

Social Agencies for Children and Families as Street Level Bureaucracies. A Case Study.

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1 Street level bureaucracies: the theoretical framework

Social workers in public welfare services can be considered, according to Michael Lipsky theorization, *street level bureaucrats*. Lipsky (1980) defines as street level bureaucrats all public service workers who interact directly with citizens and have substantial discretion in the execution of their work. They are professionals who grant access to State programs and provide services within these programs; but they also operate in an environment where resources are chronically inadequate to the task they are asked to perform, where goals expectations tend to be ambiguous, conflicting or vague and where the demand for services tends to increase constantly to meet the supply. The working conditions of street level bureaucrats are unavoidably uncertain: they are regularly confronted with dilemmas that are not just ethical but also organizational. Due to this situation, *discretion* represents for them, simultaneously, a crucial tool to work with in very complicated situations - where the human dimension is essential - and an important option in order to solve or simplify the mentioned organizational contradictions. In the first case discretion may be synonymous of professional autonomy; in the second it may represent a strategy to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, often through the rationing of services (which may even mean autonomous reduction of the level of services).

2 Literature review

Lipsky's professional discretion can be considered a key issue in contemporary social work: this perspective has emerged as a significant point of debate in the analysis of the impact of managerial reforms of public services in Britain (Baldwin 2000). Many studies have been developed to verify the extension of discretion in the professional practice of social workers in the recent years. The conclusions that have been mainly reached tend to confirm that professional discretion has not been cancelled by the new organizational models (Winter 2005, Ellis 2007, Evans/Harris 2006; Evans 2010) of the Public Administrations. Managerialization is anyway reducing it in certain sectors and is producing professional reactions that may affect the quality of the services delivered (Broadhurst et al. 2010).

Other authors have worked on the definition of different responses of street level social workers to dilemmas and uncertainty: Musil et al. suggest that some social workers may develop a specific culture of avoiding dilemmas in order to simplify working conditions but stresses, at the same time, on the fact that there are social workers that handle their dilemmas by means of changing those working conditions that provoke it. He also underlines the key differences between the changing policies and avoiding policies at the street level. Social workers trying to avoid dilemmas tend to develop ways of interacting with clients that enable them to avoid stressful choices between irreconcilable possibilities. The actors of changing policies, on the other hand, tend to work on changing unsuitable working conditions and try to remove circumstances that provoke dilemmas and contradictions in their eyes. Musil et al.

(2004) conclude, accordingly with Lipsky, that examples of avoiding behaviours are more frequent in literature whereas stories of changing policies from the bottom levels are more rare but do exist. Recently, Michael Lipsky himself, in editing a new edition of his main publication, has analysed the position of child protection social workers stressing on the persistence of organizational complexity in work situations but underlining the fact that street level workers do not just adopt rationing strategies but also look for innovative options.

3 The Italian situation

Some of the mentioned works focus on the dilemma discretion yes/discretion no and describe a social and political situation quite different from the Italian reality, where the process of managerialization has not been effectively implemented, yet, in many parts of the Public Administration. In the last decade the social work sector in the Italian welfare system has been, on the other hand, influenced by the neoliberal social policies more through heavy cuts in the budgets at the national and at the local level (where the interventions are mainly delivered) than through managerialization : it basically means that discretion still exists but is strongly affected, for social workers, by lack of options and resources (consistently with Lipsky position) more than by strict procedures and organizational constraints. Consequently, it is quite likely that there are new complex professional dilemmas to be faced in everyday work: for this reason the studies and reflections of researchers like Musil et al. or Broadhurst are somehow more connected with the situation that will be investigated and the approach that will be used. Professional discretion, in this organizational and political situation, needs first of all to be specifically defined and the theoretical efforts of these researchers in analysing this concept will be quite useful .

4 The research project

The research project I am developing does not intend to verify if discretion subsists in the Italian social services, but it is trying to investigate how social workers now define and consider it in reference to the professional responsibilities that they have. Is discretion (in terms of autonomy) something still positive and constitutive of the professional role or is it becoming increasingly a kind of trap that forces them to manage, at the bottom level, budget cuts and other reductions of services on behalf of the political level much more frequently than before (and than Lipsky expected) ? Do social workers often implement rationing strategies in everyday work? And are they aware of it, if it happens?

In order to respond to these questions I will conduct a case study in which I will analyse the dimensions and quality of discretion of social workers in an Italian social agency for children and families, paying specific attention to the phase of initial assessment and of the definition of interventions. I will use both qualitative and quantitative methods analysing available quantitative data and collecting the social workers views through in depth interviews and focus groups. At the preliminary level there will be also a documental analysis of laws and regulations in order to detect in them potential ambiguities and conflicting goals. To carry out research on this topic may require the promotion of self questioning and reminding workers of unpleasant circumstances. Baldwin (2000) suggests to handle this problem not hiding the researchers findings to the social worker but by means of participative research, which should enable the researcher to co-operate closely with street level workers and be even directly involved in solving their problems. I will definitely try to follow this recommendation.

The case study approach should allow to investigate deeply this phenomenon (discretion) in its real context, relying on multiple sources of evidence. I consider this very important for a

case where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin 2008).

The preliminary level of the research, with the documental analysis of laws and regulations, has already been carried out: it has emphasized that ambiguities and over-generalized statements (mainly in the Regional laws) are clearly existing in the official documents that are referring points for the social workers on field. This first finding confirms one of the elements emphasized by Lipsky in his theorization.

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