Chapter Five: Bureaucracy and Social Work

In this chapter we will:
- Consider the importance of the Bureaucracy in modern societies.
- Discuss the ways different theorists have sought to understand the impact of bureaucracy on ethical practice in Social Work, looking at *pessimistic* and *optimistic* accounts of this.
- Consider the rise of "Managerialism" and it effect on Social Work practice in the context of the shift toward neo-Liberal conceptions of service provision and the importance of professional discretion in decision-making.

> In a modern state, the actual ruler is necessarily and unavoidably the bureaucracy
>
> Max Weber (in Parkin, 2002:87-88)

> The main concern of too many social work managers today is the control of budgets rather than the welfare of service users, while worker-client relationships are increasingly characterised by control and supervision rather than care.
>
> Social Work Manifesto: 2006

Social Workers: Prisoners of Bureaucracy?

In July 2010, the UK Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) carried out their first ever survey of Children and Families Social Work, entitled "Safeguarding and Looked After Children" (Ofsted: 2010). One of the most significant findings of this report emerged when the Social Workers interviewed were asked whether they felt that had "time to work as effectively as they would wish to with children and young people". 64% of respondents said that they did not, with one respondent quoted as saying that:

> Workloads, expectations and demands on social workers are unmanageable. The majority of us are working long hours to simply keep up. This issue of long hours is 'hidden' due to the expectations of management and the ethos of disciplinaries. We are frightened to say that we cannot manage our workloads (2010:13).

On further questioning of those 64% who felt they were unable to work effectively as they wished to with their service users, the main reason given for this was the amount of bureaucratic administration they were required to carry out, either in the form of paperwork or recording information electronically (2010:14). These findings were reported on the BBC News website with the heading "Bureaucracy Hampers Social Workers Survey Says", and in doing so, came to form part of a wider discussion about the way many public sector workers, particularly the police as well as many others, feel they are spending more time 'doing paperwork than doing the actual job'. This is not the first time these concerns have been expressed in research into Social Work practice. In 2007 an almost identical concern was expressed through a survey of Social Workers carried out by *Community Care* Magazine. In a report entitled "Bureaucracy: Social Workers Bogged down by Paperwork", this survey found that "three-quarters of social workers spend more than 40% of their time on administrative work, including more than one-third who spend more than 60% of their working lives on administration". So is it the case that Social Workers now are trapped in a quagmire of bureaucracy - or have things always been this way to a greater or lesser degree? How much is this a new concern and how much have these issues always been a tension in Social Work? The author of the previous article, Lauren Revans, makes the point that Social Work has always entailed a significant degree of administration, and she cites studies of Social Work in the 1960s and 1970s which she says illustrated that Social Workers then spent only about one fifth of their time doing direct work. Rather than seeing the problem as bureaucracy as such, she suggests that what has changed is

the nature of Social Workers administrative activities, where Social Workers see these as solely related to demands from managers in the sense of begin unrelated to what they see as their job – which is doing work on behalf of service users. She cites Ray Jones, former chair of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) who says: "It's not so much about spending time with clients - I don't think that has changed. What I do think has happened is that more non-client time has been distorted. More of it is now spent on bureaucracy than doing things on behalf of clients." (Revans, Community Care, 2007).

These recent examples illustrate the vexed relationship between the "helping people" and the "bureaucracy" aspects of Social Work. Whilst this is a tension that we would suggest has been around as long as Social Work itself, the form which this tension is taking may be becoming more acute for very particular reasons. It is these issues which form the focus of this chapter on Bureaucracy and Social Work. We begin this chapter by trying to define bureaucracy, and our starting point here is the sociological writings of Max Weber, discussed earlier in Chapter 3 on Power. Weber's work remains a crucial landmark in thinking about the significance of bureaucracy in modern industrial capitalist societies and for this reason it is important to understand his contribution. After outlining his ideas we then turn to one of the key ambiguities in his arguments, which concern the question of who the bureaucracy is responsible to. This is a question which impinges directly on Social Work, and in particular the issue, which has have been discussed

previously, of who Social Work is 'answerable' to, both in a practical organisational sense, as well as ethically.

This leads us to the question of how much Social Workers are controlled by the bureaucracy, or how much space the professional role gives Social Workers to themselves define what their role and tasks actually are. We approach this by considering the arguments of two different schools of thought, which we broadly categorise as *pessimistic* and *optimistic*. Firstly we consider the arguments put forward by Margaret Rhodes in her book Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work Practice (1991). We class these as *pessimistic* in the sense they she sees an inherent contradiction between the needs of the bureaucracy itself, and the needs of those whom it is supposed to serve, which she argues are almost always resolved in favour of the former. For Rhodes, the demands of the bureaucracy are what undermines Social Work as an ethical enterprise. The other side of this story, what can be characterised as *optimistic* arguments, follow the work of Micheal Lipsky in his book Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in the Public Services (1980). Lipsky's distinctive argument is that while policy makers and managers never stop seeking to define and control what front line professionals actually do, the very nature of the front line role means that they can never fully achieve this. Lipsky can be characterised as an optimist in the sense he sees *discretion* as ever present in the work of front line professionals, who are forever in the business of inventing, improvising and working in, through, around and even against the substantive policy objectives of those higher up in the bureaucratic food chain.

The next part of our discussion brings us right up to the present and concerns the issue of whether contemporary Social Work is now subject to new types of bureaucratic control. These have been characterised by John Clarke as "Managerialism" and concern "the forms of organisational control and direction, and the relations between leaders, staff and customers involved in the production and delivery of welfare outcomes" (Clarke, 2000:1). Clarke links the rise of Managerialism with the impact of Neo-liberalism on state policy, and this continues the discussion of the significance of Neo-liberalism's impact on Social Work from the previous chapter. We conclude by asking whether these new forms of buearucratic control are a key issue in the often voiced dissatisfaction and frustration by Social workers about what the way they feel recent changes are so detrimental to the job, as exemplified at the beginning of the chapter.

Defining Bureaucracy

What is a bureaucracy?   The sociologist Max Weber is hugely significant for being one of the first social theorists to talk about why bureaucracy has become such a pervasive feature of modern society as well as to define its central operating principles. Writing at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century Weber was seeking to understand the phenomenon of bureaucracy; what it was and why it was that they had become so important. His key argument was that the rise of the bureaucracy needed to be understood as a consequence of the rational, calculating spirit

of capitalism, which was leading to the emergence of new kinds of social organisations which were called upon to deal efficiently and equitably with large numbers of people. In our previous reference to the work Max Weber in Chapter 3, we talked about the way he characterised modern societies as based on what he called "Legal-rational domination"; a form of authority in which authority is not the possession of an individual, but is invested in a person through their being the holder of a particular office. Bureaucracy was for Weber the most typical organisational form to develop out of a society based on these legal-rational principles. This was because unlike traditional or charismatic power where power was seen to reside in the person themselves, bureaucratic authority is vested not in the person but in *the rules*. Frank Parkin explains that for Weber:

> The hallmark of bureaucratic domination is its studied impartiality. Its officials act without prejudice or passion, applying the same rules to all irrespective of rank or condition. The bureaucrat moreover is not the ultimate fount of the rule. Unlike the traditional or charismatic leader, the official in the modern state are themselves a servant of a higher political authority – typically an elected government and its ministers (Parkin, 2002:88)

Weber on Bureaucracy

Weber defined the features of the bureaucracy as follows:
1. That it was a continuous organisation bound by rules.
2. That each individual in the bureaucracy occupied a specified sphere of competence.
3. That the organisation of offices follows a principle of hierarchy.
4. That the conduct of an office is based on the acquisition of technical skills.
5. That in the rational type of organisation it is a matter of principle that the people who administer the bureaucracy must be separated from ownership of the means of production.
6. That the administrators of the bureaucracy cannot appropriate their official positions.
7. Administrative acts, decisions and rules are recorded in writing.

(From Craib, I Classical Social Theory (1997:139-140)

While the centrality of impartial rules was crucial to Weber's view of the bureaucracy, he also saw the role of the bureaucrat in a large organisation as representing a particular way of working. In his 1914 work <u>Economy and Society</u> Weber he characterised this as follows:

> The individual bureaucrat cannot squirm out of the apparatus into which he [sic] has been harnessed…In the great majority of cases he [sic] is only a small cog in a ceaselessly moving mechanism which prescribes to him [sic] an essential fixed route of march. The individual bureaucrat is, above all, forged to the common interest of all the functionaries in the perpetuation of the apparatus and the persistence of its rationally exercised domination.
>
> The ruled, for their part, cannot dispense with or replace the bureaucratic apparatus once it exists, for it rests upon expert training, a functional specialisation of work, and an attitude set on habitual virtuosity in the mastery of a single yet methodologically integrated function. If the apparatus stops working, or if its work is interrupted by force, chaos results, which is difficult to master by improvised replacements from among the governed…Increasingly the material fate of the masses depends on the continuous and correct functioning of the ever more bureaucratic organisations of private capitalism, and the idea of eliminating them becomes more and more utopian (Weber in Kalberg, 2005:214-215)

The point Weber is making here is that as a hierarchically structured organisation, bureaucracies define not just the remit and activities, but also the thinking, of those who work within them. It is important to note Weber's aim in discussing bureaucracy here was not to criticise them or to object to their existence; rather his objective was to argue that given the development of large scale societies which had to process huge numbers of individuals, alongside the demands for rationality and efficiency in these dealings, the development of the bureaucracy was *inevitable*.   In the above quote Weber also notes another key feature of the bureaucracy; that it is based on the acquisition of technical expertise, and Social Work is just one of many examples of this. Weber saw society's need for bureaucracy as linked to the way we come to be dependent on bureaucratic expertise. Indeed when people complain about "bureaucracy" and "red tape", often what they are complaining about is not bureaucracy as such, but about bureaucracies which do their job badly. This becomes hugely inconvenient because of the extent to which we rely on them, and in that sense Weber argued that the technical mastery of the bureaucratic office was invaluable to the smooth running of society. As the quote above demonstrates he thoroughly rejected the idea that a complex modern society could ever do without bureaucracy, however frustrating we may find our dealings with them.

After setting out these arguments mid-way throughout his career, toward the end of his life Weber came to see the development of the bureaucracy in a less positive light. While he never shifted from his view that they were an inevitable feature of modern societies, he used the memorable phrase "the iron cage of bureaucracy" as means of expressing his concern about the vast impersonality of the bureaucratic organisation. He was particularly concerned with the way a mechanistic loyalty to rules and impersonal specialisation could act to stifle individual creativity, independence and initiative. He was also concerned about the way they had grown and argued that bureaucracy was absorbing everything - religion, music, art, war, law, education and family life had all entered the "iron cage"; though it must be noted that Weber would be rolling in his grave if he were to see the extent of their expansion throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century! However this image of the "iron cage" remains significant for the way it expresses a particular view of the modern rational world, dominated by a ceaseless search for efficiency. Weber saw this as a world in which charm, wonder and awe had disappeared, and he concluded his work on bureaucracy by noting that:

> So much more terrible is the idea that the world should be filled with nothing but those cogs who cling to a little post and strive for a greater one….The central and further question is not how we further and accelerate it but what we have to set against this machinery, in order to preserve a remnant of humanity from this parcelling-out of the soul, and from this exclusive rule of bureaucratic life-ideals (in Pampel: 111).

It should be apparent from this brief account of his ideas that Weber has bequeathed us a somewhat ambiguous view of the bureaucracy. On one hand he argued strongly that there is no alternative to bureaucratic forms of organisation in modern, complex, urbanised and economically advanced

societies. How else would the state and government keep track of the multiple activities of its citizens without some form of bureaucratic organisation? However the comments he made about the stifling impact these could have both on individuals and on society as a whole suggest that though they may be inevitable, this did not make them a particularly positive feature of modern society. The sociologist Bryan Turner has noted that another key ambivalence in Weber's work concerns the legitimacy of the norms which being followed by those bureaucracies. Turner argues that is one thing for Weber to insist on the inevitability of bureaucracy as a means by which modern societies need to organised, but it is another thing to say what the rationale of this bureaucracy is or should be (1996:358). This is a question with substantial implications for Social Work, since Social Work agencies are bureaucracies with the capacity to intervene powerfully in the lives of individuals and families. Think of the process of removing a child from their neglectful parents; this is a rationale which claims to be about rendering assistance to a vulnerable child, yet this process may be, and often is, perceived in entirely the opposite terms by those on the receiving end. It is one thing to say that we as a society would like such a bureaucracy to protect vulnerable children – it is another thing to say that we are happy with the way this or that organisation is undertaking this. Hence the question of how bureaucracies treat people is therefore a crucial question when thinking about Social Work as an ethically based activity. This leads us to the question of how we make sense of and conceptualise the actual day-to-day operation of policy and procedures for Social Work in the context of bureaucratic organisations, and it is to these issues that we now turn.

Understanding Life in the Bureaucracy: Pessimists and Optimists

While most books on Social Work ethics contain extensive discussion of different ethical theories, there is by comparison much less discussion of what we could thing of as 'real world' of ethical decision making; which is invariably located in the context of the bureaucratic agencies within which most Social Workers are employed. Margaret Rhodes book Ethical Dilemmas In Social Work Practice (1991) is significant for the way she offers an extremely forthright discussion of bureaucracy which can be regarded as one of the most distinctive contributions to this debate within the Social Work literature. In the opening pages of her chapter on Bureaucracy Rhodes argues that in a world in which public bureaucracies increasingly shape Social Work practice "individual workers often seen caught up by organisational forces beyond their control", finding their work "determined more by institutional rules than by client needs". She argues that in spite of the attempts by well meaning people to improve the functioning of bureaucracy, the front line Social Worker "must continue to make her decisions despite inadequate resources, case overloads, excessive paper work, and a labyrinth of rules, all of which contribute to a sense of helplessness and hopelessness" (1991:133-4). While these sentiments are ones that many Social Workers would agree with, the key question for our purposes here is to ask why this is. According to Rhodes, the fundamental problem is that:

> bureaucracies, by virtue of the kind of decisions they promote,
> undermine our ordinary concepts of morality. In particular, *human*

> *service* organisations undermine our moral concepts, because of their contradictory nature; their *stated* goal is to help clients, yet their actual operation serves the interest of preserving the bureaucracy. When this conflict is not recognised, workers often function as if their day to day decisions do not have ethical dimensions (1991:134).

Hence for Rhodes the key issue is that there is an inherent contradiction between the ethical impulse of the Social Work professional as an individual, and the demands of the bureaucracy upon that individual.

Rhodes returns to Weber as part of her discussion of the basis of bureaucracy, and while she deploys the same categories for describing the bureaucracy as he does, she fundamentally rejects the idea that his description of the bureaucracy could simply be an objective description. The very features which Weber sees as those which allow the bureaucracy to work effectively, Rhodes characterises as the key factors which *undermine ethical decision making* in Social Work. To take for example the question of impartial decision making. While Weber sees as a central feature of bureaucracy, Rhodes argues that this brings about a "double standard" in that rules allow people to be "freed from the demands of their personal moralities". Consider an instance a situation where a Social Worker may personally believe that a particular service user is in need of support, but is also aware that the agency's eligibility criteria specify this at a particular level which that service user does not meet. Because the rules predominate over "personal morality", the Social Worker dealing with this situation will feel that it is morally legitimate to not offer any further service to that service user because they do not meet the criteria for this support. The Social Worker, Rhodes argues, is able to see this decision as morally legitimate because they:

> …do not hold [themselves] *personally* responsible for the action, because the choice is made *impersonally* by the organisation. The result of this split between personal and organisational morality is that an employee can dismiss general ethical considerations from evaluation of job performance (1991:137).

At the core of Rhodes' argument is a powerfully expressed view that bureaucracies *through being bureaucracies* undermine an ethically based approach, as they are inherently based on a split between personal moralities and the rules and procedures of the agency concerned.

Another of the features of the bureaucracy outlined by Weber is the specialisation of particular roles. Rhodes also sees this as undermining an ethically based approach in Social Work as it allows workers to only see themselves as responsible for the one part of the process which is their particular role, and in doing so they fail to consider the impact of different interventions on service users overall: "Workers and agencies may spend considerable energy denying responsibility for a case…with the result that no-one will take primary responsibility" (1991:141). An example of this could be a person with Learning Disabilities and additional Mental Health issues which neither a Social Services Mental Health or Learning Disabilities team is willing to take responsibility for. While some might argue that the way to deal with this is to generate guidelines which specify what those agencies should do to avoid this happening, Rhodes argues that this is to miss the point about the way these forms of behaviour are inherent in bureaucracy. She concludes her indictment of the bureaucracy stating that:

It may be argued that the failings of human service organisations do not result from bureaucratic structure, but from inadequate resources combined with increased demand. Certainly in this decade of new cutbacks to social programmes and higher caseloads, characteristics like impersonality of work and objectification of the client are magnified. These bureaucratic features, however, characterise human services whatever the political climate and are basic to bureaucracies as they are currently structured (1991:144).

It is on the basis of this account that we have classified Rhodes approach to the role of bureaucracy in Social Work as *pessimistic*. It is important to note, based on her concluding statement, that she is not just criticising particular procedures, which may be seen as unfair or discriminatory, or particular organisations, which may do their job badly or treat service users oppressively. Her account locates the problem as *inherent in bureaucracy itself*. There is no doubt that many of the examples Rhodes gives will resonate with many Social Workers; but the question we need to think about here is whether these issues are inherent in bureaucracy itself, or are consequences of bureaucracies which function badly, or treat people badly because they are shaped by powerful forces external to the bureaucracy. We want to now to examine Rhodes central arguments that the core of what is wrong with bureaucracy is this split between personal morality and bureaucratic rules through a case study.

Patience's Placement

Patience is a Social Work student who has been living in the UK for 6 years after arriving from Zimbabwe as an Asylum Seeker and having now obtained the right to remain in the UK. She worked as a teacher before leaving Zimbabwe, and was inspired to train as a Social Worker after being helped by Social Workers in an Asylum Team. Prior to coming on the Social Work course Patience worked for several years in a residential home for older people, and she has also been involved in assisting other Zimbabweans who had recently arrived in the UK with practical and emotional support issues in work that she organised through her church.

For her first Social Work placement she joins a fostering team, and while she is very happy to have this placement, she is deeply shocked to realise not just that the team she works with places children with gay or lesbian couples, but that she may be herself expected to work with these people. The situation becomes clear to her after she undertakes a visit to a gay male couple with her Practice Assessor, Neelam. The couple whom she meets, Don and Warren, have done some short term fostering with the Local Authority, which has gone extremely well. They are now interested in being assessed as potential adoptive parents. For Patience the visit to their house was extremely challenging in itself, and while she feels nothing personally against Don and Warren, the visit has raised a series of issues she needs desperately to discuss with Neelam.

We noted earlier that a key assumption in Margaret Rhodes' argument about the relationship between Social Work and bureaucracy is that individual morality represents a superior form of morality than agency policy and procedure. While this may be true in many instances, it is not universally true. This assumption, which is central to Rhodes' arguments, has been explicitly challenged by the sociologist Paul Du Gay in his book In Praise of Bureaucracy (2000). Du Gay characterises the position taken up by Margaret Rhodes as expressive of:

> a thoroughly romantic belief that the principle of a full and free exercise of personal capacities is akin to a moral absolute for human conduct…[Within such a view] the specialisations of function and conduct attendant upon bureaucratic organisation are represented as introducing a violent 'split' into individual subjective and social being. The instrumental 'spirit of bureaucracy' makes fragmented…that which should be organic and 'whole'. It is because bureaucracy fosters only rational and instrumental human faculties…that it must be seen as a fatally flawed vehicle for the realisation of a moral personality (2000:3).

Du Gay is arguing here that it is simply romantic to propose that instead of a bureaucratic structure for Social Work, Social Workers should be able to allocate resources to all service users on the basis of what they as individuals feel is appropriate – how would such an organisation function? Du Gay is suggesting, following Weber, that one of the great advantages of regulation is that it ensures consistency, and without this we would lack criteria for establishing what we considered was fair toward service users. He is also questioning the assumption that it is inherently unethical to take a decision which deploys one set of values in one setting and to use another set of values in another. Rather than this something of an absolute distinction between ethical versus unethical decision making, as Rhodes suggests, Du Gay is suggesting that it depends on the context.

In terms of our Case Study above, imagine that after some time that Patience came to accept that in terms of her role as a Social Worker, she did need to be able to consider the qualities of foster carers and adopters regardless of sexual orientation. While such a shift would involve something of a split between her role as a Social Worker and her life outside of Social Work, is it right to characterise this as being based on an abandonment of personal responsibility or a rejection of ethical practice within Social Work (which would

be the implication of Rhodes arguments)? Du Gay is suggesting that because

we live in a world which has "different socio-ethical comportments", meaning

that different things are expected of us in different situations, that the

recognition of this is not the same as a distinction between ethical versus

unethical behaviour. Neither can it be simply understand as a 'split' between

a concept of personal responsibility versus an acceptance of purely technical

rationality (2000:3). In other words he is saying that it in a complex and

diverse world, it is commonplace that we make ethical decisions using

particular criteria in a particular situations and these may be different from

other criteria we may use in other situations, but that doing this does not

necessarily make our decision making inherently unethical – again that would

depend on the situation we were in.

Indeed Du Gay takes this argument about bureaucracy and ethics one stage

further and suggests that rather than being dominated by a technical

rationality and thereby devoid of ethics, that bureaucracy needs to be

understood as an *ethical domain in its own right*:

> The ethical attributes of the 'good' bureaucrat - adherence of sub- and
> superordination, commitment to the purposes of the office and so forth
> – do not represent an incompetent subtraction from a 'complete' or 'all-
> round' conception of personhood. Rather they should be represented
> as a positive moral and ethical achievement in their own right. They
> represent the product of particular ethical techniques and practices
> through which individuals develop the disposition and capacity to
> conduct themselves according to the ethos of the bureaucratic office
> (2000:4).

To put this point into the context of our previous example; one of the most

important things which Patience needs to learn as a Social Work student, is

precisely the question of *how to operate* within the bureaucratic office environment – the things she needs to do immediately and the things she can leave to do later, the things which are irrelevant and the things which must be followed up and pursued, the people she needs to develop a relationship with in order to get a particular process happening, the distinction between those procedures which must be followed to the letter and those where there is a certain room to manoeuvre. Du Gay is arguing that it is entirely mistaken to see the acquisition of these skills as involving a diminution of our own personal moralities - instead he argues we need to see the acquisition of these as crucial "moral and ethical achievements" which will allow Patience to achieve what she has come into Social Work to do – help people.

So far we have set out what we have called the *pessimistic* view of the bureaucracy through looking at the work of Margaret Rhodes, as well as considering a critique of that, looking at the work of Paul Du Gay. Now we want to look at what could be called the *optimistic* accounts of bureaucracy. As noted above, these accounts are optimistic not in the sense that they suggest that everything that happens within bureaucracies is good – it is rather that they suggest that people within bureaucracies cannot be thought of as simply controlled by those organisations - but rather that people often have a certain room to manoeuvre. The key work which looks at this is Michael Lipsky's book <u>Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services</u> (1980). Lipsky's work grew out of research which he carried out with front-line public service employees in the United States - people such as teachers, police officers, social workers, public lawyers, whose role is

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to "grant access to government programmes and provide services within them" (1980:3). It is through this research that he has developed a distinctive account of role of practitioners within the bureaucracy. Rather than seeing, as Rhodes does, that public policy *determines* the role of front-line practitioners, Lipsky emphasises the element of active agency exercised by front line practitioners, arguing that it is their actions which in essence *make* that policy. He characterises front line professionals as "street level bureaucrats", and argues that:

> Most citizens encounter government (if they encounter it at all) not through letters to [their political representatives] or by attendance at school board meetings, but through their teachers and their children's teachers and the policeman on the corner or in the patrol car…(1980:3)

In other words, we experience the state bureaucracy not through grand statements of purpose and intent, or through the vast amounts of policy documents published by government departments, but through particular kinds of everyday interactions we have with state employees – teachers, health workers, social workers and police. These people are significant for the way they form the interface between the public on one hand and politicians and policy makers on the other. The argument of his which is most suggestive in the context of our discussion here is the idea that each one of these everyday interactions between the public and front line practitioners:

> …represents an instance of policy delivery…Although [front line practitioners] are normally regarded as low-level employees, the actions of most public service workers actually constitute the services "delivered" by government. Moreover when taken together the individual decisions of these workers become, or add up to, agency policy (1980:3)

It follows from Lispsky's argument that one of the reasons why front line

professionals such as police, social workers, teachers, and health

professionals are so often controversial figures, often in the news, often

singled out for either criticism or praise by politicians and other commentators,

is that the decisions they make, frequently in situations of considerable stress,

can have a massive impact on the people on the receiving end. As Lipsky

notes:

> …in delivering policy, street level bureaucrats made decisions about
> people that affect their life chances. To designate or treat someone as
> a welfare recipient, a juvenile delinquent, or a high achiever affects the
> relationships of others to that person and also affects the person's self
> evaluation…A defining feature of the working environment of street
> level bureaucrats is that they must deal with client's personal reactions
> to their decisions…[and this means that] the reality of the work of street
> level bureaucrats could hardly be farther from the bureaucratic ideal of
> impersonal detachment in decision making (1980:9)

Lipsky is emphasising that is rather than seeing street level bureaucrats as

defined by the rules and procedures they work within, as both Weber and

Margaret Rhodes argue, it makes more sense to see them as *intermediaries*

between policy guidelines and the public. In the context of Social Work, one

of the most significant skills the social worker has to acquire is how to carry

out this mediating role between the wider bureaucracy, to which they are

formally accountable, and to the service user, to whom they are also

accountable. This accountability is both formal – in the sense that an agency

employs a Social Worker and could terminate this employment if the

employee's behaviour was seen to be inappropriate – but also ethical in that

the Social Worker is likely to feel a sense of responsibility to both the agency

and to the service user. The way the Social Worker and their agency may

experience this sense of duty may vary significantly from person to person

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and agency to agency; however the point being made here is that front line professionals are not simply automatons who exist simply to carry out the will of policy makers and managers. The way a Social Worker manages accountability to service users may not be the same as the way they deal with accountability to the agency, and links with Du Gay's discussion regarding different "ethical domains".

Lipsky's focus on the mediating role of front-line professionals is significant because it points to one of the issues which he sees as central to the role of street level bureaucrats, which is the way they exercise discretion:

> Unlike lower-level workers in most organisations, street level bureaucrats have considerable discretion in determining the nature, amount and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies…That is not to say that street level bureaucrats are unrestrained by rules, regulations and directives from above, or by the norms and standards of their occupational group. On the contrary the major dimensions of public policy – levels of benefits, categories of eligibility, nature of rules, regulations and services - are shaped by policy elites and political and administrative officials…[At the same time] even public employees who do not have claims to professional status exercise considerable discretion (1980:14)

This discretion comes about for a number of reasons. Firstly the range of situations which street level bureaucrats encounter are too broad and too complex to be easily fitted into a single series of rules – there are never enough rules to cover the range of situations which front line workers will find themselves in. Secondly, part of the expectation of the professional role which Social Workers have, is not simply to respond mechanistically to what is in front of them, but to read the human and relational dimensions of a situation and devise a response accordingly. The 2011 Munro Review of Child Protection into Children and Families Social Work in the UK reinforced exactly this point in its recommendations, a key one of which was that:

> Good social work practice requires forming a relationship with the child and family and using professional reasoning to judge how best to work with parents. The nature of this close engagement means that supervision, which provides the space for critical reflection, is essential for reducing the risk of errors in professionals' reasoning (2011: 11-12).

The significance of this recommendation is that while Children and Families Social Workers are expected to work within policy and guidelines and the legal framework for intervention, Professor Munro is saying that the exercise of discretion where there is scope to do so, is equally crucial to their work.

Lipsky is therefore arguing that while the major parameters of policy and practice are fixed at the top level of the state, that within street level bureaucracies, much front line practice is conducted in this more indeterminate realm. It is in situations where policy and legislation offer only partial and sometimes even contradictory guidance, that discretion, and the issues of ethical judgement which accompany this, come most to the fore. The following case study considers the way two Social Work students exercise discretion in differing ways.

Values and Exercising Discretion – The Case of John Garson

John Garson is a young British man who has come to the attention of Social Services after contacting the Duty team of a Physical Disability Social Work team requesting help with an application for financial support from a charity which helps members of the Armed Forces. John is 23 years old and grew up in Local Authority care. After leaving school with few qualifications he worked in a series of factory jobs, and frustrated with the lack of any direction or security offered by these, he decided to join the Army. John liked life in the Army well enough, though he found the tension of aspects of life on tours of duty in Afghanistan got to him at times, and to deal with this he started using opiate based painkillers, which were available from army medics, as a means of relaxing. These were widely used amongst soldiers and John would not have considered his use of these to be any sort of problem. On his third tour of duty John was severely wounded by a roadside bomb, and it was only through the quick thinking of his fellow soldiers in getting him quickly to a field hospital that he survived at all. John is now severely disabled and due to injuries in his legs and spine is confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. He has been back in the UK for just over two years now, and while he has had very good Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy, he was not offered any psychological support or counselling, and neither would he have felt able to ask for this sort of help. In addition John has become very isolated from his social networks; his former girlfriend is now in another relationship with another man with whom she has just had a child, he only ever had intermittent contact with his mother and was never close to her, and with the passage of time his former comrades in the army have stopped visiting him. John is seriously depressed and after coming off painkillers for his injuries has started drinking heavily.

John is in receipt of an army pension and disability benefits, but has got into financial problems largely though bills he left unpaid and rent arrears he failed to deal with. He was able to deal with some of the rent arrears with assistance from a charity for injured service people around six months previously, and was supported in this by a Social Work Student who was working with the Physical Disability Team who helped him complete the relevant paperwork and helped him obtain the necessary independent verification of his financial difficulties. He has now come back to the same service following being threatened with court proceedings by a debt collectors following non-payment of his utility bills. Unfortunately the charity he applied to successfully previously only allows a single application every two years unless there is a substantial deterioration in the individual's condition. Secondly, while John was vague about the reasons for getting into debt in the first place with the first student Social Worker, when John is visited this time around he takes the opportunity to talk about his difficulties, in terms of his drinking, his debts and his isolation. John makes this disclosure because he is concerned about the way his life seems to be slipping out of his control.

Questions and Discussion – Exercising Discretion:
The purpose of this exercise is to think about the way two different practitioners exercise discretion in different ways

In summary, the question of how we understand the way a bureaucracy

actually works is more complex than it may appear at first sight. What we

have tried to demonstrate here is that there are a range of different

approaches. We characterised Margaret Rhodes as a *pessimist,* since her

emphasis is consistently on way Social Workers are determined, and almost

entirely negatively in her view, by the structure of the bureaucracy. Lipsky on

the other hand could be seen as an *optimist*, since he emphasises the

discretionary and improvisational element, noting that this exercise sometimes

exists to the point of being able to work in ways that are entirely different to

the intentions of those who drafted the legislation or policy. However rather

than seeing this optimistic and pessimistic positions as alternatives to each

other, it may be useful to think of them applying to different situations along a

kind of "discretion continuum" – at one end of the spectrum are Social Work

situations in which staff have very little room to manoeuvre, while the at other end are situations in which front line workers have considerable opportunity to do so. As well as different situations, there are also different practitioners – exemplified by the Social Work students Wayne and Susan in the case above – who because of their different backgrounds and experiences will understand the capacity to exercise discretion differently.   This is a question that concerns values, but also concerns what sociologists call 'agency'; meaning the things people feel able to do. So in this situation agency refers to the things people are prepared to do to make the values they believe in a reality; this combination of values and agency could be seen to come together in the form of a person's political outlook. To use our above example, we could see Wayne as someone feels the 'handout mentality' is not just unhelpful for John, but bad for society in general. In John's case he would see this as something which is preventing him from learning, or re-learning, how to be independent and take control of his situation. He is therefore unlikely to be interested in re-interpreting the charity guidelines.   Susan, on the other hand, looks upon John as someone who has already given a huge amount, having served his country as a soldier and ended up being severely and permanently disabled in the process. As she sees it John should be entitled to much greater support than he has received so far, and would see the fact that he has to rely on charity applications as something of an indictment of the way society treats people like him. From her perspective, the charity application is the least of what John should be entitled to.

It is in this sense that these different political understandings informs the question of what these two students are prepared to do for John, and it is in this way that discretion has these political and ethical dimensions. This brings us back to the question of the scope for discretion within bureaucratic structures, and if it is the case, as suggested at the beginning of the chapter, whether the shift toward neo-liberalism has been accompanied by an attempt to limit or alter the scope of Social Work's discretion, as part of a project of seeking to alter what John Clarke has called "the meaning of welfare" (Clarke, 2000:3). It is this question that leads us onto the issue about an attempt to reconstruct design and purpose of the bureaucracy - the question of "Managerialism".

Managerialism - End of the Road for Professional Discretion?

We began this chapter with a discussion of the OFSTED Report into Children and Families Social Work and quoted a Social Worker who noted that the issue of staff working extra hours "just to keep up.. is 'hidden' due to the expectations of management and the ethos of disciplinaries. We are frightened to say that we cannot manage our workloads" (2010:13). This personal account, which expresses something many Social Workers will recognise, expresses a dichotomy between the worlds of front-line Social Workers, and Management, suggesting some kind of separation between these two worlds. While this might be seen to a lesser or greater extent in all

'street level bureaucracies', what we want to explore here is the idea that this division has been significantly exacerbated through the development of a particular set of ideas which have had a huge influence on the theory and practice of public management, which have become known as Managerialism.

CARTOON "SAVAGE CHICKENS INSERTED HERE

What is Managerialism? The cartoon above points to the absurdity of the convoluted forms of bureaucracy associated with this, but managerialism is more than this. Most commentators on this issue understand the emergence of managerialism in the context of the emergence of neo-liberalism 1980s and 1990s. Stuart Hall put this incisively when he argued that "Managerialism is not just the hall mark of neo-liberalism, but actually the motor: if neo-liberalism is a set of ideas, how neo-liberalism then gets into the system is through managerialism" (Hall, 2007:111).   In chapter 1 we noted John Clarke's argument about the two key strands within neo-liberalism: an anti-welfarist strand and an anti-statist strand. For the anti-welfarist strand, welfare spending is seen as both unproductive, in the sense that it is 'a drain on the real economy', and undesirable, in the sense of that is produces 'welfare dependency' and a 'handout mentality'. For the anti-statist element within neo-liberal thinking, the problem is excessive state involvement in what should rightly be the role of the free market, seen as the most appropriate mechanism for allocating resources, goods and services (Clarke et. al, 2000:2-3). While neo-liberalism began under the Thatcher/Major Conservative governments in the UK, the election of a New Labour government in 1997 under Tony Blair, represented essentially a continuation of neo-liberal thinking. The concept of the "Third Way" (see Giddens 1998)

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for example, was equally based on the conception of a diminished role for the state in social provision.

In terms of understanding the remaking of the Welfare State, and in looking at the particular impact on the Social Work bureaucracy, it is important to note the way both of these different strands converge. On one hand Social Services agencies were seen as needing to be reduced in size and scope, but also that as an organisation, the bureaucracy needed to model itself on the practices of private sector organisations with its claims of 'greater efficiency'. This was hugely facilitated by the privatisation and outsourcing of large areas of Adult Social Care, where those areas of provision once run by the state were taken over by new private sector companies. The logic of this privatisation of former state run agencies gave a huge boost to the values and attitudes embodied under managerialism, and provided further justification for the managerial revolution of changing the way people were "expected to think and behave" within bureaucratic structures. (Clarke, 2000:9). Martin Parker has sought to capture this sense of the pervasiveness of managerialism as both an ideology and a practice when he notes that it:

> …is increasingly articulated as a universal solution to whatever problem presents itself. Management protects us against chaos and inefficiency, management guarantees that organisations, people and machines do what they claim to do. Management is…a new civic religion. Even if we don't share the faith in today's management, we often seem to believe that the answer is 'better' management (2002:2)

The key point Parker implies is the way managerialist ideas were presented as common-sense – "what works" – and thereby disavowing their ideological dimension. The elevation of managerialism to the status of what Parker

ironically describes as "a new civic religion" expresses the pervasiveness of

this process. This has particular significance for Social Work as

managerialism was crucial to the displacement of a professionally based

ethos which had previously been dominant in Social Work bureaucracies.

Clarke notes that:

> Managerialism – like professionalism – defines a set of expectations,
> values and beliefs. It is a normative system concerning what counts as
> valuable knowledge, who knows it and who is empowered to act in
> what ways as a consequence. Indeed a central issue in the
> managerialisation of public services has been to displace or
> subordinate the claims of professionals. It can no longer be assumed
> that 'professionals know best', rather we are invited to accept that
> managers 'do the right thing'…Public service organisations have [thus]
> come to 'think' managerially about themselves, their 'business' and
> their relationships with others (2000:9)

Managerialism in Social Work has thus involved the supplanting of a

professionally based ethos for a managerial one. John Harris has noted that

this involves a major change in the role and understanding of the Social Work

bureaucracy:

> In the post-war welfare state, the reliance on professionalism and the
> assumption of citizen passivity led to state social work being provided
> through bureau-professional regimes in which priority was given to
> expert knowledge. The corollary was the subordination of citizens
> without expert knowledge to bureau-professional authority, in what
> were seen as their own interests (Harris, 1999:918).

Harris's arguments here can be linked with the discussion on the changing

significance of the concept of "Empowerment" in the previous chapter. While

the old style "bureau-professional" regimes were characterised by state

provision accompanied by professionals who 'knew best', the new style

managerial regimes favour a so-called "mixed economy" of providers and

professionals whose job it is to 'empower' service users to look after

themselves. As our previous chapter noted, this "empowerment" takes place

in a context where the availability and eligibility for services has been both significantly reduced, with significant areas of provision now run on a for-profit basis.

Other commentators have noted the way in which the rise of managerialism allows us to understand a certain irony in the way some apparently progressive agendas in Social Work, such as Service User Involvement, are being promoted. Cowden and Singh (2006) have argued for example that the development of this agenda needs to be seen as a sign not so much as indicative of a more enlightened attitude to Service Users, but more as part of an ideological battle over 'old' and 'new' conceptions of welfare . The service user agenda was one where 'old' professional concepts of "knowing best" were criticised as patronising, as well as insufficiently responsive to the declared aspirations of Service Users. Whilst there was often truth in this, the alternatives that came in wake of Community Care legislation were not necessarily any better. And while the agenda around service user involvement has wide support within Social Work, it is at the end of the day, managers who retain the capacity to decide the terms on which service users are involved, or not as the case may be (Cowden and Singh, 2006).

This is of a piece with the way managerialism has become dominant through the public sector by conjuring up a world of greater transparency, accountability and flexibility for Service Users in opposition to an inflexible statist bureaucracy ruled over by inscrutable professionals . In spite of the pervasiveness of this image, research into these areas demonstrates that, in

spite of the many inadequacies what went before, the introduction of market

forces into social care does not necessarily lead to any of these outcomes

being realised. As Malcolm Carey notes in a recent survey of state of Social

Work:

> Within the private sector dominated market of residential and nursing home care, complex and convoluted rituals of mergers, take-overs, sales and closures have continued…As a consequence such markets have helped to generate unstable (and therefore potentially unsafe) living and 'support' environments for many residents. For example, recent research has highlighted how many private sector providers have failed to meet basic standards of care...Also recent plans by the Commission for Social Care Inspection to reduce the number of care home inspectors, including children's homes, suggests that presently unacceptable standards may fall even further (2008a:923)

Most of the evidence for Carey's conclusions comes from Government's own

reports, and material such as this makes depressing reading when thinking

about the ways in which bureaucratic structures limit the scope for ethical

agency by Social Workers. In an overall sense the response to the

dominance of managerialism within the Social Work profession has been one

of profound frustration and disorientation at the changes that have come

about. This sense of fragmentation is exacerbated also by the way large

sections of the Social Care direct provision has further declined in quality

through privatisation, particularly where work is undertaken by lowly paid,

lowly skilled or untrained staff. As Carey notes "key sectors of social care are

now dominated by business interests, many of which, in principle, seek to

gain profits" (2008a:919), and he goes on to note that:

> the consequences for Social Work practitioners have been many and have included adherence to numerous (and typically convoluted) administrative procedures and protocols, the rationalisation of Social Work practice, which has led to intense deskilling, and the virtual removal of therapeutic interventions and service provision (2008a:919)

In 2006 a grouping calling itself the Social Work Manifesto expressed the view that:

> … our work is shaped by managerialism, by the fragmentation of services, by financial restrictions and lack of resources, by increased bureaucracy and workloads, by the domination of care-management approaches, with their associated performance indicators, and by the increased use of the private sector. These trends have long been present in state social work, but they now dominate the work of frontline social workers and shape the welfare services offered to clients. The effect has been to increase the distance between managers and frontline workers, and between workers and service users.

Rather than being isolated, this sense of a disjuncture between practitioners' ideas on what Social Work should be about and what is actually happening in reality is echoed throughout most research into the impact of managerialism on Social Work. In a related piece of research, where Malcolm Carey has asked front line practitioners to describe the nature of the changes in their jobs which have brought about by managerial practices, an equally negative picture is portrayed. One Social Worker, Linda, expresses these in terms of how different the job is compared to her expectation of what it would be like:

> It's just such a routine job now, and quite tedious. There's no real freedom in what you do, and everyone seems pretty fed up most of the time…It's just all this paper work and there's no money for services…I do feel terrible completing those assessment forms knowing there's no budget for anything…We are always hearing about new policies – 'best value' is the most recent…but I've seen little evidence [of positive change]…Nobody cares about Social Work (Carey, 2008b:349).

In the same article Carey interviews another worker Tony, who expresses a slightly more optimistic picture of his work:

> There's too much bureaucracy in the job, that's the main problem. However you can find a way around [the bureaucracy], and make time for carers and clients…I enjoy the work…There's little money about [for support services for clients] but you can still change things for some people…I've counselled people during assessments, and also done a

bit of group work with families, especially [informal] carers…You have to believe in something…(2008b:351)

These accounts both illustrate that what managerialism is managing is services run with declining resources, a fact which is denied through an obsessive emphasis on 'efficiencies'. It is this more than anything which creates the sense that people 'at the top' fail to understand or even engage with the issues faced by Social Workers on the front line. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has argued that it is this which constitutes the "profoundly contradictory basis of the mission" of Social Work under present conditions:

Social Workers must fight unceasingly on two fronts; against those they want to help and who are too demoralised to take a hand in their own interests, let alone the interests of the collectivity; on the other hand, against administrations and bureaucrats divided and enclosed in separate universes (2002:190)

Defending Bureaucracy Against Itself?

The question which has been addressed throughout this chapter concerns the issue of Bureaucracy and Ethical or Moral Agency – how much do bureaucratic structures suppress, undermine, facilitate or encourage ethical practice within Social Work. The answer is not entirely straightforward. Certain kinds of bureaucracy and bureaucratic roles undoubtedly do undermine moral agency, though it would be a mistake to see this as an inherent quality of bureaucracies. We note here the value of Paul du Gay's arguments about bureaucracy and ethics for Social Work, in that one of the most important ways ethical attributes may be experienced in Social Work, by service users at the very least, is about the way practitioners behave within a bureaucracy. To be a good bureaucrat in this sense is not about a coldly technical rationality, but rather is about an awareness of the needs of the

people relying on you (2000:4). It is in this way that Du Gay could be seen as linking the issue of behaviour within the bureaucracy with the an ethics of public duty. However it is in this sense of a focus on ethics that we can return to the point made by Bryan Turner on Weber; that is that it is one thing to argue for the inevitability of bureaucracy as a means of organising society, and another to endorse the rationales of the bureaucracy at any given point in time (1996:358). This point becomes all the more pertinent in a world where the state is continuing to privatise what were once functions controlled entirely by state, leaving those practitioners working for the state with reduced leverage to effect the change which is the very rationale for entering Social Work. Are Social Workers therefore destined then to remain prisoners of this particular form of neo-liberal form of bureaucracy? Pierre Bourdieu makes an insightful point when he argues that:

> Paradoxically, the rigidity of bureaucratic institutions is such that, despite what Max Weber said about them, they can only function…thanks to the initiative, the inventiveness, if not the charisma of those who are the least imprisoned in their function…And it is undoubtedly these contradictions emanating from bureaucratic divisions that open up a margin of manoeuvre, initiative and freedom which can be used by those whom, in breaking with bureaucratic routines and regulations, defend bureaucracy against itself (2002:191).

Amongst Social Workers, there will always be some of us who feel "the weight of the world" more than others. But what Bourdieu offers here is the idea that just as bureaucracies are made by people, so can they be unmade by people. In this sense, our ethical duty may be best served by refusing to allow ourselves to become mentally, psychologically and practically imprisoned by the "iron cage", and in doing so, we can come to realise that its bars are not as fixed as we are told they are. It is important to realise in this sense that

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Social Work only became a profession out of a form of imagined social solidarity which the Welfare State represented. Through the dominance of neo-liberalism, this form of solidarity has been hollowed out and in some cases emptied altogether – yet this system itself is far from invulnerable to challenge, and it in this process of challenge that new forms of solidarity will emerge and Social Work's ethical mission will again be fought over and reconstructed.