case of poverty perceptions, individualistic perceptions may be layered onto an existing structuralistic base. We chose to exclude fatalistic reasons for poverty from the analysis because its theoretical connection to the institutions investigated is unclear. Instead, it seemed theoretically relevant to study structural causes of poverty because they are related to the principles of more universal public institutions and individual causes of poverty as they come closer to the principles of means-tested institutions. In other words, our theoretical approach influenced the choice of statements to be included in the analyses.

Altogether, the analysis included seven statements about the causes of poverty and ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The statements were as follows: (i) there is injustice in society, (ii) public policy favours the wealthy, (iii) the level of social security is too low, (iv) applying for benefits is too complicated and there is too much bureaucracy, (v) the poor are lazy and lack willpower, (vi) the poor do not have proper money management skills, and (vii) the poor have lack of effort. Most of the statements, which have been used to represent various aspects of individualistic and

structural explanations, respectively, were adapted from earlier studies (e.g., Niemelä, 2008; van Oorschot & Halman, 2000).

Independent variables. The frontline workers' 'institutional affiliation' refers to the three institutions representing different institutional logics. The variable measuring education makes a distinction between frontline workers with: (i) a university degree in social work, (ii) deacon-bachelor in social services, (iii) bachelor of social services, (iv) vocational education in social services, and (v) any other education. For our purposes, it seemed reasonable to view categories 1–3 as *academic professional* education within the social sciences, as they all, albeit to a varying extent, include theoretical studies on social problems and processes of social exclusion, as well as professional training in their field. The second category included frontline workers with different types of vocational (non-academic) education in the field. The third category included all other types of education. Working experience was measured by the length of work experience in a given occupation. Political ideology was measured by a question: 'Which political party did you vote for in the most recent parliamentary elections?'

Procedure

The methods used consisted of factor analysis, the examination of means and, as a multivariate method, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Factor analysis was applied to explore the possible dimensions along which the explanations of poverty can be combined. The direct oblimin rotation method was used to allow the factor loadings to correlate as we could assume that individualistic and structural causes are correlated negatively. In the descriptive analysis, means were reported for each separate item and for the factor scores to get a more nuanced interpretation of the findings. MANOVA was utilised to examine the main effects of independent variables (two regression factor score variables) on different types of explanations of poverty. MANOVA also includes a subsequent ANOVA, which helps interpret different explanations separately. Therefore, a test of between-subject effects (ANOVA) and estimated marginal means was examined as well.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The responses to a question asking whether or not people agree with a series of statements about the causes of poverty are summarised in Table 1. In general, the results show that frontline workers viewed

Table 1. Frontline workers' perceptions of the causes of poverty.

	Social workers		Diaconal workers		Social security officials		Total	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Injustice in society	3.86	1.02	4.01	0.92	3.50	1.03	3.76	1.02
Social policy favours wealthy	3.98	1.00	4.14	0.85	3.61	1.05	3.88	1.01
Low level of social security	3.81	1.07	3.87	1.01	3.15	1.11	3.55	1.12
Bureaucracy in social security	3.67	1.07	3.97	0.94	2.94	1.19	3.46	1.17
Lack of proper money management	3.39	1.02	3.78	0.89	3.46	0.97	3.55	0.97
Lack of effort	2.32	1.05	2.43	0.96	2.91	1.03	2.60	1.05
Laziness and lack of willpower	1.93	0.95	2.17	1.05	2.72	1.08	2.34	1.09
Regression factor score I (structural) ^a	0.20	0.94	0.45	0.79	-0.47	0.98	0	1.00
Regression factor score II (individualistic)	-0.33	0.97	-0.29	0.94	0.22	1.01	0	1.00

The proportion of frontline workers that agrees or strongly agrees with the statement and mean value on a 5-point scale (strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 5), with standard deviations (SD) for the mean.

Source: Finnish survey of street-level bureaucrats.

^aScales concerning structural causes: -3.63191 (strongly disagree) to 0.189731 (strongly agree). Scales concerning individualistic causes: -2.46778 (strongly disagree) to 2.78173 (strongly agree).

poverty as caused by policies favouring the wealthy (mean 3.88) and by general injustice in society (3.76) the most. Therefore, the results would support *H1* which suggested that frontline workers, regardless of institutional affiliation, support structural reasons for poverty.

There were, however, also differences between frontline workers in the three institutions. Social security officials were less likely to endorse structural factors (-0.47) and more likely to endorse individualistic poverty explanations (0.22) than social (0.20 and -0.33) and diaconal workers (0.45 and -0.29). This was especially pronounced concerning the concrete statements on the level and implementation of social security. While the social (3.67 and 3.81) and diaconal workers (3.97 and 3.87) supported the idea that poverty is caused by bureaucracy and low level of social security, social security officials (2.94 and 3.15) provided clearly less support to these ideas. This might have reflected the institutional division between primary and last resort social security. Thus, social and diaconal workers were through their work more likely to be aware of the problems regarding minimum social security benefits, and they also had more exposure to the poor than did social security officials.

In regard to individualistic explanations, social (2.32 and 1.93) and diaconal workers (2.43 and 2.17) were critical towards the notion that lack of effort and laziness cause poverty, whereas social insurance officials (2.91 and 2.72) blamed the poor for their poverty more often. However, frontline workers agreed more often with the view that lack of proper money management causes poverty. Thus, frontline workers' perceptions also reflected the responsibility of individual actions. Yet the meaning of lacking money management skills is to some extent different from other individualistic reasons examined in this study. The lack of proper money management reflects individuals' capabilities,

whereas lack of effort and laziness are related more directly to dysfunctional behaviour of an individual. To examine the possible dimension along which explanations of poverty can be combined, attribution statements were subjected to factor analysis. As indicated in Table A1, the results support our expectation that the statements represent two dimensions, structural and individualistic explanations, respectively. Thus, also the lack of money management skills could be interpreted as an individualistic cause, even though the item loading of this statement was lower than other item loadings. Overall, descriptive results show that there were certain differences concerning poverty perceptions among frontline workers in different institutions: Social insurance officials appeared to be, to some extent, a distinctive group compared with social and diaconal workers; however, not in the way expected above (cf. *H2*).

Instead, the results seem to support the idea that the institutional design resulting in a partly different client composition and varying exposure to the poor was associated with poverty perceptions (*H3*). Yet multivariate analyses showed to what extent other factors, such as work experience and education, had an effect on this association.

Multivariate analysis

Besides institutional differences between frontline workers, the theoretical discussion above emphasised the importance of educational background, working experience, as well as personal political ideology for frontline workers' perceptions. To examine the main effects of independent variables on individualistic and structural explanations of poverty, we next performed a MANOVA. Dependent variables were the regression factor scores obtained from the factor analysis (Table A1). Education is naturally strongly correlated

with institutional affiliation. Thus, the variables were included in separate statistical models (I, II).

The results of Wilk's lambda show that regardless of the independent variable, the value of lambda is more than 0.8 (Table A2). This means that group differences were rather small. The results of eta squared show that the impacts or effects sizes were in general rather small as well. Model I indicates that there were statistically significant differences in perceptions of the causes of poverty by education, length of working experience and political ideology. In addition, Model II confirms the results of the descriptive statistics above. It shows that institutional affiliation does also matter when other independent variables are included in the model. Actually, the values of Wilk's lambda and eta squared indicate that institutional affiliation had the strongest impact on differences in attributions for poverty.

The multivariate test results show whether certain independent variables are significant. However, they do not indicate in what way the levels involved in each significant variable are different. The MANOVA also includes a subsequent ANOVA, which made it possible to interpret structural and individualistic explanations of poverty separately. Hence, a test of between-subject effects (ANOVA) and multiple comparison tests are applied in Table 2. A comparison between statistical models showed that replacing education with institutional affiliation has an effect on the results.

Regarding the differences between frontline workers, estimated marginal means were in line with the descriptive results presented above: Social workers and especially diaconal workers more often supported structural explanations than did social security officials (Table 3), and thus this lends support to *H3*. The results are, however, sensitive to the fact that social insurance officials were particularly critical towards the

statements regarding the level of and bureaucracy in social security. As presented in Table 1, they clearly did not blame the 'shortcomings' of the social security system as much as social and diaconal workers did, while the differences between the groups were not that pronounced when it came to the other structural poverty perceptions. The results were more unequivocal when it came to the differences in perceptions of individualistic reasons for poverty. Social insurance officials were more likely than social and diaconal workers to endorse individualistic reasons. And, as descriptive statistics indicated, this result was due to social insurance officials' stronger support for the statements about the lack of effort and the laziness of the poor.

In regard to working experience, *H4* could not be clearly confirmed. Model II shows that when institutional affiliation was included in the model, working experience was revealed to be significantly associated only with the individualistic explanation (Table 2). Estimated marginal means also show that the association between working experience and attributions for poverty is not linear (Table 3).

Education was significantly related to both types of explanation for poverty. Table 3 shows that frontline workers with a university degree in social work as well as deacons being bachelors of social services endorsed structural causes of poverty more often than frontline workers with another type of education. Further, frontline workers with a university degree in social work were less inclined than others to support individualistic poverty explanations. The stronger support for individualistic reasons among deacon-bachelors of social services was, however, due mainly to their strong support for the statement regarding lack of proper money management among the poor. They did not agree with moral arguments about the laziness or lack

Table 2. ANOVA test of between-subject effects of independent variables on the perceptions of the causes of poverty.

Attribution for poverty	Model I			Model II		
	F	Partial eta squared	Observed power	F	Partial eta squared	Observed power
Education						
Structural	27.935***	0.053	1.000			
Individualistic	13.735***	0.027	1.000			
Institutional affiliation						
Structural				174.793***	0.149	1.000
Individualistic				30.047***	0.029	1.000
Working experience						
Structural	7.337***	0.015	0.997	1.294	0.003	0.409
Individualistic	11.273***	0.022	1.0	9.803***	0.019	1.000
Political ideology						
Structural	21.445***	0.051	1.000	21.990***	0.052	1.000
Individualistic	8.110***	0.020	1.000	8.938***	0.022	1.000

F-value, significance level^a, partial eta squared and observed power^b.

Source: Finnish survey of street-level bureaucrats.

Note: Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

^aAdjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni. ^balpha = 0.05.

Table 3. Perceptions of the causes of poverty by education, institutional affiliation, working experience and political ideology.

	Structural explanation				Individualistic explanation			
	Model I		Model II		Model I		Model II	
	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI
Education								
Degree in social work (university)	0.125	0.029 to 0.222			-0.274	-0.373 to -0.176		
Deacon-bachelor of social services	0.498	0.378 to 0.617			-0.016	-0.139 to 0.107		
Bachelor of social services	-0.006	-0.181 to 0.165			-0.013	-0.192 to 0.167		
Vocational education in social services	-0.108	-0.251 to 0.035			-0.028	-0.175 to 0.119		
Any other education	-0.181	-0.244 to -0.118			0.158	0.093 to 0.223		
Institutional affiliation								
Social workers			0.093	0.010 to 0.117			-0.231	-0.322 to -0.141
Diaconal workers			0.427	0.354 to 0.499			-0.014	-0.092 to 0.065
Social security officials			-0.483	-0.551 to -0.415			0.207	-0.134 to 0.281
Working experience								
Less than 5 years	-0.120	-0.217 to -0.024	-0.034	-0.124 to 0.055	0.109	0.010 to 0.208	0.107	0.010 to 0.203
5–9	0.016	-0.088 to 0.121	-0.033	-0.129 to 0.062	0.134	0.027 to 0.241	0.154	0.051 to 0.258
10–19	0.132	0.042 to 0.222	-0.022	-0.057 to 0.101	-0.184	-0.277 to -0.091	-0.153	-0.238 to -0.068
20–29	0.208	0.110 to 0.307	0.085	0.002 to 0.168	-0.210	-0.311 to -0.109	-0.170	-0.260 to -0.081
30 or older	0.092	-0.036 to 0.220	0.023	-0.091 to 0.137	-0.022	-0.153 to 0.110	-0.001	-0.124 to 0.122
Political ideology								
The Conservatives	-0.421	-0.550 to -0.291	-0.425	-0.542 to -0.307	0.217	0.084 to 0.350	0.221	0.094 to 0.348
Centre Party	-0.022	-0.138 to 0.093	-0.079	-0.184 to 0.026	-0.026	-0.145 to 0.092	0.001	-0.113 to 0.114
Christian Democrats	0.367	0.231 to 0.504	0.099	-0.029 to 0.228	-0.022	-0.162 to 0.118	0.059	-0.079 to 0.198
The Green League	0.153	0.017 to 0.289	0.138	0.012 to 0.265	-0.170	-0.309 to -0.030	-0.164	-0.301 to -0.028
Social Democratic Party/Left Alliance	0.277	0.184 to 0.371	0.312	0.229 to 0.394	-0.239	-0.335 to -0.143	-0.241	-0.330 to -0.152
Other/politically passive	0.039	-0.046 to 0.125	0.029	-0.044 to 0.101	0.033	-0.055 to 0.121	0.049	-0.030 to 0.127

Estimated marginal means for regression factor scores and 95% confidence interval.

Source: Finnish survey of street-level bureaucrats.

of effort among the poor (see Table 1). Hence, the results on education would support *H5* that frontline workers' type of education was associated with poverty perceptions.

Finally, the analysis lends strong support to *H6*, which assumed that political ideology does matter in poverty perceptions. Table 2 also shows that the explanatory power of political ideology was stronger when it came to differences in perceptions for structural than in individualistic causes. Voters of the right-wing Conservatives were more likely to support individualistic explanations and less likely to explain poverty by structural causes than those who had voted for the Social Democrats or the Left Alliance (Table 3).

Conclusions

As expected, our findings suggest a generally strong inclination to explain poverty by structural reasons and a considerably lower support for individualistic explanations. Still, it is possible to identify a certain coexistence of dominant (structural) and challenging (individualistic) beliefs, a coexistence which has also

been prevailing in the Nordic welfare model, especially during the last decades (Kuivalainen & Niemelä, 2010).

Analyses, however, also reveal significant differences between the frontline workers in different types of institutions. Indeed, our multivariate analysis indicates that institutional affiliation has the strongest impact on attributions for poverty among the factors investigated. However, its impact is not of the kind we expected on the basis of the respective institutional *raison d'être*.

In the light of our results, the design of the system seems to produce a kind of 'administrative paradox': In selective institutions in which a greater influence of a thinking that stresses individualistic explanations for poverty might adhere (cf. above), a larger share of frontline workers adheres to structural explanations of poverty. In an institution that builds on principles of universalism, thought to be concordant with structural poverty explanations, frontline workers more often favour individualistic explanations.

Thus, our results indicate that a mechanism, analogous to the one that (re)inforces perceptions of structural reasons for poverty among the general public in

systems based on the principle of universalism, is not necessarily present within institutions administering social security based on that principle – in the sense that these would result in a strong adherence by their frontline workers to their basic, normative institutional logic.

There are various possible factors that may have contributed to this finding. A possible explanation, which is discussed above, has to do with exposure to the poor. Due to the division between customer service and the handling process of benefit application, social security officials have fewer personal contacts with the poor than do social and diaconal workers. In addition, while the social support provided by social and diaconal work is based on a multidimensional understanding of the clients' living conditions, handling of non-means-based social security requires much narrower information related to the eligibility standards for a given benefit.

Furthermore, one might reflect on whether a certain (pre)selection process as regards the recruitment to various types of institutions might be taking place: Those believing in structural poverty explanations may be drawn towards becoming social or diaconal workers, while becoming a social security official is not determined by any distinct 'view on the poor'. However, for this to be a plausible explanation, one could also expect (at least) a fairly similarly strong impact of education, which is not the case.

We also assumed that those with a longer working experience might be more likely to endorse structural reasons for poverty than those with shorter working experience. However, it seems difficult to interpret the effect of the length of work experience on attitudes in terms of this type of 'exposure to the poor'; on the basis of our results, support for individualistic poverty explanations is more common among those who have both the longest and the shortest work experience, respectively, when compared with those in-between. A possible reason for this result could instead be a socialisation to the general values and norms prevailing in the welfare sector, especially at the beginning of one's working career. This would explain the lowest support for individualistic explanations among those who had their initial work experiences during the heyday of the normative influence of the Nordic welfare model, which stresses structural explanations, on Finnish social policy (cf. e.g., Blomberg et al., 2013).

Education was found to be associated with perceptions of poverty, and thus our hypothesis on this factor is confirmed. As expected, the education of professional frontline workers within the field of social science seems to shape (or at least reinforce) certain poverty perceptions: Those with an academic professional education in social services (i.e., those with a degree in social work, as well as deacon-bachelors of

social services) are more likely to endorse structural reasons for poverty than frontline workers with other types of education. It seems fair to assume that this pattern is related to an inclusion in the former type of education of scientific knowledge on reasons for poverty and other 'social problems' which highlight structural explanations for poverty. Frontline workers with a degree in social work are also the least inclined to support individualistic poverty perceptions, which thus also may be the result of their education.

But the personal political ideology of frontline workers also has significant importance for their poverty perceptions, independent of education or what type of institution they work in, thus confirming our assumptions about this point. It has been assumed elsewhere that this could be the case especially in bureaucracies/institutions with multiple or vague missions (cf. Keiser, 2010). Further analysis would be needed to discern, for instance, whether only one or all of the institutions investigated should be regarded as having, in practice, a 'vague mission' when it comes to issues related to the reasons for poverty.

The often substantial discretion given to social (and diaconal) workers in more selective services makes (variation in) their views about their clients and the nature of their predicaments especially important for the handling of clients and cases. However, the views of individual frontline workers can be of importance for the implementation of policies in universal institutions, like the one investigated here, as well: Their role seldom corresponds to the Weberian bureaucratic ideal in which the views of single bureaucrats have no bearing on the implementation process. A variety of possible negative effects of encounters between clients and frontline workers within universalistic institutional contexts have been detected (see Upmark, Hagberg, & Alexanderson, 2009; cf. Söderberg & Alexanderson, 2005).

It needs to be remembered that none of the institutions investigated administer benefits or services solely directed at 'the poor'. Nonetheless, one implication to be drawn from our results is that the fulfilment of the principles of the Nordic welfare state model, as regards benefits and services for the economically most vulnerable groups in society, would probably be advanced by a system that combined universalistic principles of provision, which are known to usually be less stigmatising than selective services, and an administrative arrangement engaging frontline workers trained in working with poverty issues.

References

- Albrekt Larsen, C. (2006). *The institutional logic of welfare attitudes. How welfare regimes influence public support*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

- Blomberg, H., Kroll, C., Kallio, J., & Erola, J. (2013). Social workers' perceptions of the causes of poverty in the Nordic countries. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 23(1), 68–82.
- Bullock, H. E. (1999). Attributions for poverty: A comparison of middle-class and welfare recipient attitudes. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 29(10), 2059–2082.
- Bullock, H. E. (2004). From the front lines of welfare reform: An analysis of social worker and welfare recipient attitudes. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 144(6), 571–588.
- Cozzarelli, C., Wilkinson, A., & Tagler, M. (2001). Attitudes towards the poor and attributions for poverty. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(2), 207–227.
- Ditch, J. (1984). The perception of poverty in Northern Ireland. *Policy and Politics*, 12(2), 167–181.
- Evans, T. (2010). *Professional discretion in welfare services. Beyond street-level bureaucracy*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Feagin, J. R. (1972). Poverty: We still believe that God helps those who help themselves. *Psychology Today*, 6(2), 101–129.
- Gallie, D. & Paugam, S. (2002). *Social precarity and social integration. Report for the European Commission based on Eurobarometer 56.1*. Brussels, Belgium: European Commission Directorate-General Employment.
- Hjörne, E., Juhila, K., & van Nijnatte, C. (2010). Negotiating dilemmas in the practices of street-level welfare work. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 19(3), 303–309.
- Hunt, M. O. (2002). Religion, race/ethnicity, and beliefs about poverty. *Social Science Quarterly*, 83(3), 810–831.
- Juntunen, E. (2011). *Vain hätäapua? Taloudellinen avustaminen diakoniatyön professionaalisen itseymmärryksen ilmentäjänä* [Financial help alone? Financial help as an exponent of professional diaconal work]. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- Kallio, J., Blomberg, H., & Kroll, J. (2011). Suomalaisten sosiaalityöntekijöiden mielipiteet köyhiin kohdistuvista auttamisstrategioista [Social workers' attitudes towards the strategies of helping the poor]. *Janus*, 19(3), 251–268.
- Kallio, J. & Niemelä, M. (2014). Who blames the poor? A multilevel evidence of the support for and determinants of the individualistic explanation of poverty in Europe. *European Societies*, 16(1), 112–135.
- Kautto, M., Fritzell, J., Hvinden, B., Kvist, J., & Uusitalo, H. (2001). *Nordic welfare states in the European context*. London: Routledge.
- Keiser, L. R. (1999). State bureaucratic discretion and the administration of social welfare programs: The case of social security disability. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 9(1), 87–106.
- Keiser, L. R. (2010). Understanding street-level bureaucrats' decision making: Determining eligibility in the social security disability program. *Public Administration Review*, 70(2), 247–257.
- Kluegel, J. R. & Smith, E. R. (1986). *Beliefs about inequality: Americans' views of what is and what ought to be*. New York, NY: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Kuivalainen, S. & Niemelä, M. (2010). From universalism to selectivism: The ideational turn of the anti-poverty policies in Finland. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 20(3), 263–276.
- Lee, B. A., Farrell, C. A., & Link, B. G. (2004). Revisiting the contact hypothesis: The case of public exposure to homelessness. *American Sociological Review*, 69(1), 40–63.
- Lepianka, D. (2007). *Are the poor to be blamed or pitied? A comparative study of popular poverty attributions in Europe*. Tilburg, The Netherlands: Tilburg University.
- Lepianka, D., van Oorschot, W., & Gelissen, J. (2009). Popular explanations of poverty: A critical discussion of empirical research. *Journal of Social Policy*, 38(3), 421–438.
- Lepianka, D., van Oorschot, W., & Gelissen, J. (2010). Popular explanations of poverty in Europe: Effects of contextual and individual characteristics across 28 European countries. *Acta Sociologica*, 53(1), 53–72.
- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy. Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Mau, S. (2003). *The moral economy of welfare states. Britain and Germany compared*. London, UK: Routledge.
- May, P. J. & Winter, S. C. (2009). Politicians, managers, and street-level bureaucrats: Influences on policy implementation. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 19(3), 453–476.
- Meyers, M. K. & Vorsanger, S. (2003). Street-level bureaucrats and the implementation of public policy. In B. G. Peters & J. Pierre (Eds.), *Handbook of public administration* (pp. 245–255). London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Niemelä, M. (2008). Perceptions of the causes of poverty in Finland. *Acta Sociologica*, 51(1), 23–40.
- Prottas, J. M. (1978). The power of the street-level bureaucrat in public bureaucracies. *Urban Affairs Review*, 13(3), 285–312.
- Prottas, J. M. (1979). *People-processing: The street-level bureaucrat in public service bureaucracies*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Rehner, T., Ishee, J., Salloum, M., & Velasquez, D. (1997). Mississippi social workers' attitudes toward poverty and the poor. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 33(1), 131–142.
- Saunders, P. (2003). Stability and change in community perceptions of poverty: Evidence from Australia. *Journal of Poverty*, 7(4), 1–20.
- Schwartz, S. & Robinson, M. M. (1991). Attitudes toward poverty during undergraduate education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 27(3), 290–296.
- Söderberg, E. & Alexanderson, K. (2005). Gatekeepers in sickness insurance: A systematic review of the literature on practices of social insurance officers. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 13(3), 211–223.
- Sun, A.-P. (2001). Perceptions among social work and non-social work students concerning causes of poverty. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 37(1), 161–173.
- Sunesson, S., Blomberg, S., Edebalk, P. G., Harrysson, L., Magnusson, J., Meeuwisse, A., . . . & Salonen, T. (1998). The flight from universalism. *European Journal of Social Work*, 1(1), 19–29.
- Upmark, M., Hagberg, J., & Alexanderson, K. (2009). Negative encounters with social insurance officers – experiences of women and men on long-term sick leave. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 20(3), 309–317.
- van Oorschot, W. & Halman, L. (2000). Blame or fate, individual or social? An international comparison of popular explanations of poverty. *European Societies*, 2(1), 1–28.
- Weatherley, R. & Lipsky, M. (1977). Street-level bureaucrats and institutional innovation: Implementing special education reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 47(2), 171–197.
- Weiss, I. (2003). Social work students and social change: On the link between views on poverty, social work goals and policy practice. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 12(2), 132–141.
- Weiss, I. & Gal, J. (2007). Poverty in the eyes of the beholder: Social workers compared to other middle-class professionals. *British Journal of Social Work*, 37(5), 893–908.
- Weiss-Gal, I., Benyamini, Y., Ginzburg, K., Savaya, R., & Peled, E. (2009). Social workers' and service users' causal attributions for poverty. *Social Work*, 54(2), 125–133.
- Zucker, G. S. & Weiner, B. (1993). Conservatism and perceptions of poverty: An attributional analysis. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 23(12), 925–943.

Appendix

Table A1. Factor analysis of the perceptions of the causes of poverty and descriptive statistics of the regression factor scores.

Causes of poverty	I	II	h ²
Bureaucracy in social security	0.757	-0.141	0.574
Low level of social security	0.747	-0.194	0.563
Social policy favours wealthy	0.742	-0.157	0.551
Injustice in society	0.726	-0.069	0.532
Lack of effort	-0.318	0.835	0.728
Laziness and lack of willpower	-0.297	0.827	0.709
Lack of proper money management	0.088	0.673	0.496
Eigenvalue	2.639	1.514	
Per cent variance explained	37.701	21.630	
Factor score: Mean	0	0	
Factor score: Max	0.1897	2.7817	
Factor score: Min	-3.6319	-2.4678	

Source: Finnish survey of street-level bureaucrats
Rotation method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.

Table A2. MANOVA for effects of independent variables on perceptions of the causes of poverty.

	Wilks' lambda	F	Sig	Eta squared
Model I				
Education	0.925	19.656	0.00	0.038
Working experience	0.967	8.450	0.00	0.017
Political ideology	0.935	13.580	0.00	0.033
Model II				
Institutional affiliation	0.833	95.349	0.00	0.087
Working experience	0.979	5.276	0.00	0.010
Political ideology	0.932	14.219	0.00	0.035

Source: Finnish survey of street-level bureaucrats.