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► **To cite this version:**

Vincent Dubois. The Functions of Bureaucratic Routines in a Changing Social State: On Interactions with Recipients in French Welfare Offices. Ph. Sandermann. The End of Welfare as we Know it? Continuity and Change in Western Welfare State Settings and Practices, Barbara Budrich Publishers, p. 127-136, 2014. halshs-00768746

**HAL Id: halshs-00768746**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00768746>**

Submitted on 9 Jan 2013

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**The Functions of Bureaucratic Routines in a Changing Social State: On Interactions  
with Recipients in French Welfare Offices**

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in Ph. Sandermann, ed., *The end of welfare as we know it? Continuity and Change in Western  
Welfare Practices*, Barbara Budrich Press, forthcoming, July 2013.

The relationships between clients and agents at the front desks of government agencies, particularly welfare agencies, have received unprecedented attention in France since the 1990s. A number of reasons explain this surge of interest in a dimension of public policy hitherto generally neglected both by institutional actors and observers alike. First, so-called public service modernization programs and then State reform programs have included the objective of improving relationships between the administrations and their *usagers* [users], now referred to as "clients" (Warin 1997). Welfare agencies were quickly and intensely enlisted in this general reform undertaking. Combining a management-oriented approach and the specialization of services provided to disadvantaged persons (Siblot 2006), these programs have contributed to the practical and symbolic production of the problem of "handling the excluded", even beyond the level of welfare organizations, especially when public service agents deal with those referred to as *des publics difficiles* [difficult publics] in the institutional lingo: *jeunes des cités* [inner-city kids] in public transport, *SDF* [homeless people] in the hospitals, and *les exclus* [the excluded] in general. Lastly, these institutional and social preoccupations resonated with researchers, especially as they coincided with a trend towards a focus on individuals and-or the study of micro-relationships (Weller 1998): scholars were eager to take interpersonal exchanges as an object of study or as a level of observation.

Yet, I argue that there are deeper and less contextual reasons to focus on inter-individual relationships in welfare administrations, mainly exemplified here by front desk interactions. The front desks of welfare organizations are not only institutions aimed at the poor: it is in and through these front desk relationships, which are practical realizations of the "assistance"

relationship (Simmel 1965), that the poor are instituted as such. Building on Simmel's perspective, I show how the poor are produced by describing the relationships between those asking for assistance and those invested with the authority to provide it.

These relationships, as it happens, are no more immutable than the social definitions of poverty with which they are associated. By studying their transformations, we can evidence new ways of defining the poor (the "entitled") at work in the concrete functioning of the welfare state. In this chapter, I set about to do this focusing on contemporary France. I rely on a study conducted in family benefit offices which, in addition to the usual family and housing benefits, also attribute minimum benefits (Dubois 2010) and on an investigation of the practices used to control minimum benefit recipients (partly presented in Dubois forthcoming).

Front desk interactions and more broadly direct exchanges between administrative agents and recipients reveal the type of relationship that develops between welfare provision systems and those entitled to benefiting from them. I show that the importance taken on by these face-to-face administrative interactions owes much to the redefinition of this relationship in an unprecedented context of progressive decline of social rights and worsening socio-economic problems. Then, I show that far from being merely technical means to the implementation of a social policy, the methods used in this relational and bureaucratic work constitute its very core. Ultimately, I assess the impact of these new relationships and methods on welfare recipients.

### **Declining social rights and increasing need for assistance**

The meaning and the importance of face-to-face relationships between welfare claimants and the representatives of institutions in charge of welfare provision vary depending on the features of the welfare benefits and on the socio-economic situation, and therefore according to the periods and national configurations under consideration. I posit that these relationships have become increasingly important in France, particularly since the late 1980s, and that they are less and less mere bureaucratic routines, instead becoming more strategic interactions – in the strong sense of the term. This evolution derives both from transformations in the status of welfare applicants and in social policy, and from the effects of persisting mass

unemployment, which keeps much of the population dependent towards welfare organizations.

### Recipients or entitled?

In order to illustrate the impact of different types of social policy on administrative relationships between applicants and agents, I suggest starting from a rough ideal-typical distinction. In a welfare system where acquiring a specific status gives access to benefits (particularly when contributions have been paid), the relationship to welfare administrations pertaining to welfare provision can be limited to a formal and mostly technical exchange, in the sense that the way the interaction goes has no effect on the actual payment of benefits. In such a setting, the street-level bureaucrat's work consists in checking the presence of the documents required for processing the file, and if need be give additional information on the calculation of benefits or the schedule of payouts. The recipient is mostly asked to provide the required certificates and attestations, and occasionally to give additional explanations in the most complex situations. The face-to-face relationships can therefore be reduced to a limited number of brief interactions (sometimes only one), and seen merely in terms of effectiveness in the processing of files.

In other systems, exemplified among others by the US case, which tend towards a model of public charity (Castel 1978) or "regulation of the poor" (Piven and Cloward 1993), the situation is entirely different. In the absence of well-defined social rights, replaced by allowances and assistance in kind handed out on a case-by-case basis, confrontation to the institutions becomes a complex and crucial matter. The welfare agent assesses the applicant's situation and decides which features to take into account in the process of ruling on each case. The "client", on the other hand, must present his situation and his person in a way that gives credit to his request for assistance. Such interactions are structured by a key requirement: establishing the truthfulness of the claimant's presentation to come up with a decision on the need for assistance, the form it will take and the amount of money provided (if any). As Frederic Wiseman's illuminating documentary on a New York City welfare office (*Welfare*) shows, the administrative relationship is then far from a mere formality; it becomes a tense, complex and literally decisive situation, since it is on this occasion that welfare provision is granted or refused.

These interactions have also become decisive, albeit for partly different reasons, after the welfare reform that puts strong emphasis on returning to work (Morgen, Acker and Weigt 2010). Face-to-face encounters are no longer only about granting a benefit; they are conceived as incentives to work. Agents paradoxically strive to "enforce 'self-sufficiency'", by teaching welfare recipients the value of work or having recourse to more directly coercive practices (Morgen, Acker and Weigt 2010: 64-83). Recipients must show that they "deserve" public support, not only because they are poor, but because they are showing efforts to fight their poverty. The legacy of the paternalistic tradition of public charity combined with the rise of workfare leads to a form of "disciplinarization" of the poor, displayed in their encounters with welfare agents (Soss et al. 2011).

Describing recent transformations in French social policies as a return to the public charity model or an application of the workfare model (which is composite anyway) would be an exaggeration. They have, however, been getting closer to this ideal-type; a number of recent trends in the public treatment of poverty in France have impacted the recipients' relationships to welfare organizations and systems. The emergency fund implemented in 1998 following a mobilization by the unemployed constituted a typical manifestation of the new obligation required from the poor, who no longer have to fulfill a range of criteria, but must be able to showcase their poverty (Fassin 2012). This exceptional program required the unemployed to send a claim consisting in a letter explaining their situation and all information they would find relevant in order to convince *ad hoc* local committees that they deserved this occasional help. Conversely to a classical social welfare program defining *a priori* general rules to be applied to individual cases, this emergency aid was decided after the *a posteriori* evaluation of rationales conceived on an individual basis by the claimants themselves. More broadly speaking, the implementation of the so-called "new social policies", including the increasingly important RMI minimum benefit in 1998, has resulted in a more case-based approach, with individual accounts being produced for and assessed by institutional representatives (Astier 1996). Increasingly, fact-based criteria (subject to appreciation) prevail over law-based criteria (relating to a status), which makes the process of assessing individual situations in legal terms more difficult (Choquet and Sayn 2000). For instance, the very vague criterion of "isolation" (*isolement*) considered in the provision of the single parent benefit [API] and of the minimum benefit [RMI] is interpreted in very diverse ways. The evaluation of individual cases is now a complement, if not a replacement, to the attribution of social rights. In this increasingly workfare-oriented system, behaviors are assessed to establish whether

individuals really want to return to work or not. This transpired first in the field of employment: in 2001, the implementation of the return to work assistance plan [PARE, plan d'aide au retour à l'emploi] reinforced the obligation for the unemployed to bring evidence of an "active job search" during regular interviews. Numerous reforms have since resulted in the increase in the number and importance of institutional interactions: interviews are more frequent and may lead to the suspension or cancellation of unemployment benefit payouts and more and more checks are conducted to ensure that recipients are genuinely looking for work. In the field of so-called solidarity policies, reforms have been pushing for "activation", as the replacement of the RMI and API benefits (minimum and single parent benefits) by the RSA (active solidarity benefit), more work-oriented and whose provision is subject to regular individual follow-up interviews.

In a context of persisting mass unemployment, the individual responsibility of the "able-bodied poor" is increasingly singled out, and assistance relationships tend to be structured around the suspicion of institutional agents towards the applicants' justifications. Since both the conviction that "every salary deserves work" (Murard 2002) and the idea that this work or the hindrances to doing this work might not in fact exist have come to prevail, the relationships between institutions and welfare claimants have become increasingly decisive and conflict-laden. The claimant must declare, explain, prove, justify and convince, as opposed to the agent who must understand, control, assess and rule (Dubois forthcoming). Checks and individual rulings have always been carried out by social workers, who generally have dispositions (a "vocation") and a professional socialization that allow them to master these practices. They are now also administrative employees who control and rule on individual cases, but with no "tools" at their disposal and generally less critical distance. All of this illustrates the general thesis of the "policy-making role of street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky 1980) and more precisely, shows how social and historical conditions are crucial to the importance of that role. In the case under study, I have not observed the decline of their discretionary power (Evans and Harris 2004). Rather, I argue that this discretionary power has been extended to the lower levels of welfare administrations. Discretion is no longer the privilege of trained and professional social workers and is now also being exerted by bureaucratic clerks who master the administrative procedures but who have had no training in social work.

### *A growing demand*

The new importance and meaning of administrative relationships cannot only be attributed to transformations in social policy. It also relates to socio-economic conditions that affect the volume and the structure of demand. Self-evidently, the degradation of the economic situation in the poorest households and continuing high unemployment rates have resulted in a steady increase in welfare applications and recourse to charity. Every year, the media reports the increase in the number of meals served by the "Restaurants du Coeur" charity; though they make for less good TV, the statistics on visits to the front desk of welfare organizations are no less edifying. Admittedly, the number of visits is only a very rough indicator of the evolutions in front desk relationships. However, insofar as the reasons for visiting – fearing payouts might not arrive, looking for additional benefits when suffering from great financial difficulties, not knowing how the administrative machinery works or needing to talk about one's problems – orient the attitudes and practices of the claimants (deference, prospection, aggressiveness, self-surrendering or display of misfortune), this indicator at least reveals possible trends. The number of visits has increased from slightly below 15 million in 1995 to more than 18 million in 2008 and nearly 21 million in 2009: the increase observed was higher during the first year of the financial crisis than over the entire preceding decade. This is a far greater increase than that of the number of recipients, which has gone from 9.5 million in 1995 to slightly above 11 million in 2009: it can therefore be explained by a greater frequency of the visits. While this is not the only explanation, the global socio-economic situation in terms of poverty and employment therefore has a direct impact on the relationships with relevant administrations, including as far as physical reception is concerned.

The evolution is not only quantitative; it derives from the expression of a more complex and varied demand. The instability and the complexity of individual situations, which grow as the boundaries between work and unemployment become increasingly unclear and as family structures change, lead applicants to expose problems that call for active involvement from the agents, particularly since, as part of the aforementioned evolutions in social policy, the adaptation of the institutional response to the diversity of the situations has become a requirement where the standardized enforcement of general rules used to prevail.

Furthermore, the relationship with a welfare institution, even in such an impersonal and bureaucratic setting as front desk reception, does not only amount to attempts to solve objective problems through the provision of a regular or occasional benefit. Despite the

inconvenience of dealing with an administration in terms of waiting times and bureaucracy, which are perceived in variable ways depending on the visitor's objective position and "moral career" (Goffman 1961), as well as the potential effects of domination that can derive from the scornful attitude of a reception agent or an institutional sanction, welfare claimants still may expect secondary benefits from the administrative relationship. The front desks of welfare organizations are subject to a number of lateral uses which, as they develop, contribute to reinforcing and diversifying the social function of the relationships that take place there: being reassured about the processing of a request, finding someone with whom to share one's troubles, sometimes getting advice when lost in life or taking steps to maintain the identity of individuals who are liable to pick themselves up and get out of poverty...

### **The "relational" as a way to handle social issues**

The increasing importance of face-to-face relationships is not simply, as we have seen, an organizational epiphenomenon of the transformations of social issues. Quite the opposite in fact: it is part and parcel of the handling of social problems, since the practical redefinition of the institutional treatment of the precarious fractions of the working-class has given way to a new form of management.

#### *A new social administration*

As they move away from an impersonal model characterized by the routine application of standardized rules, front desk relationships in welfare organizations have arguably become less "bureaucratic". Meanwhile, the growing complexity of the procedures and situations often leads social workers to devote more and more of their time to file processing and committee meetings to the detriment of direct interaction with the population. The "relational" still constitutes the central feature of social workers' professional identity (Dubet 2002: 231 sq.); whether it is still their main activity is less certain. At any rate, the "relational demands" of unprivileged populations are now less than ever met by social workers, who are overwhelmed and held up by multiple tasks. As a result, part of the relational work with the clients that used to be carried out by social professionals, whose "job and vocation" were initially based on helping the poor, is now being taken over by administrative professionals (such as reception agents), who are supposed to be competent as far as enforcing standards and procedures go, but who have not been trained or prepared to handle poverty. In other



words, the "socialization" of the administrative relationship is also the counterpart of a "bureaucratization" of social work.

These two concurrent trends have a combined effect resulting in a watered-down treatment of poor populations, which goes beyond the internal functioning of welfare-oriented organizations. The "excess in social demand" triggered by the increase and diversification of requests for assistance and – at least partly and temporarily – encouraged by calls for general mobilization in the "fight against exclusion", has led front desk agents in all kinds of public services to become involved in the follow-up of individuals in difficult situations (Jeannot 1996), as the case of post offices in working-class neighborhoods shows (Siblot 2003).

Instead of promoting a specific competence in the handling of social problems, the relational skills of street-level public servants have been valued. Reception trainings generally grant much importance to communicational skills ("being able to listen and make yourself understood"), alternatively borrowing from techniques used in commercial interaction trainings (from smiling to neuro-linguistic programming) and from a psychology-tinged register that matches the overall trend towards the individualization of social problems. The strictly social dimension of the relationship is all too often reduced to one session on the "diversity of the publics" or to a role-playing game aimed at "dealing with situations of conflict".

#### *New forms of management of the poor*

All of this contributes to encouraging a diffraction of the social question. Front desk agents do not address the "global situation" of the applicants, but specific issues regarding them, conceived and delineated as a result of the segmentation of benefits and institutions: housing, health, children, etc. Collectives are not mentioned; "collections of individuals" receive a distinct treatment, broken up into waiting lines and numbers. This reveals an unlikely affinity between recent trends towards the individualization of welfare and the fragmentation that occurs in practice at front desks, often considered as the symbol of bureaucratic archaism. These front desk relationships and the new assistance relationships they witness contribute to replacing the production of the poor as a group by the identification of individuals with distinctive issues, expressed in terms of personal suffering immediately translated into institutional language.

This individualization comes with contrasting trends in the determination of the distance between the protagonists in the relationship. In welfare administration and politics alike, "proximity" is in fashion. This can physically entail the opening of offices in the neighborhoods where poor people live. At another level, this can mean the development of "personalized" relationships that make it possible for reception agents and welfare recipients to know each other, which both facilitates administrative formalities and induces new forms of dependence (Dubois 2010). Furthermore, this personalization takes on a paradoxical form, as it partly consists in the implementation of a technique linked to the specialization of so-called "relational" professions.

When measuring distance and proximity on the basis of the agents' respective social positions, a growing social gap can be observed. The people who come to the front desks have an increasingly low social level since the arrival of the "new publics" (as they are called in the institutional lingo) starting in the late 1980s (RMI recipients who until then did not frequent social security organizations, later refugees and immigrants from Central or Eastern European countries, for instance). Concurrently, the educational and/or social level of the public service employees (including those in direct contact with the population) has become higher, as such functions have become fallback solutions in high unemployment periods for agents that would have held higher positions in better times.

The effects of this growing social gap are not univocal. There can be reactions of rejection and practices of stigmatization of the poor, but there are also cases of unplanned commitment to the socio-relational dimensions of an administrative job chosen by default. In such cases, this commitment does not derive from established professional skills in social matters, but on the agents' personal predispositions: their social "sensibility", the categories of perception of the issues and of the populations they have forged during their trajectory. The forms and limitations of this commitment are determined by professional relationships between co-workers and with the hierarchy, often more prone to spreading stereotypes about the "entitled" poor and to imposing a management and productivity-oriented rationale than to committing to the defense of the underprivileged.

Due to the practical rationales of these "bottom-up social policies", welfare recipients have to contend with greater requirements under the influence of governmental bodies and of the

media. "Responsibilization", a word used to call for more autonomy and to express the idea that the poor are responsible for whatever problems they are dealing with, is both an official catchphrase and the practical horizon of these face-to-face encounters.

Consequently, instead of merely contrasting the "social magistrature", based on case-by-case appreciation, with a "front desk logic" supposedly amounting to the routine application of pre-established general standards, I argue that it is necessary to comprehend the origins, the rationales and the stakes of the exercise of this power to rule on individual situations, to assign statuses or promote behaviors in bureaucratic relationships.

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