

# CHAPTER 3

## APPLYING MIXED-METHOD DESIGN IN THE STUDY OF IMMIGRANT SOCIAL PROTECTION

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In order to study immigrants' access to social assistance and the functioning of welfare policies and related decision-making processes on the ground, we adopted a mixed-methods design, combining both qualitative and quantitative research tools, as well as accounting for the perspective of a variety of stakeholders and social actors involved. Mixed methods have proved efficiency as the weaknesses of each single method could be compensated by 'the counter-balancing strengths of another'; moreover, '[m]ixed methods can serve a transformative purpose for vulnerable populations' (Stewart *et al.*, 2008, p. 1407; also see Beiser & Stewart, 2005; Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). This is particularly relevant in policy evaluation research, which aims to assess the effect of measures implemented on the ground in relation to the experience of specific groups – which is the case for our study. Combining data collected through a mixed-methods approach – particularly through quantitative and qualitative research tools – can serve a range of analytical purposes, including triangulating data; generating complementary data; expanding data (Greene *et al.*, 1989). We considered these objectives throughout our analysis. First, while the low response rate in the quantitative part does not allow us to treat those results as equal to the qualitative findings, their comparison still helped in gaining a better understanding of our research results. Moreover, the complementarity of the applied research tools allowed us to assess different components of our object of study and aims, as well as to complexify the interpretation of the collected data – without necessarily looking for convergences on each of the assessed topics. Lastly, the use of mixed methods led to extend the scope of our research, which is beneficial for both contextual policy evaluation and for contributing to the theoretical literature.

The overall approach of our research included three main phases: the qualitative study of welfare practices through interviews with PCSWs' staff

members, the administration of a complementary online survey to chief social workers of PCSWs, and the interviews with immigrant beneficiaries. In this chapter, we will provide details on how the data have been collected, processed, and analysed within this methodological framework.

## 1. A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF WELFARE POLICIES AND PRACTICES ON THE GROUND

The first phase of the research consisted of identifying relevant case studies for the qualitative approach, that is, a series of municipalities from which to study the functioning of the PCSWs from the point of view of staff members (presidents, directors and other managers, social workers, and other profiles of field workers). The objective of this phase of the research was to study welfare policies and practices as they manifest themselves on the ground through the decisions and actions of the institutions' representatives and agents. With the aim of setting a panel of diverse but comparable cases whose study would allow us to have a comprehensive overview of the functioning of welfare system toward newcomers in Belgium, we considered a set of criteria that reflect 'the nature of the case, historical background, physical setting, and other institutional and political contextual factors' (Stake, 1998; Stake, 1995; cited in Hyett *et al.*, 2014, p. 2) that may influence social assistance practices and the access to them. Indeed, four main factors may have a relevant impact on the implementation of welfare policies targeting immigrants, that are: (1) the level of pressure on social welfare agencies; (2) the presence of immigrant populations and newcomer beneficiaries of welfare service in particular in the concerned municipality; (3) the political orientation of the local government; (4) the demographic and environmental characteristics of the context. As already mentioned in Chapter 1, these contextual and organisational elements also influence the ways in which SLB and agents' discretion operate (Hupe & Buffat, 2014; Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010; Berman, 1978). Taking this framework into account, we considered the following data (reference year 2019) to choose our case studies: number of inhabitants, population density and environment (rural, semi-rural, urban); political orientation (main governing party or coalition); number of social incomes per 1,000 inhabitants delivered to refugees or holders of subsidiary protection status;<sup>1</sup> overall number of social incomes delivered per 1,000 inhabitants; and overall number of ISIP (Individualised Social Integration Project) set per 1,000 inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> These criteria were identified as substantive – that is, possibly leading to variations (Swanbord, 2010) with regard to our object of study.

Through a comparison of the collected figures and with the aim of studying the practices of PCSWs in contexts with distinct characteristics, we have selected a set of municipalities across the three regions whose names will not be mentioned for confidentiality reasons.<sup>3</sup> Once completed the case studies selection, we prepared topic lists and interview grids adapted to different profiles of PCSWs' staff members. Overall, in the interviews with presidents, directors, managers, and members of the local social council/committee (see Chapter 7) we focused on the domains of service delivery to newly arrived immigrants, the organisation of service delivery, the legal framework, the conditions of access to rights and social activation, the monitoring of the social services, the functioning of the decision-making process, and additional information concerning the context. These themes were also addressed in the interviews with the social workers in order to explore their own perspective on the issues involved, as well as additional questions about their day-to-day experience, degree of autonomy, and the exercise of discretionary power. Exploring these issues was functional to address our research aims, namely – as mentioned in the introduction of this volume – mapping practices regarding the granting of rights and social activation interventions targeting newly arrived immigrants; shedding light on the factors influencing social workers' choices and decisions regarding social benefits and social activation targeting newcomers; analysing the accessibility of social welfare for newcomers and of their experience with a European welfare state administration.

In this phase of the research, we faced two main challenges. First, the access to PCSWs was in some cases particularly problematic, due to the work overload of the agencies as well as to the additional difficulties brought by the COVID-19 crisis and the changes in working arrangements that this has brought about.<sup>4</sup> However, all selected PCSWs were eventually involved in the study, and a total number of 197 staff members across the three regions have been interviewed, including 81 social workers, 57 managers and directors, 38 presidents and committee members, and 21 other staff members (educators, reception agents, project coordinators, lawyers, and so forth).<sup>5</sup> The second main difficulty we encountered in the fieldwork with PCSW staff members is that very often our research participants – unless they only work with immigrant beneficiaries, that is, in the case of social workers engaged in specialised services –<sup>6</sup> emphasised that the functioning of the PCSWs and their work within these was not aimed at immigrants in particular, but operated on an equal basis with all beneficiaries. While the practical and conceptual rationale and scope of this approach will be discussed later in this book (Chapters 4 and 8), it is worth mentioning that this issue has been managed throughout the fieldwork activities through a set of research

strategies. First, during interviews with all staff members, we paid attention to keeping the focus on immigrant beneficiaries, by specifying our questions and follow-up questions. Second, in the analysis of the collected material, we took this issue into account and distinguished between data concerning all beneficiary profiles, *including* immigrant and newcomer beneficiaries, and data concerning *only* immigrant and newcomer beneficiaries. The articulation of these two sets of data allowed us to analyse the functioning of the PCSWs under study and the work of their staff members with regard to all beneficiaries and the beneficiaries targeted by our study more particularly.

Throughout our fieldwork activity we considered research interviews as interactions and encounters between individuals – the researchers and the other research participants, discussing in more or less formal ways on a given topic. The use of an interview guide enabled the researchers to remind themselves of the main themes of the object of study, without, however, ‘closing’ the possibility of interactions outside pre-programmed standards and without putting at risk the discussion dynamic (Delaleu *et al.*, 1983). Indeed, the interviews also allowed the researchers to get more familiar with the ‘local culture’ of PCSWs, their internal functioning, and communication rules. The ‘recursive’ aspect of the interviews (Olivier de Sardan, 1995) consisted of formulating new questions based on what had been said in order to go deeper into the subject.

The qualitative approach to the study of PCSWs’ practices towards immigrant beneficiaries adopted in our research also included some initiative of ethnographic observation. As highlighted by Brodtkin (2017, p. 131):

[E]thnographic approaches to political research treat human behaviour and thought not as phenomena that develop in a vacuum, but as phenomena that develop in real world settings. [...] ethnographic methods offer strategies for studying people as fully-constituted human beings interacting with the institutions and organisations in which they are embedded.

This methodological tool applied to public services and officials gives the opportunity to observe power relations, as well as ‘the rules of the game’ (Mascia & Odasso, 2015) performing concretely on the ground. Situational practices are observed (Dubois, 2010), revealing aspects on how the records are managed empirically, in relation with the institutional environment and the law framework. This allows a realistic ground-level view of policies (Dubois, 2009). Indeed, in the founding literature on SLB itself, public policy is the result of the combination of decision-making rules and practices and individuals’ attitudes on the ground. Observation also allows attention to be

paid to the way in which the relationship between agents and beneficiaries develops, in terms of mutual care and empathy, the tone used, body language, the way the setting is arranged, and so on. During the observation activities, it was also possible to gather 'paper' (Andreetta, 2019) relevant for the analysis, more particularly canvas and guidelines concerning the social enquiry carried out by social workers and the conditions to access the rights (see Chapter 8), which PCSWs' staff would not necessarily transmit in other ways.

In the light of these elements, observations allowed the researchers to gather data to complement those collected through interviews. Indeed, because of the impact of the measures to deal with the COVID-19 health crisis as well as the agents' workload, it was not possible to conduct systematic observations in all PCSWs and in all regions. Therefore, interviews remained the main source of data, that could be enriched by material gathered through observations in some social services among the selected case studies.

The study of the qualitative data was carried out through adopting an inductive grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Bryant & Charmaz, 2011). The coding and analysis of the collected data was developed based on analytical units emerging from the field, put into perspective with the topic lists developed before the fieldwork activity and built on the literature review. Moreover, regional data were compared to highlight – when possible – convergences and divergences, and to describe the overall functioning of PCSWs with regard to immigrant beneficiaries as well as the role of social workers and other staff members within it. The main analytical issues raised by the fieldwork are reflected in the structure of this book.

## 2. A QUANTITATIVE APPROACH TO WELFARE SERVICE DELIVERY

The preliminary results of the qualitative research targeting the PCSWs were also helpful to elaborate the survey aimed at collecting quantitative data – the second phase of our research. More particularly, this survey was administrated online to chief social workers of all Belgian PCSWs. In order to ensure comparability across the PCSWs under analysis, the core questionnaire included mainly closed-ended questions along with a few open-ended answer categories to capture the wide variety of possible responses. The questions – parallel to the topic list of the qualitative interviews – concerned the organisation of service delivery with regard to immigrant beneficiaries, the management of agency human resources, the implementation of labour market activation policies and practices, the decision-making process on immigrant beneficiaries' demands, language policies, and cooperation activities. The questions were aimed at

getting a broader overview of the functioning of PCSWs in the three regions with regard to these topics – complementing the qualitative findings (see above).

Concerning the finer grains of the survey design, the sample selection consisted of the whole population the project targeted (Hibberts *et al.*, 2012), mainly the chief social workers of all PCSWs in Belgium. We opted for an online survey and not another survey media (such as face-to-face interviews, written interviews) not only due to the significantly lower costs (in terms of administration, personnel, and the usage of paper questionnaires) that online tools entail but also for avoiding bias caused by the interviewers to the responders to give ‘socially desirable’ answers (Neuman, 2012). Furthermore, the online survey mode gives the participants a safe space to reply honestly, at their own pace, and its accessible online modality facilitates the participation of the respondents.

In this context, the ethical aspects of the survey should also be taken into account. To increase the response rate of the survey, the survey contained a well-knitted framework of Survey Research Ethics (SRE) (Glasgow, 2005; Oldendick, 2012). The SRE included a pre-form to participate in the survey, the latter not only including the project aims and description to familiarise the participants with the project, but also a detailed explanation on the anonymisation and data treatment. Furthermore, the SRE included clauses of confidentiality, and a space to declare the consent to participate (Oldendick, 2012). In addition, the SRE included a clause that the respondents had the option to ‘drop’ from the survey should they have wished. While the survey was designed in English, in order to make it accessible to all survey participants, it has been translated into two of the official languages of Belgium (French and Dutch). The survey has also been adapted to the different Belgian regions (Brussels, Flanders, Wallonia, and also to the German-speaking community). Lastly, in order to ensure the completion of the surveys, the respondents’ progress has been followed up via the online platform in an anonymous manner and reminders have been sent two weeks and seven weeks after the survey has been launched to those who had not yet started or completed the survey.

The survey has been programmed with LimeSurvey. It was launched on 22 March 2022 and a first reminder was sent on 5 April 2022. Due to a low response rate – in part related to the high work pressure in the PCSWs following the war in Ukraine and subsequent influx of Ukrainian refugees – one month after the initial launch of the survey the two Belgian organisations connecting all municipalities (for Wallonia the Union des Villes et Communes de Wallonie and for Flanders the Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten) and the Public Planning Service for Social Integration (POD MI/SPP IS) have been contacted in order to make an additional call among the PCSWs to participate by addressing the survey in their respective newsletters.

In light of these extra calls, a second reminder has been sent on 9 May 2022. The survey was closed on 4 July 2022. The survey was sent to 542 PCSWs and was filled out completely by 99 chief social workers, thus giving us a response rate of 18%.

Due to the relatively low response rate, a short response analysis was carried out in order to obtain a better view of which PCSWs participated and to verify their representativeness in light of the entire population. As for the regions, the percentage of participants from Flanders and Wallonia reflected well the population distribution. Brussels, however, was slightly underrepresented. The analysis further showed that relatively more PCSWs in municipalities with a higher number of beneficiaries with a non-EU-background or refugee status have participated than could have been expected based on the overall population numbers. This could be explained by the relevance the topic of the survey has for those PCSWs. Indeed, a few PCSWs informed the researchers they would not participate in the survey as they simply did not have any newcomer beneficiaries in their PCSW the past years. Also, PCSWs in municipalities with a high median income and in small municipalities in terms of the number of inhabitants are underrepresented. This last finding is not surprising, as many immigrants tend to reside in larger cities.<sup>7</sup>

The data has been analysed using the statistical software package SPSS. The data gathered through the quantitative research activity were considered in the overall analysis and are reported in this book where they complement the findings of the qualitative fieldwork. While the survey results cannot confirm the qualitative research findings, they may 'contribute to greater confidence in the generalisability of results' (Jick, 1979, p. 604).

### **3. IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS OF IMMIGRANT BENEFICIARIES OF PCSWS**

Another crucial element of the overall research approach adopted, which partly overlapped – temporally speaking – with the other two phases of the research (the qualitative interviews of PCSWs' staff members and the quantitative survey), was to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with newcomer beneficiaries. As outlined in the theoretical chapter of this book, extensive research has been conducted on welfare policies and their implementation on the ground by studying bureaucracy at street level; however, this should require taking into account the perspective of immigrant beneficiaries themselves (Raeymaeckers & Dierckx, 2013) – who are not seen as passive targets of social programmes. In our research, we interviewed a total number of 87 newly arrived immigrants,<sup>8</sup> beneficiaries

of PCSWs. More particularly: 32 respondents in Wallonia, 21 respondents in Flanders, 34 respondents in Brussels, 32 women, 54 men, 1 family, aged from 21 to about 50 years old, and from diverse origins including Palestine, Syria, Brazil, Salvador, Turkey, Guinea, Eritrea, Burundi, Somalia, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Morocco, Lebanon, Yemen, Cameroon, Guinea Conakry, and Soudan. We sought to collect data from different profiles of people in terms of their migration trajectory, personal characteristics, employment status, and level of education and command of one of the Belgian national languages. The heterogeneity of our sample responds to our objective of exemplarity rather than statistical representativeness (Pischerit *et al.*, 2019), that is, our wish to reflect the variety of profiles of immigrant beneficiaries of Belgian PCSWs, the experiences they may have with social services and their representations and expectations concerning welfare assistance (Albertini & Semprebbon, 2018). Moreover, through diversifying our sample, we aimed at avoiding overemphasising ethnicity and overlooking that ‘empirical phenomena might be evoked by other boundaries, such as class or gender, which often intersect with ethnicity’ (Barglowski, 2018, p. 152; also see Amelina & Faist, 2012).

The sample was also diversified in terms of the geographical location of the newcomers. In each region, three main locations were chosen – from the case studies of the research phase with the PCSWs – to gather the beneficiaries participating in the research.<sup>9</sup> The rationale behind this selection was to consider the experience of beneficiaries in relation with certain types of PCSWs, that is, smaller/bigger, located in rural/urban environment, managing a big/small number of social welfare demands, working with big/small numbers of newcomer beneficiaries – which were the criteria also used to identify the main case studies of the research, as explained above. We applied these criteria to identify relevant locations among our case studies where to contact newcomer beneficiaries, too. It is important to note that this rational selection effort on the part of the research team does not necessarily reflect the complexity and diversity of respondents’ life experiences. Indeed, many of the respondents who were associated with a location in our selection have been involved with services in different places since their arrival in Belgium. This characteristic of our sample informs our analysis as (1) the diversity of experiences with different PCSWs (from LRIs to the city of residence) characterises the trajectory of many respondents and (2) it impacts the way newcomers make sense of their experience of the PCSW by allowing them to compare between different institutions and settings.

With regard to the access to the field, two main entry points were used. First, respondents have been recruited through regional centres for integration and (local) associations working with immigrants. We tried to avoid as much



as possible the recruitment of respondents directly through PCSWs' services because of the bias regarding the possible selection of specific beneficiary profiles by the officers, and to avoid the risk that they would perceive our research activity as an evaluation of their own work by interviewing the beneficiaries they were in contact with.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, going through institutions not related to the PCSW appeared as a way not to be identified by the respondents as 'working with the PCSW' and to make them more comfortable to share their experience without perceiving the fear of impact on their situation as beneficiaries. Once in contact with the institution, the selection of respondents was generally done by the institution itself on the basis of the criteria communicated by the researcher. Typically, a worker of the institution would introduce the research to some of the institution's beneficiaries and ask them if they would agree to be contacted by the researcher. A list of possible contacts would then be communicated to the researcher. This procedure had some advantages. First, the respondents were introduced to the research in a context and by a person that they knew, which would tend to reassure them about the seriousness of the project. Second, as the project had been presented to the beneficiaries beforehand, contact with the researcher was facilitated. However, this procedure also had potential limitations. For example, as the selection of potential contacts was often carried out by employees of the institution, the researcher had limited control over the contacts provided and limited means to check that the selection criteria were in line with the research objectives. On some occasions, the interview revealed that the interlocutor selected by the institution was not fitting with the criteria of selection of the sample. Another element was that regional centres for integration or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are not neutral actors. They operate within their own institutional logic and their workers are caught in a relation of mutual obligation with their public. Thus, the access to contacts often required to be negotiated with the institutions. For example, some institutions requested payment for the respondents (which could not be implemented). In another case, the researcher had to clarify and negotiate interview protocols after the staff of one institution expressed concerns that some interviews were being conducted outside their premises. Finally, not all of the potential participants selected by the institutions were responsive to the researchers' attempt to establish contact. The potential contacts were usually reached by email, telephone, WhatsApp message, or posts<sup>11</sup> on other social networks, either in a common language or – when deemed necessary – in the contact's native language.

Complementary strategies to enter the field included the use of the researcher's social network to identify possible respondents. This was particularly

relevant in Brussels, where the researchers had already been in contact with groups of newcomers or volunteers and host families who were therefore contacted directly. This strategy had the advantage of finding contacts through already established relationships of trust, as well as of being put in touch with newcomer beneficiaries who had already developed some resources to understand and cope with the procedures and requirements of the PCSW. We also tried to identify some respondents through snow-ball sampling (Parker *et al.*, 2019), although this was rarely fruitful. Indeed, potential respondents were sometimes reluctant to participate, fearing that the interview would negatively affect their future relationship with the PCSW. For those who agreed to participate, it was because their reluctance was alleviated by talking to other beneficiaries who had already been interviewed, and who reassured them that confidentiality would be respected throughout the process.

We conducted in-depth semi-directive interviews using a topic list prepared on the basis of our thematic focuses as well as the preliminary results of the research phase with PCSWs' staff members. The topic list included the life history and migration trajectory of the interviewee, the access to and use of welfare service delivery, a set of specific dimensions of accessibility (availability, timeliness, acceptability, and so forth), and in some cases the access to and use of other organisations, and some contextual factors (including the perception of the socio-cultural and political environment). One of the challenges met during the interviews was that the categories and terminology used by PCSWs' social workers to describe their institution – and that we included in our topic list – were not necessarily used by newcomer beneficiaries who developed their own understanding and vocabulary. While sometimes making it difficult for the researcher to identify exactly the type of services or the type of procedures that the respondent was referring to, this also gave precious information about how newcomer beneficiaries made sense of their experience of PCSW.

As some of the respondents did not have sufficient knowledge or did not feel comfortable enough in speaking a common language, interpreters have been used. In most cases, these were formal interpreters requested by the researcher (and thus no relation was present between the respondent and the interpreter), while in some other cases the research participants arranged their own interpreter. As for the latter, even though it could not have been avoided that the interpreters (albeit in a very minimal number of interviews) intervened in the interview, in the case of a misunderstanding or unclarity they could also bring some clarification to the conversation as they were aware of the situation the respondent was in at the time or had been in in the past.

Concerning the analysis of the data gathered through the interviews with newcomer beneficiaries, it has been developed – as for the content of the qualitative research within the PCSWs – based on the pre-identified topics as well as on empirically grounded categories of analysis. We have paid particular attention to aspects related to the specificity of our target group and the thematic focus of this research – besides the elements of the experience of newcomer beneficiaries with welfare institutions in Belgium that are similar to those of other beneficiaries, according to the literature. The analysis of this material is included in the third part of this book, while in the conclusion we bring together all the data collected in order to elaborate a transversal reasoning on the complexity of the process studied.

## NOTES

1. This figure allowed us to identify PCSWs that work 'at least' with this profile of newcomers.
2. All these figures were retrieved from institutional statistics databases.
3. This also applies to all research participants, who were informed about the content and objectives of our study and were granted anonymity. Their consent to participate in the research was obtained orally and recorded at the beginning of the interviews. Throughout the book, they are referenced by codes including region, city, interviewee's role, and date of interview.
4. The main fieldwork activities of the research project were conducted from November 2020 to January 2022.
5. While we selected the categories of respondents we wished to interview (presidents, directors, managers, social workers – more particularly those working with immigrants – and agents involved in the implementation of activation policies), we did not necessarily select the respondents themselves, that is, we interviewed those – for example, among social workers, the most numerous category – who were available to meet us.
6. However, the procedures and decision-making process for the granting of social benefit are described as operating in specialised services in the same way as in other general social services.
7. See [https://www.myria.be/files/2020\\_JVMIG\\_-\\_Migratie\\_in\\_Belgi%C3%AB.pdf](https://www.myria.be/files/2020_JVMIG_-_Migratie_in_Belgi%C3%AB.pdf), accessed on 8 August 2022.
8. We considered people from third countries whose residence permit was five years old or less (in most cases, these were in fact people living in Belgium for less than five years).
9. Due to challenges in finding research participants in Flanders, the initial three main locations have been expanded to six. All of the new locations were part of the case studies at the PCSWs.
10. Despite this initial strategy, going through the PCSWs' services was necessary in a limited number of locations where local NGOs or organisations were not responsive to our demand of contacts.
11. This strategy allowed participants to contact the researcher directly without necessarily going through third parties or feeling 'obliged' to participate to please local friends or associations/institutions.

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