

The Bureaucrat and the Poor: Encounters in French Welfare Offices

VINCENT DUBOIS

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The Bureaucrat and the Poor is an English-language translation of Vincent Dubois' *La Vie au Guichet* (literally, life at the desk) which was published in France in 1999. In this book, Dubois examines the relationship between reception staff and welfare recipients in two French benefit offices. The book builds upon Lipsky's (1980) work on street-level bureaucracy and draws upon the sociology of Bourdieu and Goffman. The fieldwork was conducted in 1995 and included around 900 observations of face-to-face encounters between reception staff and their clients. These observations were complemented by formal interviews with 22 staff and 120 interviews with welfare recipients.

The book focuses on bureaucratic encounters at the reception desk of family welfare offices. The desk is symbolic of the divide between the state and the people. Bureaucratic encounters are part of the administration's daily grind – a world apparently made up of anonymity and routine. However, the author dispels the false dichotomy that often characterizes interpretations of bureaucratic interactions. Impersonal bureaucrats and standard clients do not exist: 'only social agents with individual personalities who, within certain conditions and limits, are required to play the role of impersonal or standardised bureaucrat and client' (p. 3). The book is divided into three parts.

Part I explores the relationship between reception staff and their clients. Dubois shows that the relationship is unequal because the organization's role as a paying body induces claimant deference. The claimant's lack of knowledge of institutional mechanisms sustains this inequality. Nevertheless, he shows that staff are aware of their power and may be uncomfortable with it. Dubois concludes that the function of the reception desk is not only to appease rancour and impose self-control on the client but is also a mechanism for reasserting supposedly universally shared values.

Part II examines the roles, identities and experiences of reception staff. The ability of staff to take part in the definition of their role is facilitated by the relative isolation of reception staff within the administrative organization; the random manner of their recruitment; the

absence of preliminary training; and their loosely defined function. This leads to a compromise between institutional logics and personal dispositions. Dubois shows how the personal dispositions of agents vary, as does the priority accorded to protecting the recipient's rights and exposing fraud.

He finds that a degraded staff position (due to growing workloads, complexity and the dead-end nature of the job) mirrors the social decline of those seeking help. Staff disillusionment is compounded by the limitations of the job which prevent the relief of the misery of welfare recipients. Staff members tend to react by self-withdrawal or becoming more involved in their work. This phenomenon may apply to many street-level bureaucrats, as 'the state's left hand' tends to be more dedicated when the right hand resigns (Bourdieu *et al.* 1999: 183). Staff have to reconcile the opposite demands of self-preservation (using a bureaucratic identity) and self-exposure (demonstrating empathy). Too much of the former does not fit the reality of the job, whereas too much of the latter undermines the well-being of staff.

Part III focuses on the broader institutional and policy systems. A particular focus is on flaws such as computer-related problems and other irregularities which can threaten the relationship between the two parties. He argues that injustices are much more problematic for staff because they highlight the contradictions of the system that they apply and thus the legitimacy of applying it even though it is key to their position.

Dubois is less sure-footed when he turns his attention to the motivations and behaviours of recipients. We do not gain an in-depth understanding of their lives and how this shapes their interactions with the bureaucrat. Rather, the focus is on various strategies deployed by individuals, such as docility, silence and defiance. Similarly, violence is viewed in an instrumental way, i.e. as a strategy of the last resort of the underprivileged or a mode of self-assertion. However, this seems to be at best a partial explanation of the violence blighting welfare offices. He goes on to argue that the desk has become a place of self-expression for those deprived of the main venues of identification and social relationships: work and family. This is an interesting proposition but ultimately is unconvincing, given that recipients are not drawn from several consecutive generations of unemployment and it is likely that many retain some contact with the labour market by engaging in pre-arious forms of work.

Much has changed since the original fieldwork was conducted. The pressures placed on frontline staff have grown exponentially. The economic crisis and neo-liberalism have led to rapidly growing caseloads in many welfare offices and the growing immiseration of the poor. The culture of welfare organizations in many western countries has been transformed from a primary concern with determining benefit eligibility towards more personal conversations about clients' lives and behaviours. Meyers *et al.* (1998) encapsulate this as a change from 'people sustaining' activities towards a 'people transforming' role. Frontline workers have also had to increasingly focus on outcomes and contribute towards the realization of organizational targets. Fletcher (2011) argues

that discretion remains an enduring feature of frontline practice and may be cherished in times of low morale for its ability to allow staff to maintain their self-esteem. Nevertheless, this is a first-rate account of the treatment of the poor in French welfare offices and provides an excellent comparison to similar US studies.

References

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