

Fabio Cappello

Doctoral School in Social Sciences - Comparative Social Work
University of Trento

f.cappellorizzarello@unitn.it

SOCIAL AGENCIES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AS STREET LEVEL BUREAUCRACIES – A CASE STUDY

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 them; but they also operate in an environment where resources are chronically inadequate to the task they are asked to perform, where goals expectations of the agencies tend to be ambiguous, vague or conflicting and where the demand for services tend to increase constantly to meet the supply. Due to this situation, discretion represents for them, simultaneously, a crucial tool to work with in situations very complicated, 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.

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 (Evans 2010). 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) 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 2010).

2. The Italian situation

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 implemented effectively in many parts of the public administration, yet. 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): 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 organizational innovations and constraints.

3. The research project

The research project I'm 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 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 budget cuts and other reductions of services on behalf of the political level much more frequently than before (and than Lipsky had expected) ?

In order to respond to this question I will realize a case study in which I will try to analyse the dimensions and quality of discretion of social workers in an Italian social agency for children and families, paying attention to the phase of initial assessment and to the definition of interventions. I will use both qualitative and quantitative methods analysing available quantitative data and

collecting the social workers' s 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.

The case study approach should allows to investigate deeply this phenomenon (discretion) in its real context, relying on multiple sources of evidence. I consider it very important for a case – like this - where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin 2008).

References

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