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ABSTRACT

Social workers' welfare state attitudes are of prime interest, as it is expected that these attitudes may potentially influence client treatments. In this paper, we compare social workers' welfare state attitudes with those of the general public in Flanders in order to test two competing hypotheses. On the one hand, the professional identification hypothesis assumes that social workers have a more positive outlook towards the welfare state as a result of socialization, self-interest and professional identification. On the other hand, the selection hypothesis conversely assumes that only citizens with specific socio-demographic characteristics and ideological preferences choose to study social work and therefore stresses the similarities of social workers to citizens with similar characteristics and preferences. Using a multigroup structural equation modelling approach, we compare three dimensions of welfare state attitudes: (1) the perceived economic and moral consequences of the welfare state (*welfare state criticism*), (2) the call for control of benefit users (*welfare state sanctioning*) and (3) the perceived overuse of welfare state benefits (*welfare state overuse*). Our results show that the welfare state attitudes of Flemish social workers differ considerably from their fellow citizens. Although the attitudinal discrepancy decreases when controlling for socio-demographic characteristics and political preferences, the latent mean differences between social workers and the general public remain significant. Social workers are indeed more positive about the moral consequences of the welfare state, less in favour of more control and punishment of benefit users, and suspect less benefit abuse compared to the general population. Both the professional identification and selection hypotheses are partly confirmed.

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1 Introduction

Social work professionals and street-level bureaucrats are actors of crucial importance in translating social policy into social practice. In several policy domains, they are granted a substantial degree of discretion to choose between various treatment options based on official legislation, local regulations, contextual possibilities and the capacity and needs of clients, but also based on their own preferences (De Wilde, 2016; De Wilde & Marchal, 2018; Evans, 2012; Lipsky, 1980; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011; Tummers, Bekkers, Vink, & Musheno, 2015). Several studies have shown that a policy is only 'real' if professionals implementing the policy accept the dominant ideology behind the policy. Role conflicts between professionals' own values and norms and the policy they are required to implement have a major influence on their willingness to do so (Tabin & Perriard, 2016; Tummers, Steijn, & Bekkers, 2012). As a result, it seems reasonable to expect that the general attitudes of social workers towards the welfare state will be reflected in their actual treatment decisions (Blomberg, Kroll, Kallio, & Erola, 2013; Castillo & Becerra, 2012; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; De Wilde & Marchal, 2018; Keiser, 2010; Reingold & Liu, 2009).

While there is extensive literature on the general public's attitude towards welfare state provision (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003; Kulin & Svallfors, 2013; Larsen, 2008), only a few studies focus particularly on the welfare state attitudes of social workers, and these studies have several limitations. First, most studies have focused on poverty attributions among social workers (Cozzarelli e.a., 2001), which is only one very specific aspect of the relevant concepts identified in welfare attitude research. Second, most research does not compare social workers' attitudes to patterns among the general public, and therefore lacks a benchmark (Weiss & Gal, 2007; Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2008). For these reasons, the question concerning the extent to which the attitudes of those who implement social policies resemble general public opinion on the welfare state remains unanswered.

This paper tests the professional identification and selection theses by comparing welfare-related preferences of social workers and the general public. Specifically, we set out to determine the extent to which and why social workers deviate from general public opinion with respect to three dimensions of welfare state attitudes (Roosma, van Oorschot, & Gelissen, 2014; van Oorschot & Meuleman, 2012): 1) the perceived consequences of the welfare state on the behaviour of citizens, 2) the call for control of benefit users and 3) the perceived overuse of welfare state benefits. To address this issue, we combined and analysed two complementary datasets that use identical measures, the Belgian National Election Study 2014 (Abts e.a., 2015) and a survey of 603 social workers employed in social assistance agencies in Flanders. Moreover, to guarantee comparability, we applied state-of-the-art multigroup structural equation modelling combined with an alignment procedure to test measurement equivalence.

2 Literature review

2.1 *Welfare state attitudes as a multidimensional concept*

Several scholars have suggested that welfare state attitudes cannot be reduced to a single pro vs. contra welfare state stance, but are multidimensional instead (Roosma, Gelissen, & Oorschot, 2013; van Oorschot, Reeskens, & Meuleman, 2012). People can be supportive of certain aspects of welfare provision, but be quite critical of other dimensions. In this respect, Roosma, van Oorschot and Gelissen (2013) make the crucial distinction between support for the underlying principles of welfare state provision and evaluations of the concrete implementation and performance of welfare arrangements. In general, European citizens are rather positive about the goals of the welfare state (Blekesaune & Quadagno, 2003), but they are much more critical about the policy outcomes, the unintended side effects and the efficiency of certain policies (Roosma e.a., 2014; van Oorschot & Meuleman, 2014).

In this contribution, we focus on three particular dimensions of welfare state attitudes related to performance evaluations. First, *welfare state criticism* refers to perceptions that welfare state redistribution has unintended but detrimental consequences for the economy and the moral behaviour of the population. According to these critical views, the welfare state places an excessive burden on national budgets, and undercuts incentives for citizens to be self-reliant (Ervasti, 2012; van Oorschot e.a., 2012). Second, *welfare state sanctioning* refers to the conviction that welfare beneficiaries should be subjected to greater levels of administrative control, and that they should be punished when violations are discovered. A third and related dimension *welfare state overuse* – that is, beliefs that certain categories of recipients get welfare benefits that they are not entitled to – can be considered as the ‘Achilles heel of welfare legitimacy’ (Roosma e.a., 2014).

These three dimensions are particularly relevant to compare social workers and the general population, not only because they deal with contentious issues, but also because these attitudes might guide social workers in their treatment choices. The growing importance of activation and reintegration in the labour market has gone hand in hand with the introduction of behavioural conditions for eligibility (Clasen & Clegg, 2007; Standing, 2005; Van Kersbergen & Hemerijck, 2012). In this regard, successful activation requires evaluations of work willingness embedded in a deservingness assessment (De Wilde, 2017). Although deservingness is difficult both to prescribe in legislation and to assess in practice, the importance of the discretion used by local social assistance agencies and social workers is likely to increase as a result of the introduction of behavioural requirements rather than solely categorical conditions (e.g. lone parent) or means tests (De Wilde, 2017; De Wilde & Marchal, 2018; Van Berkel & Aa, 2012). If social workers are granted a degree of discretion to assess clients’ deservingness, it seems logical that their general ideas about deservingness will influence their actual treatment decisions (Blomberg e.a., 2013; Castillo & Becerra, 2012; Cozzarelli e.a., 2001; Reingold & Liu, 2009; Weiss-Gal, 2008). However, to investigate this issue, we need a study of different types of welfare state attitudes among social workers with a benchmark – i.e. a comparison of social workers’ attitudes with these of mass public.

2.2 Comparing social workers and the general public: professional identification or selection?

Typical social work research (Weiss & Gal, 2007) describes social workers as citizens with specific characteristics, norms and attitudes, different from those of general public. Mostly focusing on poverty attributions, studies conclude that social workers favour a structural explanation of poverty (Blomberg e.a., 2013; Bullock, 2004). Although similar research on welfare state attitudes is lacking, we expect that social workers – who think more likely in terms of structural causes of poverty – will be less critical about the negative consequences of the welfare state (*welfare state criticism*), less often suspect overuse of the welfare state system (*welfare state overuse*) and see less salvation in controlling individuals and their behaviour (*welfare state sanctioning*).

To explain these differences between social workers and general public, two competing hypotheses can be discerned: the professional identification hypothesis and the selection hypothesis. The professional identification thesis assumes that social workers have particular welfare state attitudes as a result of education, experience, self-interest and other forms of professional identification (Blomberg et al., 2013; Bullock, 2004; Guy, 2011; Weiss & Gal, 2007; Weiss, 2005). The selection approach argues that the differences between social workers and general public are essentially a result of composition effects, and rather stresses the similarities between social workers and citizens with the same socio-demographic and ideological preferences (Weiss & Gal, 2007).

The professional identification hypothesis argues that professional identity goes together with particular predispositions and beliefs that differentiate social workers from general population (Weiss & Gal, 2007). The formation of a professional identity should be seen as an ongoing process of actively identifying with a particular context, knowledge and views (e.g., Harrison & Healy, 2016; Limb & Organista, 2006). This identification might stem from a shared educational background (Barretti, 2004; Terum & Heggen, 2016; Weiss, Gal, & Cnaan, 2004) or socialization within a particular workplace with specific experiences, ethical guidelines and a common professional culture (Blomberg e.a., 2013; Harrison & Healy, 2016), as well as being related to a typical form of self-interest. In this regard, academics traditionally assume that working with people in poverty fosters a belief in the structural causes of poverty. Other research, however, suggests that social workers who work with social assistance clients favour individual explanations more than do those working in child welfare, in which they are confronted with people of all layers of the population (Blomberg e.a., 2013; Weiss & Gal, 2007). In this case, experience seems to have the opposite effect to what would be expected. Further, self-interest – as understood in this context – explains differences between social workers and their peers, because people feel inclined to support the system they work in. Self-interest is, then, not support for institution with a direct financial or other advantage, but as support for self-formed policies or self-produced institutions (Jæger, 2006). As a result, the professional identification hypothesis argues that the expected lower levels of *welfare state criticism*, *welfare state sanctioning* and perceptions of *welfare state overuse* for social workers compared to the general population can be explained by profession specific factors.

However, the selection hypothesis argues that all attitudinal differences are due to the fact that only specific citizens choose to study social work and only specific social workers choose to work with people in poverty. As social workers are more often female, young, highly qualified, autochthon and left leaning than other citizens, they are – in line with the attitudes of similar citizens in the general population – expected to have a more positive view on the performance of the welfare state. With regard to the general population is often shown that: females, higher educated citizens and more left-leaning people are often seen as more positive about the welfare state (Bean & Papadakis, 1998; Blomberg e.a., 2013; Castillo & Becerra, 2012; Costa & Dias, 2015; Cozzarelli e.a., 2001; Edlund, 1999; Elkins & Simeon, 1979; Feldman & Steenbergen, 2001; Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989, 1989; Weiss & Gal, 2007). With regard to age differences, findings are mixed (Blomberg e.a., 2013; Costa & Dias, 2015; Cozzarelli e.a., 2001; Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989). Other socio-demographic features which might be influential are ethnicity, personal experience with poverty and economic situation (Costa & Dias, 2015; Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989; Lepianka, Gelissen, & van Oorschot, 2010; Limb & Organista, 2006). The differences with regard to the general population would, thus, essentially be composition effects, and will disappear by controlling for personal characteristics. In this sense, the particularity of social work attitudes is doubted since the world view of social workers is quite similar to citizens with similar socio-demographic and ideological features.

The crucial question of this paper is how the professional identification hypothesis and the selection hypothesis interact. As we expect that both hypotheses explain part of reality, our final hypotheses are:

- (1) Social workers' attitudes with regard to the performance of the welfare state differ significantly from these of the general public. They show lower levels of *welfare state criticism*, *welfare state overuse* and *welfare state sanctioning*.
- (2) Parts of these differences can be explained by selection, i.e. similar socio-demographics and political preferences.
- (3) Other parts will not be explained by personal characteristics, and might be seen as a result of professional identification.

3 Data and methods

3.1 Data

To test the hypotheses, we combine two complementary datasets purposefully designed to allow a detailed comparison of welfare state attitudes among social workers and the general public. First, the Belgian National Election Study (BNES) 2014 (Abts e.a., 2015) contains a register-based probability sample of Belgians entitled to vote in the 2014 elections. Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI) were conducted by trained interviewers, covering a wide range of topics, including welfare state attitudes. For our study, we only selected the sample

of Flemish respondents (N=871; response rate: 55%). Additionally, in 2015, a second survey was carried out among Flemish social workers who were in contact with clients at social assistance agencies. By means of a web survey, a probability-based sample of 603 social workers (response rate: 72%) from 90 Flemish social assistance agencies was approached. Both surveys include the same measurements, which makes a unique comparison of both populations possible.

3.2 Variables

Our analyses focus on three attitudinal dimensions: perceived negative consequences of the welfare state (*welfare state criticism*); opinions on the extent to which uncooperative social assistance recipients should be monitored or punished (*welfare state sanctioning*); and perceptions of benefit overuse (*welfare state overuse*). To model these dimensions, we used structural equation modelling. This statistical method models latent constructs based on correlations between observable variables (items). These observed variables are expected to be related to each other and to be explained by the latent construct.

Welfare state criticism combines attitudes – expressed in four items – about the unintended but detrimental consequences of welfare state redistribution for the economy (*Costs*) and the moral behaviour of the population (*Dependent, Lazy, No self* – see Table 1 for exact wording of the variables). *Welfare state sanctioning* focuses on the perceived need for more administrative control of citizens and beneficiaries (*Job searching, Illicit work*) and for more punishment as a response to violations (*Punishment*). The fourth item under this latent variable is an overall evaluation of the welfare state as overly strict (*Too strict*). The final latent variable, *Welfare state overuse* combines perceptions concerning recipients receiving benefits without being eligible: sickness allowances (*Sick*), unemployment benefits (*Unemployment*) and social assistance benefits (*Welfare*). An overview of the items (5-point Likert scale), including the wording and descriptive statistics for both groups, can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of latent variables and descriptive statistics of multiple indicators (5-point Likert scale)

Welfare state criticism		Mean on SW mean (se)	Mean on GP mean (se)	SW comp to GP
<i>Dependent</i>	The welfare state is too much of a safety net that people become dependent on	2.7 (0.93)	3.1 (0.86)	***
<i>Lazy</i>	The welfare state makes people irresponsible and lazy	2.2 (0.8)	2.8 (0.92)	***
<i>No self</i>	The welfare state causes people to no longer be able to take care of themselves	2.3 (0.78)	2.7 (0.8)	***
<i>Costs</i>	The welfare state costs too much money compared to what it yields	2.4 (0.93)	2.9 (0.93)	***
Welfare state sanctioning				
<i>Job searching</i>	The government should check more closely whether the unemployed are applying for jobs sufficiently	3.5 (0.97)	4.0 (0.68)	***
<i>Punishment</i>	Social benefit beneficiaries who do not do what is required of them should be punished more harshly	3.2 (0.95)	3.9 (0.72)	***
<i>Illicit work</i>	The government should check more closely whether the unemployed do additional illicit work	3.9 (0.88)	4.0 (0.76)	
<i>Too strict</i>	The government is too strict on social benefit recipients	2.5 (0.8)	2.4 (0.77)	***
Welfare state overuse				
<i>Sick</i>	People use their health insurance although they are not sick	3.0 (0.73)	3.5 (0.81)	***
<i>Unemployment</i>	People receive unemployment benefits although they could get a job if they wanted	3.4 (0.71)	3.8 (0.82)	***
<i>Welfare</i>	People receive a social assistance benefit (minimum income) although they are not actually poor	2.4 (0.65)	3.2 (0.84)	***
<i>N</i>		603	871	

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: SW = social workers; GP = general population

To test the selection hypothesis, we included respondent variables. First, we included several socio-demographic characteristics: gender (female or male), age (in years), level of education and national background of the respondent (Belgium, Europe, outside of Europe). Second, we included variables indicating the respondents' ideology. One variable indicated a self-positioned political orientation on a 10-point scale ranging from left (0) to right (10). The other variable measured attitudes to state responsibility, with a scale ranging from 'The state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for' (0) to 'Individuals should take more responsibility for providing for themselves' (10). See Table 2 for the descriptive results for the two research populations. With regard to education, we could only differentiate between Bachelor's and Master's levels degrees, as all social workers in Belgium are required to have a Bachelor of Social Work.

3.3 Modelling strategy

To answer our research questions, we estimated and interpreted a series of different structural equation models. In the first step, we used the multigroup alignment model (Asparouhov & Muthén 2014) – without control variables – to test measurement equivalence and to evaluate the gross mean differences between the two groups (Model 1). In the second step, we regressed the latent variables on several relevant individual characteristics – namely gender, age, national background, political orientation and perceived responsibility for people's wellbeing – to control for compositional differences between both groups (Model 2). For this purpose, we used the 'alignment within CFA' model that was developed recently by Marsh and colleagues (2017). This model uses the results of the alignment model (see step one) as starting values for a model that includes the explanatory exogenous variables. We centred all variables at the mean value for the social workers. In the third and final step, we

excluded from the general population all respondents who did not have a Bachelor's or Master's degree. The procedure was similar to that described above: we fitted the alignment analysis first (Model 3), followed by the model with the socio-demographic and ideology features (Model 4).

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive results

In terms of socio-demographic characteristics, both study populations differ in several respects. The statistical significance of the differences was investigated by the t-test for the means and by the chi-square test for the categorical variables, both at the 5% level: social workers are younger, are more often female and are less likely to have a parent born outside Belgium. As mentioned in the method section, their educational level is never below Bachelor's level (see Table 2).

In attitudinal terms, our study reveals major differences between social workers and the general population. Social workers tend to place themselves as more left-leaning (see Table 2) and differ significantly from the general population with regard to welfare state attitudes. The differences in attitude indicators are as expected: social workers present themselves as having a more positive attitude to the welfare state and its users on almost all items. The two research groups only do not significantly differ with regard to the extent they see wellbeing as the state's or an individual responsibility (see Table 2) and with regard to the attitude-item 'the perceived need for more control of illicit work by unemployment benefit receivers' (see Table 1).

Table 2. Descriptive results for the independent variables

		SW	GP	SW comp to GP	GP	SW comp to GP
		Full sample	Full sample	Full sample	Bach & mast	Bach en mast
		Mean/%	Mean/%		Mean/%	
Age		38.23	52.97	***	49.21	***
Gender (ref = female)	Male	19.90%	49.7%	***	49.04%	***
Country of birth father (ref = Belgium)	Europe	1.99%	4.94%	**	4.13%	*
	Outside of Europe	1.16%	2.64%	*	1.38%	
Country of birth mother (ref = Belgium)	Europe	1.99%	4.48%	*	3.58%	
	Outside of Europe	0.83%	2.53%	*	1.38%	
Educational level (ref = Bachelor)	Lower than secon education	0%	24.80%			
	Secon education	0%	33.52%			
	Master	10.95%	13.89%	***	33.33%	***
Left-right		3.61	5.39	***	5.29	***
Responsibility well-being (state – individual)		5.05	5.21		5.39	**
N		603	871		363	

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: SW = social workers; GP = general population

4.2 Measurement equivalence and mean comparison: multigroup SEM with alignment

To assess whether the latent variables of *welfare state criticism*, *welfare state sanctioning* and *welfare state overuse* – rather than the separate indicators (see Table 1) – differed across the groups, a structural equation modelling approach was warranted. To test the equivalence of the measurement instruments across both groups (Davidov, Meuleman, Cieciuch, Schmidt, & Billiet, 2014), we used the alignment method. The basic idea of this method is that a measurement model is estimated for each group, and that one subsequently evaluates the extent to which the measurement parameters – namely factor loadings and item intercepts – are similar across the two groups. If the latter is the case, this indicates that meaningful comparisons can be made between social workers and the general population.

Recently, Asparouhov and Muthén (2014) developed the alignment method as a flexible way to identify the model that provides maximal cross-group comparability.¹ If and only if a sufficiently high level of measurement equivalence is established, can meaningful latent mean comparisons be made (which is the ultimate purpose of this analysis). The final model (Model 1) is presented in Figure 1. The adapted model has a good fit: the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) equals 0.067 and the comparative fit index (CFI = 0.923) is sufficiently close to 1. All items load significantly on the latent variables (see Table 4 in the Appendix). The alignment method does not indicate loading differences between the two groups, meaning that the latent variables measure a similar general concept in the both groups.

In this paper we were primarily interested in similarities in three attitude constructs that concern evaluations of the performance of the welfare state. Social workers and the general population differ significantly from each other with regard to all of the three constructs (latent means (lm)). First, social workers are less inclined to see unintended, negative effects of welfare state provisions on the behaviour of citizens (0.70 difference). After taking account of this overall attitude difference, the singular items (*dependent, lazy, no self, costs*) no longer significantly differ across the research groups. This means that differences in ideas about the effects of the welfare state on citizens are all explained by a general difference in evaluating the performance of the welfare state.

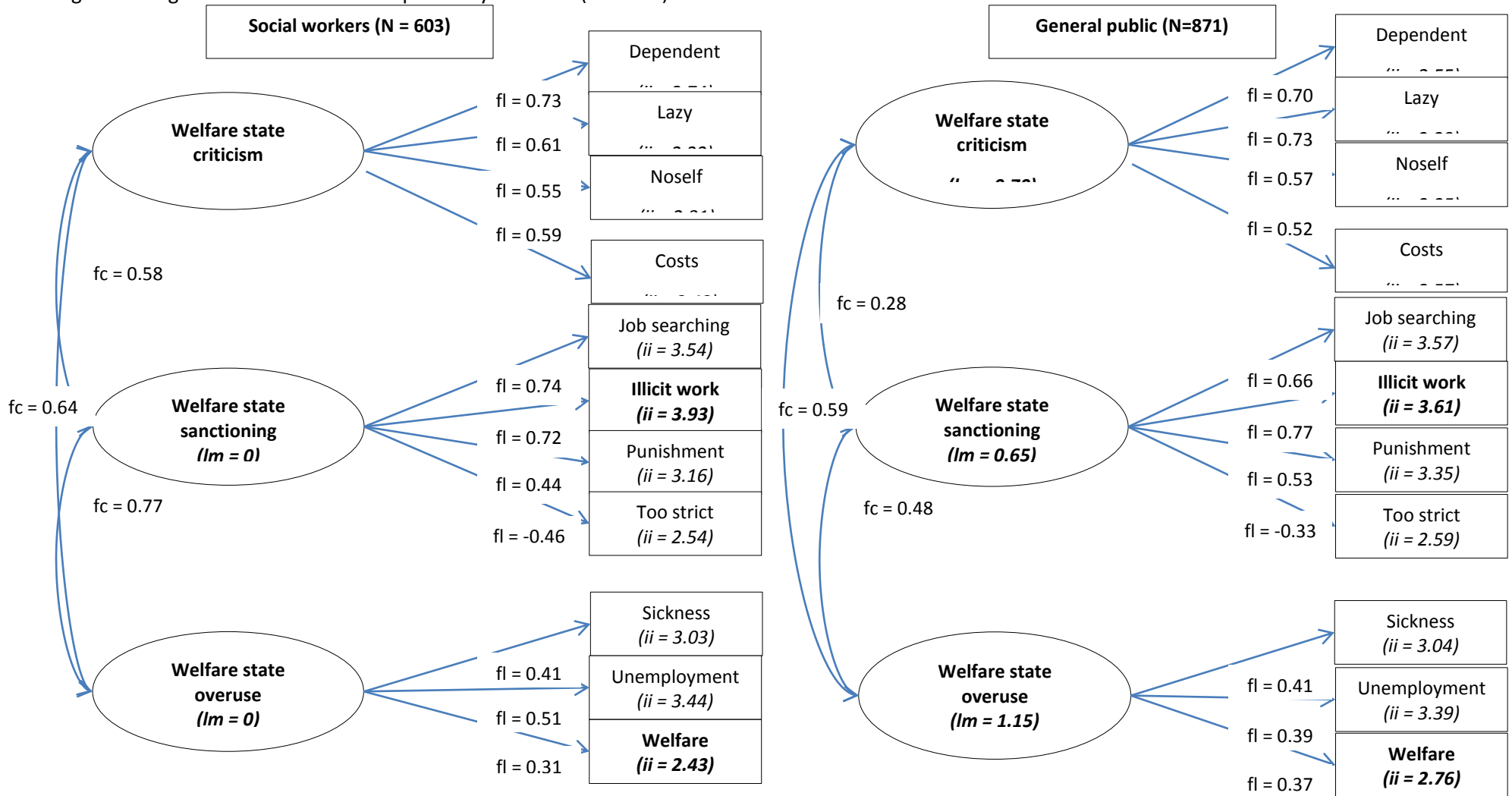
Second, with regard to the controlling function of the welfare state, the social workers less often think that there is a need for more monitoring and punishment of benefit users (0.65 difference). Differences in items such as the welfare state being too strict, the need for punishment, or for more control of job searching, are explained by this overall difference in the appreciation of the strictness of the welfare state. However, for the item ‘The government should check more closely whether the unemployed do additional illicit work’, it is not only the general difference in the latent means that determine the inter-group difference. Contrary to our expectations, social workers who have similar general views on monitoring to

¹ The alignment method resembles rotation in explanatory factor analyses. It starts from the configural invariant model (i.e. identical factor structures across groups, but no constraints on the parameter estimates) and subsequently uses Monte Carlo Markov Chain estimation to detect a model with the same fit as the configural model, in which there are as few as possible differences between measurement parameters across groups. For more technical details, see Asparouhov and Muthén (2014) or Marsh et al. (2017).

other citizens are actually more likely to believe that the government should check more closely whether the unemployed do additional illicit work (see Table 2).

Third, the largest difference concerned the beliefs about benefit receivers obtaining a benefit without being entitled to it (1.15 difference). Social workers generally perceive less overuse, and after controlling for this general difference, there is no difference in the specific items with regard to unemployment and sickness benefit receivers. However, as the item intercept of the overuse of welfare benefits remains significantly different across groups, it can be stated that a social worker who has similar beliefs about benefit overuse to a respondent from the general population (= controlled for in the latent means) is less likely to suspect that welfare benefits are being abused.

Figure 1: Alignment model without explanatory variables (Model 1)



Note: model fit indices of Model1: $\chi^2 = 422.5$, $df = 98$, $RMSEA = 0.067$, $SRMR = 0.064$, $CFI = 0.923$, $TLI = 0.914$ – All parameters are significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. – Im = latent mean, ii = item intercept, fl = factor loading, fc = factor correlation – In bold: indicators that differ between the two research populations

4.3 Controlling for relevant covariates

The previous model identified substantial differences in the welfare state attitudes of social workers and the general population. However, at this stage, it cannot be ruled out that these differences are merely the result of the differential composition of both groups. To evaluate the selection hypothesis potential, we added several explanatory variables – socio-demographic characteristics as well as ideological disposition – to the model to determine whether the differences between the latent means in the two groups would diminish or even disappear. In this regard, we performed an ‘alignment within CFA’ model (Marsh e.a., 2017). Model 2 has a good fit, with an acceptable RMSEA (0.038) and a CFI index (0.953) sufficiently close to 1 (TLI = 0.937).

According to the results in Table 3, the age of the respondents in the general population has no influence on their views about how the welfare state performs. However, the older the social workers, the more positively they evaluate the consequences of the welfare state, the less they call for more control and the less they suspect beneficiaries of overuse. In both populations, gender has – with one exception (*welfare state overuse* – GP) – no significant effect on the latent attitude constructs. Furthermore, national background has no strong predicting power. Having a non-EU-mother negatively influence opinions about overuse of benefits, but all other nationality categories remain non-significant. It should be noted that the shares of respondents with foreign backgrounds are small in both representative research samples, which means that possible population effects might not become visible in the results based on the samples.

Comparing the Z-scores, the political preference variable (left vs right) and views on responsibility for wellbeing (individual vs societal) appear to be the strongest predictors of welfare state attitudes. People who are more right-leaning and see the individual as more responsible score higher on the three latent variables. This effect is stronger among the social workers than among the general population. As shown in the presentation of the descriptive statistics at the beginning of this section, social workers are more left-leaning than the general public (see Table 2). However, being a little more right-leaning (e.g. a 1-point difference on the 11-point scale) has a stronger effect on the attitude constructs in the group of social workers than the same small difference has for the general public.

Table 3. Estimates of socio-demographic and ideological characteristics: AwC models and latent mean and intercept differences

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	SW	GP	SW	GP	SW	GP	SW	GP
STRUCTURAL MODEL								
Welfare state criticism <- Male (ref = female)				Coef.(Z-score)				Coef.(Z-score)
			-0.01 (-0.13)	0.14 (2.09)			-0.01 (-0.13)	0.13 (1.24)
Age_ref			-0.02 (-4.54)***	0.00 (0.38)			-0.02 (-4.54)***	-0.01 (-1.67)
Father EU (ref=Belgium)			0.45 (0.37)	-0.41 (-2.05)*			0.50 (1.34)	-0.57 (-1.89)
Father non-EU (ref=Belgium)			0.39 (0.93)	1.14 (1.15)			0.39 (0.93)	0.34 (0.01)
Mother EU (ref=Belgium)			-0.46 (-1.25)	0.35 (1.66)			-0.46 (-1.25)	0.43 (1.34)
Mother non-EU (ref=Belgium)			-0.40 (-0.81)	-1.07 (-1.06)			-0.40 (-0.81)	0.34 (0.01)
leftrigh_ref			0.22 (8.33)***	0.12 (7.08)***			0.22 (8.33)***	0.17 (6.60)***
responsi_ref			0.13 (5.21)***	0.07 (4.73)***			0.13 (5.21)***	0.11 (4.15)***
Welfare state sanctioning <- Male (ref=female)			-0.02 (-0.65)	0.03 (0.48)			-0.02 (-0.65)	-0.01 (-0.10)
Age_ref			-0.01 (-3.01)**	0.00 (1.52)			-0.01 (-3.01)**	-0.00 (-1.44)
Father EU (ref=Belgium)			0.42 (1.08)	0.03 (0.16)			0.42 (1.08)	0.06 (0.26)
Father non-EU (ref=Belgium)			0.40 (0.92)	0.37 (0.45)			0.40 (0.92)	-0.17 (-0.01)
Mother EU (ref=Belgium)			-0.56 (-1.45)	-0.04 (-0.20)			-0.56 (-1.45)	-0.17 (-0.67)
Mother non-EU (ref=Belgium)			-0.10 (-0.18)	-0.67 (-0.81)			-0.10 (-0.18)	-0.17 (-0.01)
Leftrigh_ref			0.24 (8.35)***	0.08 (5.56)***			0.24 (8.35)***	0.15 (6.96)***
Responsi_ref			0.14 (5.22)***	0.04 (3.38)***			0.14 (5.22)***	0.05 (2.42)*
Welfare state overuse <- Male (ref = female)			-0.04 (-0.85)	0.01 (0.09)			-0.05 (-0.92)	-0.32 (-1.96)*
Age_ref			-0.02 (-4.31)***	-0.01 (-1.42)			-0.02 (-4.22)***	-0.01 (-2.72)**
Father EU (ref=Belgium)			0.04 (0.10)	-0.16 (-0.46)			0.04 (0.10)	0.80 (1.65)
Father non-EU (ref=Belgium)			0.91 (1.77)	3.04 (1.80)			0.91 (1.77)	-0.37 (-0.01)
Mother EU (ref=Belgium)			0.30 (0.66)	0.06 (0.17)			0.30 (0.66)	-0.27 (-0.51)
Mother non-EU (ref=Belgium)			-1.39 (-2.26)*	-3.66 (-2.11)*			-1.39 (-2.26)*	-0.37 (-0.01)
Leftrigh_ref			0.16 (4.83)***	0.12 (4.03)***			0.16 (4.83)***	0.29 (6.88)***
Responsi_ref			0.15 (4.60)***	0.09 (3.61)***			0.15 (4.80)***	0.15 (3.37)***
MEASUREMENT MODEL								
Item intercepts								
Illicit work	3.93***	3.61***	3.94***	3.61***	3.93***	3.60***	3.94***	3.62***
Welfare	2.43***	2.76***	2.44***	2.76***	2.43***	2.71***	2.44***	2.70***
Latent means								
Welfare state criticism	0	0.69***	0	0.25**	0	0.55***	0	0.09
Welfare state sanctioning	0	0.65***	0	0.43***	0	0.60***	0	0.39**
Welfare state overuse	0	1.15***	0	1.00***	0	0.79***	0	0.87**
N	603	871	603	871	603	363	603	363

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Note: SW = social workers; GP = general population

Model 1 = alignment model without exogenous variables, full sample

Model 2 = alignment within CFA (AwC) with exogenous variables, full sample

Model 3 = alignment model without exogenous variables, only Bachelors and Masters

Model 4 = alignment within CFA (AwC) with exogenous variables, only Bachelors and Masters

Only the item intercepts that proved invariant in Model 1 and Model 3 are shown - for the full Models see Table 4 in the appendix

More important, however, is whether the inclusion of these socio-demographic and ideological variables reduces the overall differences in welfare state attitudes between social workers and the general population. Model 2 (see Table 3 – compared to Model 1) indeed indicates that the differences in latent means substantially decrease after adding explanatory variables. The decrease is sharpest with regard to *welfare state criticism*. Controlling for socio-demographic and ideological characteristics, the general population's latent mean of this latent variable decreases to 0.25 (compared to zero for the social workers, who served as the reference category). Without these controls, the gap between the general population and social workers was 0.69. For *Welfare state sanctioning*, the latent mean drops from 0.65 to 0.43. For *Welfare state overuse*, the decrease, from 1.15 to 1.00, is the smallest. However, the latent means remain significantly different across the two groups. This indicates that compositional differences between both groups are partly but not completely responsible for the observed discrepancies in latent means. These results are a first confirmation of our hypotheses that both professional identification and selection should be taken into account when comparing the general population to social work professionals.

4.4 Restricted sample: only Bachelors and Masters

Previous analysis was not able to include educational level in the model, although it is one of the most influential predictors of welfare state attitudes (Blomberg e.a., 2013; Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989; Weiss & Gal, 2007). Since all Belgian social workers in social assistance agencies need to have at least a Bachelor's degree in social work, there is not enough variation in educational degree for this particular group. To gain insight into whether welfare attitude differences are driven by the composition of both groups in terms of educational level, we also restricted the general population sample to respondents who obtained at least a Bachelor's degree. The re-estimated Model 3 (see Table 3) has an acceptable fit (RSMEA=0.071; CFI=0.926; TLI=0.917). The differences between the latent means for the alignment model for the restricted sample (Table 3 Model 3) are indeed smaller compared to the same model for the full sample (Table 3 Model 1). For *welfare state criticism* there is a decrease from 0.69 to 0.55, for *welfare state sanctioning* from 0.65 to 0.60 and for *welfare state overuse* from 1.15 to 0.78. This means that the welfare state attitudes of social workers differ less from those of other citizens with higher levels of education than from those of the general public as a whole. More specifically, the *welfare state overuse* latent mean decreases more by restricting the sample to respondents with higher levels of education in Model 3 than by adding co-variables (socio-demographic and ideological differences), as we did in Model 2 (see Table 2).

As expected from the selection hypothesis, the differences in latent means between the two groups decrease further by adding socio-demographic and ideological characteristics (gender,

age, national background, political preferences – Model 4). The *welfare state criticism* latent mean for the general population decreases from 0.55 to 0.09 and is, as a result, no longer differ significantly from 0. As the social worker's latent mean is fixed at 0 this means that, after controlling for socio-demographics and ideology, the two groups of higher educated citizens do not differ significantly with regard to general ideas about the effects of the welfare state on the behaviour of people. For *welfare state sanctioning* the decrease is from 0.60 to 0.39 and the difference between the two populations becomes less significant. For *welfare state overuse* there was a slight increase from 0.79 to 0.87. The alignment within CFA method did not allow us to conclude whether this is a significant increase or not. Overall, the effect of the exogenous variables of age, gender and political preferences remained similar when we reduced the sample to only Bachelor's and Master's (Table 3). The age effect for the general population became significant for one of the latent variables (*welfare state overuse*).

5 Discussion and conclusion

Social work and social policy literature has shown that policies are only effective in practice if the professionals who must implement the policy accept the ideology behind it. Looking at social assistance in Europe, we can observe a policy shift towards increased conditionality, activity requirements, monitoring and sanctioning of benefit users since the 1970s (Ditch, 1999; Immervoll, 2009). The question in this paper was whether social workers have followed this ideological shift. The first conclusion is that the views of social workers about the welfare state differ considerably from those of the general public. This is in line with research on students in different Bachelor's programmes (Blomberg e.a., 2013; Bullock, 2004; Guy, 2011; Weiss, 2005) and with the research on the comparison of social workers and citizens in Scandinavian countries (Blomberg e.a., 2013). Our study, however, extended the current knowledge to a wider range of dimensions of welfare state attitudes, and controlled for more diverse factors. We focused on three crucial dimensions of attitudes on welfare state performance: (1) the perceived negative economic and moral consequences (*welfare state criticism*); (2) support for more control and punishment of welfare beneficiaries (*welfare state sanctioning*); and (3) perceived overuse of welfare benefits (*welfare state overuse*). Social workers are less critical concerning the consequences of the welfare state and less in favour of more control over citizens. It seems that they do not completely agree with the ideological shift that perceives the existing welfare state as a threat to the economy and detrimental to the behaviour of citizens, an ideological shift that is apparent in the attitude of the general public and in the rationale behind several policy decisions in Europe.

Second, we found evidence for both the selection and the professional identification hypotheses as explanations for the attitude differences. Only citizens with particular characteristics seem to choose to become social workers or to work with people in poverty (Weiss & Gal, 2007). However, even after taking these composition effects into account, the latent attitude variables remained significantly different across the two research groups (Blomberg e.a., 2013; Bullock, 2004). Our research setup ultimately made it difficult to pinpoint exactly why this was the case. Omitted variables could be an explanation. Another explanation might concern the process of professional identification through education,

experience and self-interest, and should be investigated in greater depth in future research. We are inclined to follow the latter explanation, as, with regard to one of the attitude dimensions – *welfare state criticism* (see further) – the explanatory variables included do were sufficient to eliminate the difference between social workers and the general public.

Third, the partial acceptance of the selection hypothesis has two consequences for social work training and social policy practice. The first concerns the fact that only citizens with particular characteristics and preferences choose to become professionals who implement highly contested policies, and this makes these policies fragile. Current social work research suggests that the use of discretion – partly guided by attitudes (De Wilde & Marchal, 2018) – is difficult to manage through legislation (Evans, 2011; Tabin & Perriard, 2016; Tummers et al., 2012). Policymakers should be aware of the potential for their policies to encounter opposing forces in practice. The second consequence concerns the fact that, to a certain extent, the effect of both secondary education and on the job training seem limited in orienting social workers to a common set of attitudes and values, which is the express intention of social work education (Sewpaul & Jones, 2005). In our study, the largest part of the attitude gap between social workers and the general public was explained by characteristics of the respondent. Controlling for having a higher education, without specifying which one, led to a big decrease in differences between the two populations. This means that the specific education ‘social work’ or on the job training only have a limited effect.

This brings us to one limitation of our study. By modelling political orientation (right vs left) and perceived responsibility for wellbeing (state vs individual) as selection variables, we consider them as characteristics on which education and on the job training had no influence. This is, of course, incorrect. Unlike variables such as age, gender and country of origin, ideological preferences are subject to change as a result of the context in which people live, study and work. However, there is an established body of literature on the finding that students who choose to study social work are more left-leaning than other students (Csikai & Rozensky, 1997; Hackett, Kuronen, Matthies, & Kresal, 2003).

The differences between the two groups that cannot be explained by composition effects leads us to a fourth conclusion: some of the results suggest that when the dimension covered by the attitudes concerned the daily practice of social workers, they disagreed more about it with the general public. After controlling for educational level, age and political preferences we no longer found differences with regard to the attitude dimension concerning the overall consequences of the welfare state (*welfare state criticism*). However, the two other attitude dimensions remained significantly different. Not surprisingly, these were attitudes concerning concrete practices, such as offering benefits and monitoring clients, which are explicit tasks of social assistance workers. Furthermore, the tendency of social workers to be less suspicious about the overuse of welfare benefits accords with this reasoning. As they are the civil servants who are responsible in part for allocating benefits, it seems only reasonable that they are less likely to believe that beneficiaries abuse the system. This may be due to experience (they know the system), but also to self-interest: they may wish to protect the social assistance system in which they work. Future research should look for more evidence to support this statement and focus on the question of whether experience or self-interest guides this

positive view on aspects of the welfare state that are more closely tied to professional practice. If experience, for example, is the general explanatory factor, it seems reasonable to increase the involvement of social workers in policymaking.

Finally, it is fair to say that the attitudes of social workers about the system they work in are to a large extent the product of the characteristics and preferences of the individual social worker. However, with respect to some specific attitude constructs, social workers can be considered to be in a category of their own.

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6 Appendix

Table 1. Correlations among attitude items for the general population (N=871)

	costs	lazy	dependen	noself	toostric	contrjob	morepuni	contrill	sick	unemploy	welfare
costs	1										
lazy	0.40	1									
dependen	0.36	0.55	1								
noself	0.34	0.47	0.50	1							
toostric	-0.07	-0.19	-0.14	-0.09	1						
contrjob	0.09	0.21	0.25	0.18	-0.23	1					
morepuni	0.16	0.25	0.24	0.21	-0.25	0.52	1				
contrill	0.08	0.16	0.16	0.18	-0.11	0.34	0.37	1			
sick	0.15	0.23	0.29	0.23	-0.10	0.23	0.27	0.12	1		
unemploy	0.16	0.21	0.22	0.17	-0.16	0.25	0.27	0.15	0.57	1	
welfare	0.15	0.22	0.24	0.26	-0.10	0.25	0.23	0.13	0.50	0.49	1

Table 2. Correlations among attitude items for the social workers (N=603)

	costs	lazy	dependen	noself	toostric	contrjob	morepuni	contrill	sick	unemploy	welfare
costs	1										
lazy	0.52	1									
dependen	0.50	0.56	1								
noself	0.41	0.57	0.58	1							
toostric	-0.18	-0.27	-0.26	-0.20	1						
contrjob	0.28	0.32	0.39	0.27	-0.45	1					
morepuni	0.34	0.34	0.40	0.29	-0.43	0.58	1				
contrill	0.17	0.19	0.20	0.16	-0.25	0.43	0.39	1			
sick	0.19	0.22	0.25	0.26	-0.26	0.29	0.31	0.23	1		
unemploy	0.30	0.32	0.44	0.29	-0.36	0.46	0.43	0.26	0.38	1	
welfare	0.23	0.27	0.29	0.19	-0.22	0.20	0.30	0.19	0.38	0.27	1

Table 3. Model 1 = Alignment model without explanatory variables; Model 2 = Alignment within CFA with explanatory variables

Measurement Model	Model 1				Model 2			
	Coefficients		Intercepts		Coefficients		Intercepts	
	SW	GP	SW	GP	SW	GP	SW	GP
<i>Welfare state criticism -></i>								
Dependen	0.73 (0,03)***	0.7 (0,04)***	2.74 (0,04)***	2.56 (0,14)***	0.73 <i>Constr.</i>	0.7 <i>Constr.</i>	2.74 <i>Constr.</i>	2.56 <i>Constr.</i>
Lazy	0.61 (0,03)***	0.73 (0,03)***	2.22 (0,03)***	2.29 (0,14)***	0.62 (0,04)***	0.74 (0,04)***	2.22 (0,03)***	2.28 (0,04)***
Noself	0.55 (0,03)***	0.57 (0,03)***	2.31 (0,03)***	2.25 (0,1)***	0.56 (0,04)***	0.58 (0,03)***	2.31 (0,03)***	2.25 (0,04)***
Costs	0.59 (0,04)***	0.52 (0,04)***	2.42 (0,04)***	2.58 (0,12)***	0.58 (0,04)*	0.53 (0,04)***	2.42 (0,03)***	2.58 (0,04)***
<i>Welfare state sanctioning -></i>								
Contrjob	0.74 (0,04)***	0.66 (0,06)***	3.54 (0,04)***	3.57 (0,05)***	0.74 <i>Constr.</i>	0.66 <i>Constr.</i>	3.54 <i>Constr.</i>	3.57 <i>Constr.</i>
Morepuni	0.72 (0,04)***	0.77 (0,04)***	3.16 (0,04)***	3.35 (0,08)***	0.72 (0,04)***	0.76 (0,06)***	3.17 (0,04)***	3.36 (0,05)***
Contrill	0.44 (0,04)***	0.53 (0,06)***	3.93 (0,04)***	3.61 (0,06)***	0.44 (0,04)***	0.53 (0,05)***	3.94 (0,03)***	3.61 (0,04)**
Toostric	-0,46 (0,03)***	-0,34 (0,05)***	2.54 (0,03)***	2.59 (0,05)***	-0,46 (0,04)***	-0,34 (0,05)***	2.53 (0,03)***	2.59 (0,04)***
<i>Welfare state overuse -></i>								
Sick	0.41 (0,03)***	0.41 (0,04)***	3.03 (0,03)***	3.04 (0,03)***	0.41 <i>Constr.</i>	0.41 <i>Constr.</i>	3.03 <i>Constr.</i>	3.04 <i>Constr.</i>
Unemploy	0.51 (0,03)***	0.39 (0,04)***	3.44 (0,03)***	3.38 (0,04)***	0.53 (0,05)***	0.4 (0,02)***	3.46 (0,04)***	3.38 (0,04)***
Welfare	0.31 (0,03)***	0.37 (0,04)***	2.43 (0,03)***	2.76 (0,05)***	0.31 (0,04)***	0.37 (0,02)***	2.44 (0,03)***	2.76 (0,04)***
Latent means								
Mean (<i>Welfare state criticism</i>)			0 <i>Constr.</i>	0.69 (0,19)***			0 <i>Constr.</i>	0.37 (0,11)**
Mean (<i>Welfare state sanctioning</i>)			0 <i>Constr.</i>	0.65 (0,1)***			0 <i>Constr.</i>	0.5 (0,10)***
Mean (<i>Welfare state overuse</i>)			0 <i>Constr.</i>	1.15 (0,14)***			0 <i>Constr.</i>	1.11 (0,19)***
N	603	871	603	871	603	871	603	871

Table 4. Model 3 = Alignment model without explanatory variables with only respondents with a Bachelor's or Master's degree; Model 3 = Alignment within CFA with explanatory variables with only respondents with a Bachelor's or Master's degree

Measurement Model	Model 3				Model 4			
	Coefficients		Intercepts		Coefficients		Intercepts	
	SW	GP	SW	GP	SW	GP	SW	GP
<i>Welfare state criticism -></i>								
Dependen	0.73 (0,03)***	0.69 (0,04)***	2.74 (0,04)***	2.55 (0,07)***	0.73 <i>Constr.</i>	0.69 <i>Constr.</i>	2.74 <i>Constr.</i>	2.55 <i>Constr.</i>
Lazy	0.61 (0,03)***	0.75 (0,06)***	2.22 (0,03)***	2.27 (0,05)***	0.62 (0,04)** *	0.76 (0,05)** *	2.22 (0,03)** *	2.28 (0,04)** *
Noself	0.55 (0,03)***	0.58 (0,03)***	2.31 (0,03)***	2.22 (0,06)***	0.56 (0,04)** *	0.58 (0,05)** *	2.26 (0,05)** *	2.22 (0,05)** *
Costs	0.59 (0,04)***	0.54 (0,05)***	2.42 (0,04)***	2.52 (0,08)***	0.61 (0,04)** *	0.55 (0,05)** *	2.42 (0,04)** *	2.51 (0,06)** *
<i>Welfare state sanctioning -></i>								
Contrsol	0.74 (0,04)***	0.71 (0,05)***	3.54 (0,04)***	3.48 (0,11)***	0.74 <i>Constr.</i>	0.71 <i>Constr.</i>	3.54 <i>Constr.</i>	3.48 <i>Constr.</i>
Morepuni	0.72 (0,04)***	0.76 (0,05)***	3.16 (0,04)***	3.32 (0,12)***	0.72 (0,04)** *	0.73 (0,08)** *	3.17 (0,04)** *	3.34 (0,06)** *
Contrill	0.44 (0,04)***	0.48 (0,06)***	3.93 (0,04)***	3.61 (0,09)***	0.44 (0,04)** *	0.47 (0,07)** *	3.94 (0,03)** *	3.62 (0,06)** *
Toostric	-0,46 (0,03)***	-0,38 (0,07)***	2.54 (0,03)***	2.52 (0,03)***	-0,47 (0,04)** *	-0,38 (0,06)** *	2.54 (0,03)** *	2.52 (0,05)** *
<i>Welfare state overuse -></i>								
Sick	0.41 (0,03)***	0.41 (0,04)***	3.03 (0,03)***	3.04 (0,03)***	0.41 <i>Constr.</i>	0.41 <i>Constr.</i>	3.03 <i>Constr.</i>	3.04 <i>Constr.</i>
Unemploy	0.51 (0,03)***	0.41 (0,05)***	3.44 (0,03)***	3.38 (0,05)***	0.53 (0,05)** *	0.43 (0,03)** *	3.43 (0,04)** *	3.37 (0,05)** *
Welfare	0.31 (0,03)***	0.37 (0,05)***	2.43 (0,03)***	2.70 (0,05)***	0.31 (0,04)** *	0.37 (0,03)** *	2.43 (0,03)** *	2.70 (0,05)** *
Latent means								
Mean (<i>Welfare state criticism</i>)			0 <i>Constr.</i>	0.56 (0,11)***			0 <i>Constr.</i>	0.58 (0,48)
Mean (<i>Welfare state sanctioning</i>)			0 <i>Constr.</i>	0.59 (0,16)***			0 <i>Constr.</i>	1.33 (0,38)** *
Mean (<i>Welfare state overuse</i>)			0 <i>Constr.</i>	0.80 (0,14)***			0 <i>Constr.</i>	2.3 (0,76)**
N	603	364	603	364	603	364	603	364