Role Models in the Senior Civil Service: How Tasks Frame the Identification of Senior Bureaucrats with Active and Reactive Roles

Falk Ebinger, Sylvia Veit & Bastian Strobel

To cite this article: Falk Ebinger, Sylvia Veit & Bastian Strobel (2021): Role Models in the Senior Civil Service: How Tasks Frame the Identification of Senior Bureaucrats with Active and Reactive Roles, International Journal of Public Administration, DOI: 10.1080/01900692.2021.1945623

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2021.1945623

© 2021 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

Published online: 26 Jun 2021.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 5

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Role Models in the Senior Civil Service: How Tasks Frame the Identification of Senior Bureaucrats with Active and Reactive Roles

Falk Ebinger, Sylvia Veit, and Bastian Strobel

Institute for Public Management and Governance, Vienna University of Economic and Business, Vienna, Austria; Faculty of Economics and Management, University of Kassel, Kassel, Germany

ABSTRACT
The influence of senior civil servants’ (SCS) tasks on their role perceptions has been widely ignored in the public administration research on the administrative elite. This paper presents new survey data on SCS in German federal ministries to test this relation by categorizing SCS into three task-related groups: strategists, policy specialists, and administrators. Regression analyses reveal that SCS’s tasks do not influence their (strong) identification with reactive (supportive) roles but have a significant impact on their identification with active, more politically entrepreneurial roles. This entails two important findings: First, SCS’s tasks matter for their appreciation of different roles. Second, active and reactive role models are not irreconcilable (as it is often argued in the literature on bureaucratic politicization), but complementary.

Introduction
The selection of senior civil servants (SCS) based on assumptions on their personal attitudes and professional role perceptions is a typical point of entry for political attempts to control the civil service. Scholarship mirrors this interest: Getting to know who SCS are, what they believe and how they interpret their job, what motivates them and how their actions are influenced (or controlled) has a long tradition in public administration research (e.g., Bach & Veit, 2018; Cooper, 2018; Derlien, 2003; Peters & Pierre, 2004). However, as Wise (2004, p. 669) points out, contextual factors often remain unspecified: “studies assume generic effects from one level of bureaucracy to another, as well as from one occupational group to another […]”. Most empirical studies on role perceptions and decision-making rationalities of SCS ignore a distinct job-related scope condition, namely the tasks of the senior bureaucrats. SCS are treated as a homogeneous group in this respect, without scrutinizing their potential task-related heterogeneity. This paper challenges this implicit assumption of homogeneity and purports that the tasks assigned to SCS might affect their role perceptions. The assumed causal mechanism is based in organizational socialization theory (Hatmaker & Park, 2014; Kjeldsen & Botcher Jacobsen, 2013; Saks & Ashforth, 1997) arguing that bureaucrats in units with different tasks experience different socialization processes (Moysen et al., 2018).

We propose a typology of three task-related groups of SCS: strategists (i.e. SCS with responsibility for political planning, coordination and immediate executive staff), policy specialists (i.e. SCS who provide expertise on substantive policies and draft policy proposals), and transversal services administrators (i.e. SCS with responsibility for administrative tasks such as budgetary matters, human resources, legal services or organization of the ministry, in the following short referred to as ‘administrators’). This typology is applied to test the effect of task on SCS’ role perceptions.

To explore role perceptions, this study draws on the seminal Comparative Elite Study (Aberbach et al., 1981; Mayntz & Derlien, 1989) that identified ten typical roles of SCS. These 10 typical roles are organized into two groups: reactive roles and active roles. Reactive roles reflect the Weberian image of impartial bureaucrats with “inward-looking role patterns” (Trondal et al., 2018, p. 87), who serve the common good and give sound advice to the government but are reluctant in playing an active role in political decision-making processes. Reactive roles are the following five roles: expert role, broker role, role as implementer of policy goals, trustee role and legalistic role. Active roles reflect a more politically entrepreneurial role understanding where SCS stand up for specific societal groups or interests, and are more actively involved in political decision-making. Active roles are the following five roles:
advocacy role, the facilitator/agent role, the partisan role, the ombudsman role and the initiator role (for a more detailed description of all roles see section 3 and Mayntz & Derlien, 1989).

In public debate as well as in academic literature on politicization of bureaucracy, reactive and active roles are often considered as opposite poles and mutually exclusive (see Wise, 2004, p. 672; critically West, 2005). The analysis presented in this article confirms that this assumption is too simplistic as a high identification with reactive roles – which is traditionally widespread and deeply institutionalized in countries with a long tradition in bureaucratic impartiality – does not exclude that SCS also identify themselves with more active roles.

Empirical data stem from the German Political- Administrative Elite (PAE) survey in 2017. The data cover a full inventory of SCS in three upper hierarchical ranks (level 2 to 4, covering heads of directorates, heads of sub-directorates and heads of divisions; n = 604) in federal ministries in Germany.

Theoretical framework

Task matters: SCS as heterogeneous group

In recent years, the importance of individual-level aspects in explaining administrative behavior has been emphasized by research into motivation and commitment, role perceptions, identity and functional politicization of SCS. The point of departure for much of this research is the considerable discretion at the disposal of SCS (see Putnam, 1976, p. 87). SCS can draw on several alternative sources of legitimation for their actions (as e.g., political objectives of the government of the day, professional norms or standards, or loyalty towards the common good). Which of these sources is prioritized by the SCS and the role they hence take and the decisions they make depends on pre- and post-recruitment factors (Trondal et al., 2018). We focus on the latter aspect, that is “the social context and situation in which they find themselves” (Ehn et al., 2003, p. 437).

With regard to post-recruitment factors influencing role perceptions, several scholars emphasize (hierarchical) position as explanatory factor (e.g., Aberbach et al., 1981; Christensen, 1991; Ebinger et al. 2018; Ehn et al., 2003). Another post-recruitment factor that has been investigated in the literature is ministries’ and agencies’ “different functions within different technical and political task environments” (West, 2005, p. 157). The organizations’ different functions contribute to frame the individual organization members’ role perceptions and attitudes (Blomdahl, 2016; Ehn et al., 2003; Trondal, 2006). However, none of the work applying this “organizational specialization” perspective (Trondal et al., 2018, p. 90) controls for intra-organizational specializations, i.e. they restrict analysis to the organizational macro- or departmental level. Job related aspects, such as work-role choices or tasks, to our knowledge, never have been put to test. To the best of our knowledge, no study links specific tasks of SCS to their individual role perceptions, attitudes or behavior. Thus, we still know astonishingly little about this essential scope condition that might promote distinct role perceptions. This research gap can be explained by the original focus of research in SCS, addressing often the highest echelons of SCS only. These CEO-style actors at the top of a hierarchical line-organization hardly differ in their all-encompassing portfolio of tasks. Moreover, issues of data availability could have hindered more detailed analyses on this highly sensible group.

Picking up Rouban’s (2004) notion of politicization ex officio, meaning politicization by mere contact with inherently political issues and tasks, we assume that not all SCS within one government department are equally exposed to political tasks. We propose a framework of three types of tasks with different degrees of politicization ex officio. The first type of tasks is politics-related. Those tasks are characterized by a high politicization ex officio. Examples are policy coordination tasks and tasks related to the development of core policy programs and political strategies. The second task type is expert policy work. This includes, in particular, the preparation of policies and draft laws, policy advice to the minister, and the execution and evaluation of policies. SCS performing expert policy work – we call them policy specialists – are regularly confronted with political considerations when performing their work. There are, however, ups and downs in political attention dependent on the topic at hand. The third type is administrative tasks. Every ministerial department needs an internal administration, which provides transversal services – i.e. tasks that are not directly related to the policy portfolio of the ministry such as personnel management, budget affairs or organizational affairs. SCS with mainly such administrative duties are considered to perform tasks with a low degree of politicization ex officio. Based on the three types of tasks we differentiate three groups of SCS: strategists, policy specialists, and administrators.

Capturing patterns of variation: Role perceptions of SCS

In line with Ehn et al. (2003, p. 438), we define the term role as “attitudes and behaviors structured around rights, obligations, and tasks that are connected to a specific social position.” Role perceptions are voiced
representations of the roles SCS identify with; they are considered as "generalized receipts for action as well as normative systems of self-reference that provide codes for behavioral choices and feelings of allegiance to organizational members" (Trondal et al., 2018, p. 92; cf. Bevir et al., 2003, pp. 4ff.). Analyzing actor-level role perceptions in organization-related research has several merits: First, it is individuals, not organizations, who make available discretion real (Trondal et al., 2015). Second, this approach provides an integrated look at the "system of social regulations" and the individual actor, whose behavior is shaped by, but also modifies the surrounding structures (Ehn et al., 2003, p. 437). Finally, role perceptions are fairly easily derived and can be considered valid proxies for behavioral patterns and choices (Ehn et al., 2003, p. 438 f.; Trondal et al., 2018, pp. 85, 92).

Wise (2004, p. 672) points to the long tradition of using role categories to investigate representation and bureaucratic behavior, starting with Pitkin (1967) and Dogan (1975). Research on administrative elites early on differentiated SCS into distinct groups concerning their role perceptions. For instance, Putnam (1976) differentiated conventional and political bureaucrats. The pivotal Comparative Elite Study by Aberbach et al. (1981) theoretically derived four role images of SCS and politicians in policy-making, ranging from a strict separation of their roles to total hybridization. However, these images resemble ideal types, which are not captured in a straightforward way empirically. Several more recent studies set out to identify groups of civil servants based on role perceptions. Jacobsen (1996) surveyed agency heads at the municipal level in Norway on their stance towards bureaucratic roles and behavior. He empirically derived four groups of bureaucrats: the political bureaucrat, the autonomous bureaucrat, the classic administrator and the 'linking pin' (who acts as a citizens' advocate). Ehn et al. (2003) differentiate between the (more) judicial, political and – following the call of the day – market-oriented civil servant. Peters (2009) gets closer to the operational level by identifying five roles public servants (across all levels) might take: the traditional bureaucrat (who is primarily oriented towards formal rules as well as fair and equal treatment of citizens in policy implementation), the manager (whose main focus is on improving the efficiency of public service delivery and who has a more autonomous self-understanding), the policy-maker (who has a powerful policy role), the negotiator (who organizes, coordinates and supervises service delivery by public and private actors) and the democrat (who stabilizes democracy). Peters' model is designed to cover the whole public service. For in-depth analyses of SCS in government departments, those differentiations might still be too superficial (according to Peters, those SCS are particularly associated with the policy role), and the intermingling of functional and attitudinal aspects might bias results.3

One is tempted to interpret all these exercises as variations of the fundamental tension between neutral competence (based on what?) versus political responsiveness (towards whom?) (West, 2005, p. 148 f.; Wockelberg, 2014), especially as this dichotomous classification seems to have a strong appeal to SCSs themselves (Cooper, 2018, p. 36). However, scholars early on criticized the artificiality of such an antagonism (Heclo, 1975, p. 83), and many scholars since argued for a duality of both core role conceptions (e.g., Christensen, 1991; Trondal et al., 2018). This might be particularly true for the German case, as SCS “need both professional expertise and political craft” (Jann & Veit, 2021, p. 158).

Based on this line of thought, we argue for an approach that covers a broader range of role conceptions as in the examples presented above. To do so, we apply a more comprehensive model of SCS behavior developed by Aberbach et al. (1981) in the Comparative Elite Study. This study not only captured role images, but the respondents’ professional roles (labelled as job aspects at the time) as well. With ten categories addressing various societal stakeholders in the administrative process, this approach differentiates the erstwhile dichotomous perspective (Aberbach et al., 1981, pp. 86ff.). By classifying those professional roles into two more concise but per se compatible clusters, it becomes possible to capture the degree to which the respondents embrace reactive role perceptions, and to which degree they identify with active or ‘politically entrepreneurial’ role perceptions.

Hypotheses

We argue that individual tasks and responsibilities might be interlinked with SCS’ role perceptions. The theoretical reasoning behind this argument can be found in organizational socialization literature. In varying contexts, organizational affiliation effects and hierarchy effects have been investigated. Several public sector studies build on an institutionalist perspective on socialization (Simon, 1997). Many underline that the (hierarchical) organizational position influences civil servants’ role perceptions, attitudes and behavior (e.g., Christensen & Lægreid, 2009; Christensen & Opstrup, 2018; Egeberg, 2012; Raudla et al., 2021). The mechanism behind this process, however, seems not to be grounded in hierarchy per se, but might be based on the duties associated with a certain hierarchy level. The hierarchical position might influence role perceptions
and behavior because the tasks associated with a specific position and the demands on the position holder influence their perspective and assessment of situations.

Based on findings in socialization research (Ashforth, 2001; Hatmaker et al., 2011; Saks & Ashforth, 1997), we assume that individuals entering a new position rapidly get involved in task-related peer networks and are hence coached swiftly into the role expectations of a specific position. However, in line with the advanced discussion in the literature, we would not limit socialization processes to an entrants' onboarding or 'breaking in' period, neither consider it a continuous, more or less linear process (Oberfield, 2014, p. 15). We assume that socialization is a continuous, but nonlinear process. Changes in the organizational environment or changes in tasks might presumably lead to rapid shifts in role perception and attitudes (Murdoch et al., 2019). As Peters asserts, contemporary public servants have "to adjust their behavior to (...) multiple expectations (...) [and] may be changing their roles from time to time" (Peters, 2009, p. 16) dependent on the tasks that have to be performed. Or, as (Ashforth, 2001, p. 9) frames it: we are "individuals in flux". One could even argue that individual SCS might have risen fast on the career ladder because they were able to adjust to new demands faster than others. This swift adaption would explain the observation of hierarchical effects on attitudes and behavior despite the common selection and bureaucratic socialization processes all civil servants undergo. All this leads us to assume that not (only) a person's hierarchical position but also the tasks and duties associated with a position affect role perceptions.

We hypothesize that such a differentiated effect on role perceptions should be observable for the three task-related groups of SCS (strategists, policy specialists and administrators). As outlined above, these three groups have substantially diverging core tasks with strongly differing degrees of politicization ex officio: Strategists have to deal with political considerations on a daily basis, as essential part of their job. Policy specialists focus primarily on the professional aspects related to their tasks, and only on a secondary basis reflect political implications. Administrators are concerned with organizational issues internal to their department. Their tasks are usually remote from politics. Based on the assumption that reactive roles are most appealing for SCS with a low politicization ex officio while active roles are most attractive for SCS with a strong politicization ex officio, we expect reactive role perceptions to be least relevant for strategists and most relevant for administrators, with policy specialists taking a middle position (H 1). Active roles should be most relevant for strategists and particularly unappealing for administrators, with policy specialists again taking a middle position (H 2).

**Data and Methods**

The hypotheses introduced above are tested with data gathered by the German PAE survey in 2017. The selected sample covers SCS positions in federal ministries from the second to fourth hierarchical level. SCS at level 1 (administrative state secretaries) were removed from the sample as they are both few in numbers and, as the highest echelon of the ministerial hierarchy, do usually not differ in a similar manner as SCS at lower levels with regard to their task. Level 2 includes directors-general; level 3 includes heads of sub-directorates, heads of leadership staff units (Leitungsstab) and heads of minister's office; level 4 includes heads of sections and heads of staff units (excluding heads of leadership staff units). PAE 2017 contacted all 1,922 level 2 to 4-SCS in 12 federal ministries and reached a response rate of 31.4% (N = 604).

The independent variable (task-related groups of SCS) was operationalized as follows: To assign each SCS to one of the three task-related groups (strategists, policy specialists, administrators), we used a survey question asking for the respondent’s organizational unit. All respondents who reported to be working in a leadership staff unit or in units responsible for strategy and planning or coordination were categorized as strategists. All respondents who reported to be working in a policy unit were categorized as policy specialists. Respondents who reported to work in an administrative support unit were classified as administrators. The sample consists of 139 strategists, 401 policy specialists and 64 transversal services administrators. In regression analyses, we consider policy specialists as reference category when analyzing the influence of 'task' on SCS role perceptions. The control variables included in regression analyses are presented in Table 1.

To measure SCS’ role perceptions, we draw on the pivotal Comparative Elite Study (Aberbach et al., 1981; Mayntz & Derlien, 1989). As outlined above, those studies revealed ten typical role perceptions of SCS. We categorized those ten role perceptions into reactive and active roles (see Table 2) and composed two formative indices, the Active Role Model (ARM) the Reactive Role Model (RRM). PAE 2017 captures all ten roles by a four-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). For the single-item analyses, the responses were recoded into dummy variables, displaying whether the respondents are leaning towards the proposed model, or not. To form the indices RRM and ARM the mean values of the included items were used,
when responses were available for at least four of the five items. Thus, the minimum value of both the ARM and the RRM Index is 1 (strong disagreement) and the maximum value 4 (strong agreement). For the ARM Index Cronbach’s Alpha lies at 0.41 and for the RRM Index at 0.35. As Cronbach’s Alpha is based on the number of items and as measuring role models by only five single variables is quite complex the low reliability of both indices is not a major impediment to its use. However, neither the RRM nor ARM roles are the expression of a “shared, common perception of the concept” (Willems et al., 2014, p. 1656) as in reflexive constructs. SCS might well diverge in their understanding of the duties a SCS conventionally has to cover when fulfilling either a supportive, reactive role, or an active role. From a methodological point of view, these role models are considered to cause the latent variables RRM and ARM, and hence compose a formative index (Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer, 2001, pp. 269–270). Thus, all the items are part of the respective theoretical concept (see Table 2).

### Empirical findings and discussion

To test the hypotheses, we conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA), post hoc tests and OLS regression analyses on the two role-model indices ARM and RRM. To explain the observed differences between groups, we conducted regressions on the ten single roles.

For the RRM index, the identification turns out to be high throughout all three task-related groups of SCS (see Table 3). The OLS regression displays the relationship between the three task-related groups of SCS and the ARM Index in different models (see Figure 1 for a selection of four out of eight models tested). Throughout all models, we find no significant group effect, i.e. no significant differences in identification can be observed between strategists, policy specialists and administrators. When including all controls, only having completed studies in law has a significant positive effect on the RRM Index. All other variables have no significant effect (see Figure 1, model 8).

For the ARM index, the ANOVA reports statistically significant differences between the three task-related groups [(F 2, 556) = 6.36, p = .002]. However, Tukey–HSD and Game–Howell post hoc tests reveal that strategists and policy specialists do not differ significantly, but that both groups deviate significantly from the administrators.

The OLS regression (see Figure 2) displays the relationship between the three task-related groups of SCS and the ARM Index in different models. Throughout all models, we find a clear group effect: working as administrator makes it considerably and statistically significantly less likely to associate strongly with an active role model. Working as a strategist has no significant effect, i.e. policy specialists as reference group seem to be about equally likely to associate with this role model as strategists. The control variables show no stronger and significant effects with the exception of federal ministry (see Figure 2).

Based on the findings from OLS-regressions, H1 has to be rejected as there are no significant group differences concerning the reactive role model index. H2 can (partly) be confirmed. The expected relation – more politicized tasks being linked to more active role

### Table 1. Controls, captured as dummy variables (yes = 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Ministry</th>
<th>Interior</th>
<th>Justice and Consumer Protection</th>
<th>Labour and Social Affairs</th>
<th>Economy and Energy</th>
<th>Education and Research</th>
<th>Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth</th>
<th>Environment, Nature Conserv, and Nuclear Safety</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Finance</th>
<th>Transport and Digital Infrastructure</th>
<th>Food and Agriculture</th>
<th>Economic Cooperation and Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex (female)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of employment in the public service (years)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political civil servant (hierarchical level 2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declared Party membership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field of study (law degree)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience outside public administration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Role models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Active or reactive role?</th>
<th>Description Does the respondent understand himself/herself as . . .?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># R1 Expert role</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>Expert with specific problem solving capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2 Advocacy role</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Advocate for broader societal groups or demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3 Agent/facilitator role</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Agent for specific organized interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4 Broker role</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>Broker between conflicting interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R5 Implementer of political goals</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>Implementer of political goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R6 Partisan role</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Partisan bound to enforce a political program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R7 Trustee role</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>Representative of the state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R8 Legalist role</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>Implementer of law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R9 Ombudsman role</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Citizen advocate dealing with individual problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R10 Initiator role</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Initiator of new projects and problem solutions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Mayntz and Derlien (1989); Derlien (2003).
models – exists for policy specialists and strategists vis-

a-vis administrators but not for strategists compared to

policy specialists.

To explain these results and to scrutinize whether

belonging to a specific task-related group indeed is asso-

ciated with the taking of distinct roles, we conducted

a linear regression and interpreted Odds Ratios (OR) to

evaluate changes associated with factors and covariates

on each of the proposed roles (R1 to R10). Table 3 shows

how frequently the three task-related groups of SCS

identify with the proposed roles. The table moreover

presents the results of Pearson’s chi-square test on the

relationship between the three groups of SCS. It reveals

that the stance of the three groups towards the ten roles

is not uniform.

There is no statistically significant variation (\(p < .05\))

between the three task-related groups of SCS and their

identification with the expert role, the broker role, the

agent/facilitator role and the ombudsman role. All three

groups of SCS identify rather strongly with the reactive

roles as expert and broker (see Table 3). These two roles

can hence be considered as universally accepted core of

bureaucratic roles to which all SCS, no matter what their

particular task is, adhere to. Throughout all three task-

related groups of SCS the identification with the wo

active roles as facilitator/agent and ombudsman is rather

low. The facilitator/agent role is unanimously rejected

by SCS in all three task-related groups, even by those

who experience a strong politicization ex officio. This

role might be too explicitly in contradiction with the

established and deeply institutionalized principle of

bureaucratic impartiality. A feasible explanation for the

consistently rather low identification with the ombuds-

man role is that this role is simply beyond the scope of

what SCS in Germany commonly consider to be their

job. German civil servants traditionally consider them-

selves first and foremost as representatives of the state,

and not as citizen representatives, investigating viola-

tions of rights of individuals or specific societal groups

(Jann & Veit, 2021; Mayntz & Derlien, 1989).\(^7\)

There is a statistically significant (\(p < .05\)) but mostly

rather small (Cramer-V < .20) relation between the three

task-related groups of SCS and their identification with

six out of ten roles (R2/R5/R6/R7/R8/R10, see Table 3).

The main driver for the significant differences is the

group of administrators: In five of the six roles (R2/R5/

R7/R8/R10) there are considerable differences between

administrators and the other two groups, whereas the

identification of policy specialists and strategists with

the proposed roles coincides. Administrators identify less

with the advocacy role, role of implementer of political

goals, trustee role and initiator role, but considerably

more with the legalist role than their peers. R6 (partisan

role) is the only exception to this scheme, as it is very

strongly rejected by both policy specialists and adminis-

trators, and somewhat less so by strategist.

Comparing the measures of central tendency of ARM

and RRM across the three task-related groups (see

Table 3), it becomes apparent that SCS in all three
groups tend to see their own role rather as a reactive than
an active one. The mean of all groups is considerably lower
for the ARM Index than for the RRM Index.

When scrutinizing relevant covariates for the identifi-
cation with RRM and ARM, several important obser-
vations have been made.

First, for RRM the strong association with having

received a law degree is undeniable. A law degree has

for a long time been the norm for entering the senior

civil service in Germany. This has changed gradually

over the last decades. Nevertheless, lawyers still form

---

Table 3. Identification with role models, differences across groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Model</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Active or Reactive</th>
<th>Strategists</th>
<th>Policy Specialist</th>
<th>Administrators</th>
<th>Pearson’s (\chi^2) test</th>
<th>Cramer-V</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R1</td>
<td>Expert role</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
<td>93.9%</td>
<td>90.5%</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>Advocacy role</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>14.10**</td>
<td>.159**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3</td>
<td>Facilitator/Agent role</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4</td>
<td>Broker</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
<td>72.1%</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R5</td>
<td>Implementer of political goals</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>88.3%</td>
<td>87.4%</td>
<td>74.6%</td>
<td>7.64**</td>
<td>.115*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R6</td>
<td>Partisan role</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td>21.01***</td>
<td>.195***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R7</td>
<td>Trustee role</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>84.6%</td>
<td>87.1%</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>7.83*</td>
<td>.116*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R8</td>
<td>Legalist role</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>17.15***</td>
<td>.175***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R9</td>
<td>Ombudsman role</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>.080</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R10</td>
<td>Initiator role</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>86.5%</td>
<td>89.5%</td>
<td>66.1%</td>
<td>23.99***</td>
<td>.203***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Percent values refer to the share of respondents in the three groups who reported to (completely) agree with the role model; * (\(p < .05\)) at Pearson’s \(\chi^2\) test.
the largest group among SCS today (Strobel et al., 2021, p. 19). Critics of the high share of lawyers in the German SCS argue that this undermines innovation and a change towards a more policy- and output-oriented and less legalist administrative culture (Reichard, 2014). Our findings confirm this: lawyers in SCS positions help to cement the strong legalistic administrative culture in Germany.

Second, despite the extensive discussion on the decision-making effects of party politicization, our analysis reveals that party membership is no relevant explanatory factor for both role model indices. Party members seem to have internalized the traditional (reactive) civil service role perceptions and norms to the same extent as their colleagues (see also Ebinger et al., 2019), and they do not differ significantly from their peers without party membership in the appreciation or rejection of active roles. The only exception from this pattern can be found for R6 (partisan role). Party members identify themselves significantly stronger (p < .05; Pearson’s χ² = 29.60; Cramer-V .23) with this role than non-party members. While only very few SCS without party

Figure 1. OLS-regression: Group x reactive role model index. Source: PAE 2017. Notes: Unstandardized coefficients reported with standard errors in parentheses. Federal ministries (see Table 1) are included as system level controls into the equation. * (p < .05) ** (p < .01) *** (p < .001)
membership identify themselves with this role (1.8%), the identification of party members with this role is considerably higher (12.9%) – but still on a low level.

Third, another noteworthy finding concerns interdepartmental differences. SCS working in selected federal ministries, namely the Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and the Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, share a more active definition of their roles than their colleagues in other ministries. This might indicate that interest representation is considered more legitimate by SCS when they represent broad but rather weak societal interests. The investigation of interdepartmental differences with regard to SCS’ role perceptions is a fruitful avenue for future research.

Conclusion
This contribution challenges the widespread assumption in public administration literature that SCS can be considered (and explored) as homogeneous group. We argue that the view on SCS in previous research might
be biased, as studies on role perceptions or decision-making rationalities commonly ignore the specific task of SCS as individual level scope condition. In this article, we tested this claim. Illustrated by the analysis of new survey data from Germany, several major contributions can be drawn from our study.

First, the division of SCS into three task-related groups – strategists, policy specialists, and administrators – depending on their politicization ex officio has proved to be feasible. The operationalization applied in this study to assign SCS to the three groups is independent from country-specific characteristics, and could thus easily be applied in future studies on SCS in other countries and for comparative research on this topic. The same applies to the formative indices – RRM and ARM – used in this study.

Second, the empirical findings presented in this article enhance our knowledge on the antecedents of SCS’ role perceptions and decision-making behavior, as we supplement commonly used aspects as formal position and hierarchy with the tasks SCS are entrusted with. The claim that individual tasks are a relevant scope condition, was confirmed empirically. We found substantial differences across the three task-related sub-groups of SCS (strategists, policy specialists and administrators) concerning their role perceptions. Strategists and policy specialists are much more inclined to achieve high values in the identification with the active role model than administrators. When investigating role perceptions, SCS should hence be differentiated into subgroups to avoid biased or blurred results.

Third, we identified the reactive role model as base model of SCS behavior in Germany. All task-related groups of SCS identify strongly with reactive (supportive) roles, in particular with the expert role and the broker role. This resembles the deeply institutionalized self-image of an impartial bureaucrat that serves the government of the day. SCS entrusted with more politically salient tasks are likely to show a higher identification with active roles – in addition to their high identification with reactive roles. These findings are of high theoretical importance, as they confirm the claim that active and reactive role models are not irreconcilable, but complementary (Ebinger et al., 2019).

Fourth, while we cannot contribute to the debate on causal mechanisms linking antecedents and scope conditions to individual level traits, our results challenge common socialization theories. Even though we know from biographical research that there is substantial movement of SCS across positions and tasks within one ministry, the actors seem to exhibit a specific stance related to their actual position. Albeit substantial progress has been made in understanding socialization processes within organizations (Beyers, 2010; Trondal et al., 2018), further theory development and empirical testing is warranted. Beyond a linear understanding of socialization as an ongoing process deepening over time, new environments, critical events and changing responsibilities and tasks might indeed be much more relevant for the socialization of mature actors in later stages of career.

Note that the approach presented here to test the assumption of homogeneity of role models across different task-related groups of SCS is not suited to claim causal inference on the reasons for the variation discovered. Whether this effect is based on pre-recruiting differences of SCS in the three categories, or whether this proves the socializing capacity of (bureaucratic) organizations is beyond the scope of our investigation. Even though we assume a post-recruitment effect, we cannot say with confidence whether the socialization process which might take place here is the result of a long-term exposure to a distinct environment (actors and institutions), or whether the acquisition of the observed set of role perceptions is the result of an ad hoc process, initiated by the take-over of certain tasks which bring about an environment with a distinct set of actors and exigencies.

Moreover, as all survey-based analyses on sensitive topics, the issue of social desirability bias has to be raised. For example, we observe a consistently high appraisal of RRM across all groups. This could indicate ‘clear social norms regarding a given behavior or attitude’ (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007, p. 860). As the ‘Weberian’, serving role model is deeply institutionalized and central to SCS’ job description in meritocratic bureaucracies in Western democracies, we are inclined to give credence to the idea that the reported role model mirrors a fundamental trait, and not just hypocrisy. Moreover, as ARM shows substantial variation across task-related groups, no systematic levelling of effect is observed. Thus, although “impression management” (Rosenfeld et al., 2015) will possibly occur among such rather exposed respondents, we do not expect a systematic bias in the responses.

The most important lesson learnt from this study is that future research on SCS should apply a differentiated approach to explore role perceptions of SCS. Knowledge about disparate groups formed by varying tasks within bureaucracy is crucial to link and interpret the manifold data on SCS in a meaningful manner. Undifferentiated examinations ignoring this important scope condition might lead to biased results either by masking effects or by over- or misinterpreting effects because of inconsiderate sample selection.
Notes

1. Level 1 (the Secretaries of State) is left out due to its small number and overwhelmingly political character.
2. One exception – albeit not applicable for SCS – is Camilleri (2007), who uses the Job Characteristics Inventory (JCI) by Sims et al. (1976) and covers skill variety, task autonomy, task identity, task feedback, friendship opportunities, dealing with others and task significance.
3. A broad strand of research applied role-based analyses in international organizations, with a focus on assumed tensions between core roles SCS are committed to e.g., Hooghe (2005); Trondal (2006). However, role definitions in this strand of research (e.g., Trondal’s ‘decision-making dynamics’ labeled as intergovernmental, supranational, departmental, and epistemic roles) are strongly geared towards sources of, and conflicts between loyalties. Specific tasks forming functional epistemic communities within departments are not addressed see also Trondal et al. (2018).
4. PAE 2017 belongs to a series of online surveys in Germany (partly) based on the questionnaire of the Comparative Elite Study initiated by Aberbach et al. (1981). The survey covers SCS in federal and state ministries, federal agencies and ministerial research institutions.
5. Directors-general (level 2) are political civil servants (politische Beamte), who can be dismissed at any time by the minister, while all SCS at lower hierarchical levels are in permanent positions (Jann & Veit, 2021, p. 148).
6. The Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Federal Ministry of Defence were excluded from the analysis due to their different staff structure.
7. However, this stance might change with the rise of identity politics, when active representation by “providing a voice for societal interests” gains importance in the (individual) mission statement and self-understanding of SCS (see Piatak et al., 2020).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Leibniz Center for Science and Society, University of Hannover, Germany.

ORCID

Falk Ebinger https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1861-5359
Sylvia Veit https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3855-5995
Bastian Strobel https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1583-027X

Data availability statement

The data used in the study can be obtained from the authors for purposes of replication.

References


