

The bureaucrat and the poor: Encounters in French Welfare Offices,
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Review by Merlijn van Hulst, *Critical Policy Studies*,
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The bureaucrat and the poor offers what could be called an ethnography of a work practice: receiving people at a French family benefit office. The book is a translation from French into English. The original, *La Vie au Guichet* (literally: Life at the desk), was published in 1999 based on fieldwork which took place in 1995. The fieldwork is a good example of what various political scientists have argued for recently: getting up close and personal with a group of people to understand the way they do whatever it is they are doing (see the essays in Schatz ed. 2009 and Rhodes et al. 2007). Dubois really immersed himself in the field. Fieldwork included around 900 observations of face-to-face encounters between reception agents and their clients in two benefit offices. The observations were complemented by formal interviews with 22 agents and 120 short interviews with clients in the waiting rooms. Theoretically Vincent Dubois builds on Michael Lipsky's work (1980) and various French authors who have written on the topic. It also draws on the sociology of Irving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu. The result is a rich and at times complex narrative about the practices of and people in a street-level bureaucracy.

The book has three parts. In the first, the social conditions of the administrative relationship, Dubois focuses on the asymmetrical relationship between the reception agent and the clients. In the second, the agent's two bodies, Dubois examines the agents' paths, practices and roles. Here we learn about the agents as both bureaucrats with a formal function and individuals with a personal background, skills and dispositions. The final part, questioning the institutional order, looks at the failures and reconsideration of the preservation of institutional law and order. Here we read, for example, about the way agents deal with flaws in the system of administrative processing.

Dubois starts by explaining how the practice of the reception agents has altered as a result of changing conditions that made their work more difficult. For one, an increasing number of people entered the system, and with increasingly pressing demands. Prior to the 1990s, clients were mostly well-integrated mothers who came to inquire about potential additional income. But halfway through the 1990s the disadvantaged (society's outsiders, unemployed migrants, etc.) are coming in to apply for income to meet minimum needs. In addition, they are far from homogeneous, making the work necessary to address their needs more difficult. On top of that, those who come to the office most often, have in common that the benefits have a crucial importance in their survival. Overall, multiple forms of suffering converge at the desk. This contextualization enables the reader to get a sense of the dilemmas and tensions that the reception agents are dealing with at the time of the study.

The asymmetry of the relationship of the two parties who meet at the desk is big. Reception agents act on the basis of the authority granted to them by the institution they work for while the client, in principle, is no more than 'an applicant'. Dubois, echoing Robert Merton, cleverly notes that the clients' "limited knowledge of institutional functioning confers resources onto the reception agents that are vastly disproportionate compared to their

objective position in the institution” (p. 49).

Clients generally come to the desk without the capacity to talk the institutional language that fills their files. There is thus a double dependency. The clients do not just depend on the money that they receive from the agency, they also depend on the agent for turning their natural talk into institutional prose and accepting their demands as valid ones. The interaction between the agents and their visitors then can be understood in big part as the regulation of behavior. Even if the two offices studied are somewhat different in their treatment of clients, in both, the agents do everything possible to prevent annoying behavior and violence in the office. The spatial set-up of the offices is such that the encounter at the desk does not become a public spectacle. Indeed, after the agent picks up somebody from the waiting room, the person is expected to behave according to the norms of the office. At the desk the reception agents often act as ‘moral entrepreneurs’ (p. 69). A ‘call to order’ can be directed at clothing, language, cleanliness, general attitude, etc. As “detectives” the agents look for things that are not coherent in what the clients tell them even though the agents do their best to make sure that the clients get what they are legally entitled to. At the same time, what the agents tell their clients is hardly questioned by the latter. The clients themselves, however, are not passive victims of the institution without room to manoeuvre. Even if they are often unsuccessful, they have their own strategies during the interaction to get what they came for. These range from the personalization of the relationship beyond the control of the agent to the occasional violence.

According to Dubois’ argument, reception agents are both bureaucrats applying rules to cases and individuals with their own history, skills and dispositions. This double identity causes tensions but it also enables the agents to deal with their clients effectively, because the agents can, at any moment during an encounter, choose between the neutral language of the bureaucracy and the more personal language of ordinary life. The desk then functions as both a boundary and a link to the outside world. At the desk, clients are “interrogated” so to speak, but it is also a place where people can tell their story and be heard. It is especially this more social function of the encounter – as opposed to the official use of the institution - that has become more important over the years and has made reception work more like social work. The difference between the agents’ practices is the result of the loose definition of their function on one hand, and the differences between their own history, skills and dispositions on the other. The loose definition is not just related to the discretion agents have in making their judgment of a case; it applies more broadly to what the agent does at the desk. The absence of formal training for deskwork contributes to the lack of formalization of the work practice. When it comes to differences between the agents, what stands out most is the question of how involved the agents become in the cases they deal with. In the end, Dubois argues, in line with Lipsky, that to be successful at the desk an agent has to be able to reconcile the opposite demands of self-preservation (using the bureaucratic identity) and self-exposure (showing involvement and empathy). Too much of the former does not fit the reality of the job; too much of the latter endangers the wellbeing of the agent.

In his book we find many descriptions that contribute to the verisimilitude of what we read. But it is perhaps the combination of observation and interviews on both sides of the desk where the book makes the most interesting contribution. The personal histories of the various actors make the descriptions of encounters stronger. This combination of perspectives is also why Dubois’ book is a strong contribution to the literature on street-level bureaucracy and people processing. What Dubois shows is how the workers struggle with clients over what their case is and what strategies they use to come to decisions. Like Maynard-Moody and Musheno

(2003), Dubois asks us to pay attention to the stories and identities that are both brought to and shaped in the welfare office: “Bureaucratic encounters are where identities get a new beginning, when personal life stories are told and, in some aspects come to life in the privacy of an administration desk” (p. 2). Even if, in the end, agents make well-documented cases and a decision is made, much more is said and done during the encounter. It is the documentation and analysis of this additional work that makes this book special.

In general, Dubois paints a critical picture of what happens at the desk of two welfare offices. To be sure, many encounters nowadays will take digital form and the processing of clients will probably rely more on filling in screens with more limited options than in 1995. Nevertheless, there will be plenty of encounters to observe, especially in crisis times when the number of people in trouble will increase while the resources available to help them decrease.

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