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Desk Power: Insights Into Bureaucrats' Autonomy

Title of the paper

Creaming practices at the frontline of welfare-to-work policies: An exploration of social workers' autonomy in a social assistance organisation in Belgium

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Abstract

This paper aims at assessing the extent of creaming practices in services in charge of socio-professional integration of recipients in a social assistance agency in Belgium. Results draw upon an ethnographical study combining observation, semi-structured interviews and recipients' files analysis. Relying on a street-level bureaucracy perspective, this paper focuses on written reports to understand how workers justify referrals to the service in charge of recipients' socio-professional integration on the one hand, and to the various measures proposed by those services on the other. Those measures prove to be invested with multiple meanings and creaming appears to be a multi-dimensional process diluted along various evaluations.

Keywords: street-level bureaucracy, social policy implementation, welfare, social assistance, activation, ethnography

Introduction

This paper aims at exploring the impact of social workers' autonomy in terms of beneficiaries' access to the services proposed by social assistance agencies in Belgium, which are called Public Centres for Social Action. Social assistance is increasingly targeted by activation policies, which are characterised by an emphasis on individualisation of social rights provision and on individual responsibility of recipients, workers and organisations (Orianne, 2005). Consequently, the logics of rights provision evolved from a bureaucratic process of matching claimants with pre-existing categories to a case-by-case evaluation of eligibility on the basis of uncertain criteria (Astier, 2007; Brodtkin, 2013). Several authors have analysed this evolution as a shift from collective to individual responsibility of social risks management, thereby defining self-reliance as a moral duty (Arnsperger, 2000; Astier, 2007; Dubois, 2012; Gilbert, 2005). This emphasis on individual responsibility as well as the individualisation of eligibility criteria call for the need to analysing how social "goods" (Elster, 1992) are distributed in practice. Indeed, following Brodtkin (2013), "the practical is political" in the sense that "their [street-level organisations] practices determine 'who gets what, when, and how' – the essence of politics according to Harold Lasswell's (1936) classic definition" (Brodtkin, 2013: 24). Encounters between the public and street-level workers are also political because they are loci of interactions between citizens and the state, as described by Lipsky in his seminal book *Street-level bureaucracy. Dilemmas of the individuals in public services* (2010 [1980]). Likewise, street-level agents are defined as "policy-makers" who elaborate routines in order to cope with the various "dilemmas" generated by the interplay of organisational constraints, claimants' demands and their ideal role definition (Lipsky, 2010 [1980]). They are thus mediators of both "policy" and "politics" (Brodtkin, 2013).

Basing the analysis on an ethnographical study realised in a Public Centre for Social Action (CPAS), I will draw upon a street-level bureaucracy perspective to examine how social workers' practices shape access to rights, with a focus on services in charge of "socio-professional integration" of recipients. Turning to both "discretion-as-granted" and "discretion-as-used" (Hupe, Hill & Buffat, 2015), this paper will analyse the conditions which allow for social workers' autonomy as well as the ways they use it to define eligibility criteria for the various programs they propose. More specifically, the analysis will try to assess the existence of "creaming practices" (Lipsky, 2010 [1980]) which would rule out those with the least chances of success. Lipsky defines creaming as followed: "Confronted with more clients that can be readily accommodated street-level bureaucrats often chose (or skim off the top) those who seem most likely to succeed in terms of bureaucratic success criteria" (Lipsky, 2010 [1980]: 107). Since the mission of Belgian social assistance organisations is wide¹, I will not only focus on integration to the job market. Indeed, I will consider all measures proposed by the service, from the mere access to the socio-professional integration service to the various stages of the integration process defined by the organisation. I argue that far from being uniform, "creaming practices" are multi-dimensional, task-dependant, temporality-dependant and diluted through the whole process.

In the following sections, I will first introduce the methodology used for this research as well as the possibilities and limits characterising the data analysed in this paper. Before analysing the results, I will explain Belgian social assistance system in the light of the development of activation policies, as well as the structure of organisations in charge of their implementation. I will then turn to the context of the case study and the organisational dynamics allowing for social workers' autonomy regarding the decisional process. Eventually, I will present the referral process to the socio-professional integration

¹ The first article of their organic law defines their mission as "guaranteeing human dignity".

service on the one hand, and the measures proposed by this service on the other hand. In each case, I will analyse how measures are justified in the professional reports that compose recipients' files in order to understand how they are used and to assess whether beneficiaries' categorisation lead to creaming practices.

Methodology

The results presented in this paper derive from a four-month ethnographical study in a Public Centre for Social Action in Wallonia, the southern French-speaking part of Belgium². Focusing on the second-line service in charge of job-seeking assistance, called the socio-professional integration service (*cf. infra*), I realised direct observation of interactions between beneficiaries and workers whether in face-to-face interviews or in group activities; the every-day life of the service such as meetings and lunches; two meetings of the first-line social service; a common meeting of the two services and two sessions of the Special Committee for Social Action (*cf. infra*) in charge of taking decisions about recipients' cases. In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews with workers of the socio-professional integration service, five first-line social workers, the hierarchy as well as ten beneficiaries. Moreover, I collected thirty beneficiaries' files, gathering information from multiple sources in chronological order. In this CPAS, files are indeed scattered between two computer programs – one used by the first-line social service and a more recent one used by the socio-professional integration service. Before using this program, the workers of socio-professional integration (“integration agents”) service used Excel files and, prior to those, paper files. When information was missing, e.g. because a file was archived, I asked for more details to the social worker who was in charge at that time.

Since the analysis is still in progress, this paper will focus on the content of beneficiaries' files as well as the observation of organisational dynamics in order to understand the scope of integration agents' autonomy and the ways they use it to refer recipients to different measures. Different kinds of information can be derived from files analysis: first of all, the long-term timespan allows for the assessment of similarities/dissimilarities in decisions taken by different actors. Combined with the observation of sessions of the Special Committee for Social Action, this allows for the understanding of who has the concrete power to take which kind of decision, beyond formal decisional power.

Also, files point out to which type of information is relevant for social workers. Indeed, a file has several uses: help social workers remember what they did, inform colleagues of their service and other services, justify their decisions to hierarchy, and be accountable to inspectors of subsidising authorities.

As a result, the information contained in files can neither be used to analyse the practical knowledge guiding workers' decisions in the synchronicity of interactions with recipients, nor the negotiation power of beneficiaries. Nevertheless, it allows for the understanding of long-term dynamics in recipients' follow-up and decisional processes, as well as a comparison of workers' justifications of a variety of measures. I define a “measure” as an action towards which a recipient can be directed by social workers of the socio-professional integration service, whether in the CPAS, e.g. defining a professional project, or outside, e.g. undertake professional training. In addition, I also define access to the service as a measure in itself.

Even if a saturation logic guided the selection of the files, the corpus cannot be regarded as statistically representative. Consequently, the goal is not to analyse the frequency of each usage and justification but to understand the underlying logics of recipients' referral to different measures, in a

² This case is part of a comparison with a second case-study which will take place in the Brussels-Capital Region from September 2017.

qualitative and inductive perspective. The prevalence of some justifications over others can only be regarded as hypothesis to be confronted to the other types of data collected in the fieldwork.

The activation of social assistance in Belgium

In Belgium, social assistance is organised at the municipal level by organisations called Public Centres for Social Action (CPAS). The help they provide is residuary, meaning that claimants must first try to claim any other welfare benefits they might be entitled to. Social assistance benefits, called Social Integration Income (SII), are thus granted to those who don't have enough financial resources to be self-sufficient, be it by a job, unemployment benefits, family support or disability benefits. As a result, the assistance system targets people out of the insurance system based on workers' social contributions.

Other conditions to be eligible for the SII are nationality (Belgian, foreigner with a residence permit, refugee or stateless), residence (living in the same municipality as the one of the CPAS), age (being over 18) and willingness to work.

Eligibility is assessed by first-line social workers who will present each case to the Council of Social Action, the decisional board of the CPAS composed of local politicians ("Counsellors") in a way that reflects the result of local elections. The political chief of the CPAS is the President, whose role is to define priorities for the mandate and to lead the Council meetings. He is assisted by a Secretary, in charge of staff-management, and a Financial Manager.

Beyond those features which are made compulsory by the organic law of the CPAS, each CPAS is free to define its own organisational structure. For instance, the Council can delegate some matters to Special Committees, such as the Special Committee for Social Service in charge of taking decisions about beneficiaries' cases. The CPAS can also create specialised services in addition to the first-line social service, which can provide help for debt-mediation, paying energy bills, looking for a dwelling or looking for a job. Job-related activities, which vary from a CPAS to another, are organised in "socio-professional integration" services. They can assist recipients to define a professional project, look for training and/or a job, get professional experience, etc. One of the measures used by all CPAS is derived from the article 60§7 of the CPAS organic law and consists in providing some beneficiaries with a job for a set amount of days in order for them to recover or acquire their right to unemployment benefits. This measure enables recipients to gain professional experience, either in the CPAS itself or in public administration or non-profit organisations. They can also work in the private sector by virtue of the article 61 of the CPAS organic law, in which case the actual employer is the manager of the workplace, not the CPAS.

The development of activation policies

The creation of specialised services in charge of professional integration is linked to the development of activation in Belgium and the increasing role of CPAS in job-seeking assistance since the beginning of the nineties, which gradually blurred the limits between assistance and insurance systems (Castel, 1995; Hamzaoui, 2002). For instance, contracting is introduced as an obligation for beneficiaries younger than 25 years old in 1993 (Lacourt, 2007), then extended as a non-compulsory tool to older recipients³ in 2002.

³ Since November 2016, contracting has become compulsory for all new recipients. Nevertheless, the analysis presented here took place before this change and it does apply to the results discussed in this paper.

The law of 2002 was a real shift in the logics of rights provision. Indeed, social assistance benefits were hitherto called “Minimum Existence Income” (Minimex) and were the basics of the help provided by the CPAS, even though willingness to work was already an eligibility condition. In 2002, the Minimex becomes a “Social Integration Income” which is integrated to a broader “right to social integration” encompassing three non-exclusive modalities: the SII, a job and/or a contract called “Individualised Social Integration Project”. Hence, professional integration explicitly becomes a goal of social assistance agencies.

However, there is no concrete implementation guidelines. The law explicitly grants a broad autonomy to street-level workers in the sense that they must assess the needs and abilities of recipients, and that it recognises the necessity of negotiation between workers and beneficiaries. Without further specifications, the law indicates that should professional integration not be possible, “social” integration can become a goal. Moreover, the evaluation of “willingness to work” must be based on recipients’ behaviour, such as accepting to look for a job, but few criteria are provided. Likewise, this condition can be suspended by virtue of “health or equity motives”, which must be assessed by social workers. Finally, no criteria explain how to decide whether contracts should be signed with recipients over 25-year-old. As a result, the “right to social integration” defines a multi-modal, individualised and negotiated rights provision regime, based on a case-by-case evaluation of beneficiaries’ behaviour and personal situation, with professional integration as a goal. Consequently, practices must be defined locally in each specific context.

Context of the case-study

The case-study is a medium-sized CPAS situated in an urban municipality of the French-speaking southern Region of Belgium. The area is characterised by a history of deindustrialisation since the sixties and a high unemployment rate (Dermine, 2010). The Council of that CPAS delegated the management of recipients’ files regarding financial matters to the Special Committee for Social Service, to which first-line social workers present cases every two weeks. Recipients’ situation is examined by the Committee at least once a year for its “revision”, or whenever there is a significant change in recipients’ situation. In case of contestation, beneficiaries have the right to defend themselves in person at a Committee session.

This CPAS has a specialised socio-professional integration service (SPIS), which is itself separated in two parts: the professional integration service (PIS) and the social integration service (SIS). The former is composed of six social workers and an educator who works in both services. Except for one worker⁴, they are all “orientation agents” (OA) in charge of the first evaluation of recipients and their individual follow-up. The SIS is composed of a social worker in charge of recipients’ first evaluation and individual follow-up, three animators and an educator. In addition, a psychologist receives some recipients in individual therapy and animates some collective activities.

The autonomy of street-level bureaucrats

The law of 2002 grants a wide autonomy to CPAS, to which the concrete implementation modalities of the right to social integration are delegated. Legally, the decisional boards are the Council of Social Action and the Special Committee for Social Service. Consequently, workers have no formal

⁴ This worker acts as a link between the social service and SPIS (*see infra*). He is also in charge of modules which take place after an art.60 contract in order to prepare recipients for their subsequent job-search and inform them about the demands of Regional Employment Agencies. Since it is an automatic step after art.60 contracts, I will not analyse this measure in this paper.

power of decision. Regarding socio-professional integration, SPIS workers must write reports in a computer program in order to keep their colleagues of the social service informed. When presenting a case to the Committee, first-line social workers write their own report, which is encoded in another program and presented orally to Counsellors. In order to assess the actual power of SPIS workers, two questions must be answered. First, do first-line social workers use the arguments of SPIS workers in their own reports? Second, do Counsellors follow social workers' advice or do they contradict them as far as socio-professional integration is concerned?

Both can be answered in the affirmative. Indeed, the comparison of reports of both services shed light on the fact that first-line social workers use SPIS workers' arguments, sometimes even quoting them word for word. Furthermore, it seems rare that the Committee disagrees on measures regarding socio-professional integration. The only case found in the analysed files is the one of an art.60 contract made compulsory to prove willingness to work. It thus seems that SPIS workers are organisationally granted a real decision power, which can be explained in several ways.

To begin with, reports are not the only way to communicate about recipients to colleague. Indeed, informal exchanges of information among SPIS workers and with first-line social workers are frequent. As a result, OAs or SIS workers can explain their arguments in a more detailed way, in a negotiation process that is not limited to written files.

Moreover, the social service and SPIS managers grant a broad autonomy to social workers of both services in the organisation of their work and their argumentation regarding socio-professional issues. Indeed, the manager of the social service only supervises matters related to financial issues and is not in charge of socio-professional integration, whereas the SPIS manager regularly recalls that reports must be made without checking their content.

Besides, the Committee is not competent for all aspects of socio-professional integration. They are in charge of decisions regarding financial matters, which does not concern most of the SPIS measures. Indeed, only art.60 contracts, requests for loans to cover training fees or financial sanctions due unwillingness to work must be examined.

Additionally, Counsellors are politicians, not social workers. They are therefore not trained to assess social assistance issues and they seem to trust social workers' decisions. Indeed, they do not actually discuss their reports: in most cases, Counsellors don't ask for further information when social workers present recipients' cases. Similarly, they hardly ever discuss their proposals. As a result, social workers' accounts of SPIS follow-up seem to be in line with the content of SPIS workers' reports. This means that, in practice, SPIS workers have the autonomy to decide which actions undertake with recipients.

Accessing the socio-professional integration service

In the subsequent analysis I distinguish between access to the SPIS and access to the measures proposed in the SPIS. In this section, I examine the process leading to the SPIS as well as the criteria used to justify access or non-access. Therefore, I focus on access, non-access and suspension of follow-up by the SPIS.

The evaluation process

Accessing the SPIS is a process in itself, with different stages and the intervention of various actors (cf. Fig.1). First of all, it must be noticed that only those who are granted the right to social

integration are allowed to access the SPIS⁵. Similarly, three first-line social workers are in charge of students of less than 25-year-old. If they are not studying, they are compelled to go through the SPIS process, since they are legally bound to sign a contract related to a professional project.

If the recipient is over 25, the social worker must assess if the person faces difficulties that would impede a proper follow-up in the SPIS. Typically, issues related to physical or mental health, depression, alcoholism or drugs are defined as “health or equity” reasons to be exempted from the “willingness to work” condition and from referral to the SPIS. If no significant obstacle is encountered, the social worker will discuss the case with the “linking-agent”, a SPIS worker who goes to the social service once a week to discuss who should or should not be directed to the SPIS. This procedure was created because OAs judged they received people with problems too serious to allow for a socio-professional integration process, which led to list of “obstacles” defined collectively with the social service. However, the criteria of this list do not lead to automatic rejection. Indeed, workers adjust the difficulties to the perceived abilities of the person to face them.

If the person is accepted by the linking-agent, he or she is convened to an information session animated by the linking agent and one of the SIS animator in order to explain the services offered by the SISP. Should someone be absent twice from the session with no justification, he or she won't be referred to OAs and the process is cut short. It will then be up first-line social workers to assess if a sanction on the basis of “unwillingness to work” should be proposed to the Special Committee, by temporarily suspending or definitively suppressing benefits. In case of suppression, the person can claim the right to social integration once again, which will be granted or not depending on whether the social worker judges that progress has been made to prove willingness to work.

At the end of the information session, recipients are given an appointment with one of the OA, who will conduct the first evaluation. This face-to-face interview will determine if the person is deemed ready to remain in the service and, if so, whether he or she is ready for a professional process.

Should it be the case, the OA will stay in charge of the beneficiary and will try to define a professional project with him or her. This means that the OA is the reference person regarding professional matters, while the first-line social worker remains responsible for financial matters. Several options are open to recipients, some of them taking place within the SPIS itself and others being organised by external organisations. CPAS must then collaborate with a wide network of partners in order to offer more possibilities to beneficiaries.

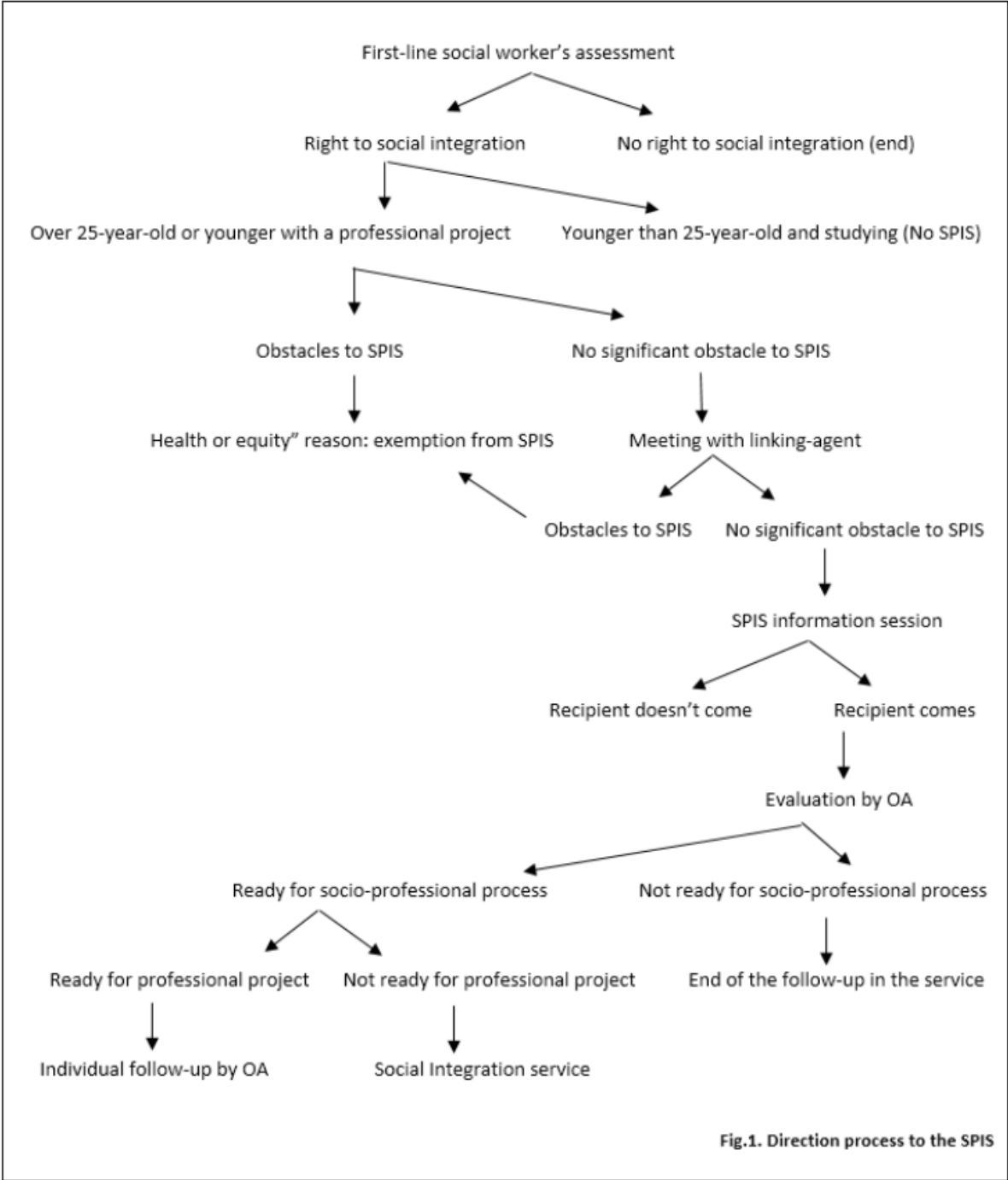
If the recipient is judged able to undertake a socio-professional process but is too far from employability behavioural norms, OAs will direct him or her to the Social Integration Service (SIS), where a second evaluation will be made by the social worker of the service. He will decide if the person fits the objectives of the regional decree that determines funding conditions, which are very vague⁶.

To sum up, accessing the SPIS is a process with several steps. At each of those stages, recipients' situation is evaluated, whether directly in face-to-face interviews or indirectly through negotiation among workers. Even though a list of impediments to the SPIS follow-up has been defined collectively, social workers of both services adjust them to the perceived abilities of the person. Therefore, each

⁵ It is not the case of all CPAS services. For example, any inhabitant of the municipality can be assisted by the debt-mediation service.

⁶ Those objectives are: breaking social isolation; allowing for a participation to social, economical, political and cultural life ; fostering social recognition ; improving well-being ; fostering autonomy.

actor proceeds to an individualised evaluation. In discussions we had during fieldwork, they insisted on the fact that they had no precise criteria and that they refused to “put people in boxes”. Nevertheless, they still have to justify their actions in their reports.



Justifying decisions

In the subsequent analysis, I will simplify the process described here above in order to focus on two steps: on the one hand, the referral to the SPIS, whether by the first-line social worker or the linking-agent, and, on the other hand, the assessment made by OAs. Indeed, the analysed files cover a long period and several of them date back to before the creation of the linking procedure. Depending

on the period, recipients were directly referred to the SPIS by first-line social workers or were evaluated by the linking-agent. What is more, the analysis has shown no differences in justifications between the direct and the linking referral procedure.

A first result is that access is less often justified than non-access. This can be explained by the fact that social workers are legally bound to justify exemption from the willingness to work condition, since recipients can be exempted from a follow-up in the SPIS on the grounds of “health of equity motives”. Indeed, issues related to health are frequently cited by both first-line social workers and OAs: having a medical certificate, a new-born child or drug addiction. Besides, health motives are also used to justify the suspension of the follow-up at any point of the process within the SPIS itself.

As to “equity”, it seems more difficult to assess. For instance, some were exempted because they were taking care of an ill or disabled relative. Other justifications are less clear-cut, e.g. the case of a man described as “discouraged” by his difficulties to find a job because of his age and criminal record; justifications only mention a health certificate for depression after several years. This example points out to two facts: first, job-search is not limited to the SPIS, only *assistance* to job-search. Second, not all persons having trouble to look for a job are directed to the SIS. Consequently, it seems that “equity motives” leave a high power of appreciation to social workers.

Other reasons for non-access are linked to administrative criteria. Those who receive benefits for a short period of time⁷ or who find a job on their own are not directed to the SPIS. Likewise, students between 18 and 25 years old are only followed by first-line social workers.

Furthermore, a shared practice in the SPIS is to stop the follow-up after two unjustified absences. Hence, if someone doesn’t come to the two first appointments, no first evaluation takes place. This rule is used and known by all workers of SPIS and accepted by hierarchy, even though no one can recall who actually created it.

By contrast, when someone is granted access, a variety of criteria is given. First, as already mentioned, the age: recipients older than 24 and those who younger with a professional project. Second, employability: having a degree or qualification, professional experience, a driving licence, a car, etc. Third, need: someone who must be assisted to look for a job or a training, to define a professional project... Four, conditionality: referral to the SPIS can be used as a way to prove one’s willingness to work. It can therefore be demanded by the Committee for Social Service if the recipient is deemed “unwilling”.

Beyond those criteria, it must be noticed that not all social workers make the same decisions. Indeed, social workers regularly proceed to internal redistributions of the cases, which can lead to a change of reference worker for some recipients. Some of them were thus directed to the SPIS after being assessed by a new worker, after sometimes several years.

A second result is the variety of temporalities. Indeed, if no contract is signed, there is no compulsory deadline to direct recipients to the SPIS. Consequently, beneficiaries are directed after a variable period of time, spanning from one month to four years in the analysed files. After being directed to the socio-professional integration service, it can take from a few days to a few months to be convened to a first appointment with an OA. Moreover, the diversity of long-term trajectories is also striking: not everyone is directed to the SPIS the first time the right to social integration is granted. Indeed, many trajectories are far from being linear and encompass changes of status in and out the

⁷ Some people are known to claim assistance for a short time, either because they plan to move to another municipality or because their unemployment benefits are temporarily suspended due to negative evaluations of their job-search.

assistance system, changes of address, SII suppressions and re-allocations. Therefore, some recipients are granted the right to social integration several times, sometimes in various CPAS, before accessing the SPIS. Likewise, some beneficiaries access the SPIS several times with various interruptions in the follow-up. This means that refusing access or suspending the follow-up are not definitive decisions. For instance, if someone is exempted on the grounds of equity or health motives, the exemption can end when the problem is solved.

Those observations shed light to the logics of access to the SPIS. Indeed, the question does not seem to be “who is able?” but “who is unable?”. Workers appear to look for obstacles which would impede a socio-professional integration process and assess their importance in the light of the person’s specific situation, in a case-by-case evaluation based on unclear criteria. Those who are directed to the SPIS are not the most “able” or the most “employable”, but the least “unable”. Indeed, a variety of profiles is referred to the SPIS: more or less employable; directed at the request of the social worker, the Committee or the person; more or less in need of assistance; with a defined project or not. Besides, non-access is not definitive. This partly answers the research question about creaming practices. Indeed, it does not appear that only the most employable or the most “ready” are directed to the SPIS. Rather, those who are the least unable are granted access. It still remains to be compared with internal dynamics of the socio-professional integration service.

Accessing the services proposed by the SPIS

Once in the SPIS, the socio-professional integration process is far from being uniform and linear. Indeed, the measures proposed to recipients depend on the assessment made by SPIS social workers. Moreover, there is no deadline to leave the SPIS, meaning that follow-up can last for years. In this section, I will first describe the various measures workers propose and the justifications written in their reports, before analysing the consequences in terms of creaming practices.

Justifying referrals through the socio-professional integration process

The activities organised by the SPIS are as followed (cf. fig.2): first, the “cyber-job” is a room where recipients can look for a job on computers, respond to offers by e-mail or telephone and write CVs and application letters under the supervision of two OAs. Although there is a session every day, recipients must go when it is the turn of their reference OA. Interestingly, only some justifications in reports are related to job-search. Although people whose project is to look for a job and who already have professional experience or qualifications are indeed directed to cyber-job sessions, other reasons relate to testing recipients’ motivation and abilities. This is consistent with informal discussions I had with OAs, who told me they always directed people to cyber-job sessions when in doubt about their employability. They don’t only assess the ability to look for a job, but also their punctuality, regularity, behaviour and motivation. In other cases, “cyber-job” can be used to resolve disagreements or have recipients adjust their expectations about their professional project. For instance, a person was directed to cyber-job sessions because the OA wanted to make him realise that he was too demanding regarding schedules and professional fields. Therefore, actual assistance to look for a job is only one of the reasons why OA can direct recipients to the “cyber-job”.

A similar logic seems to structure referral to French, mathematics and computing courses given by one of the SIS animators: in addition to enabling recipients to refresh their knowledge, those sessions can be used as testing and normalising tools. For example, a man who had refused to take part in a SIS workshop was directed to French and mathematics courses in order to make him realise

he was not qualified enough to look for a job without additional training, as well as to assess his ability to respect a schedule.

The SPIS also organises a three-month module called “Let’s get active”, with the aim of helping those who find it hard to define a professional project. Coordinated by an OA and a psychologist, it combines individual follow-up, collective sessions about career guidance and “self-expression and communication”, and visits of various workplaces and training institutions. The goal of the module is reflected in reports, since OAs propose it to recipients who are uncertain about their professional project, “change their mind all the time” or want to change career.

Regarding work, OAs can propose to hire recipients by virtue of the article 60§7 of the organic law, provided that a job is available either in the CPAS or at a partner’s place. Sometimes, the Special Committee imposes an art.60 contract as a way of proving one’s willingness to work. By contrast, OAs told me they found it harder to convince employers regarding the more recent art.61. Therefore, they mainly use it when a beneficiary finds an employer by himself or herself. Hence, the uses of art.60 and art.61 are different: in the case of art.60, OAs are those who propose a recipient for a job, if they deem him or her “ready” to work. In the case of art.61, recipients must find a job on their own. Consequently, OAs don’t refuse art.61 contracts provided that the workplace agrees. It thus gives a chance to people who would not have been recommended to employers by social workers.

Moreover, beneficiaries have the possibility to do a two-week “immersive internship” in a workplace, in order to try a job, assess a professional project, or reassure a partner before signing a contract in virtue of the art.60§7 or the art.61. In one case, the justification was not about testing a job but about helping the person to regain confidence after several unsuccessful attempts to pass an exam.

In addition to those services organised by the SPIS, recipients can also undertake vocational trainings out of the CPAS. In that case, OAs will communicate with the school in order to be kept informed of recipients’ notes and regularity. The Committee can agree to lend money to beneficiaries in order to pay the fees.

As to the social integration service, it encompasses several workshops, from which recipients must choose two⁸: a cooking course, a creative workshop, exchanges of tips in order to spend less money (home-made cosmetics, sparing energy, etc.), a wooden-pallet workshop for men called “Step-by-step”, a “citizenship” course about various topics (contraception, first-aid, etc.), and a parenthood workshop directed at parents with educational problems. Except for the parenthood workshop, which has a yearly program, they can all be accessed all year long. All of them are combined with an individual follow-up. The official criteria to direct people to the SIS were already described here above. Nevertheless, the decree is very vague and justifications can be diverse. Indeed, people can be referred to the SIS in order to get out of social isolation, because the person does not yet feel able to define a professional project, or for the workers to get to know the person better if in doubt about what to do. Only the parenthood workshop is precisely justified, e.g. by a description relational issues between a mother and her child who had to play the “parent’s role”.

The examination of justifications sheds light on the potential multiples usages of each measure. Several of them are used to test beneficiaries’ motivation and abilities, boost their confidence, make

⁸ Except men who can only choose the “Step-by-step” workshop.

them change their mind in case of disagreement or socialising them to employability norms, e.g. respecting a schedule. Three kinds of referrals can thus be distinguished, which are not mutually-exclusive: the first one is consistent with the objectives of the measure, the second one aims at socialising recipients to wider norms of the social market, while the last one provides workers with a chance to get behavioural clues to decide what to do next. As a result, those who are selected are not always those who have the most chances to succeed.

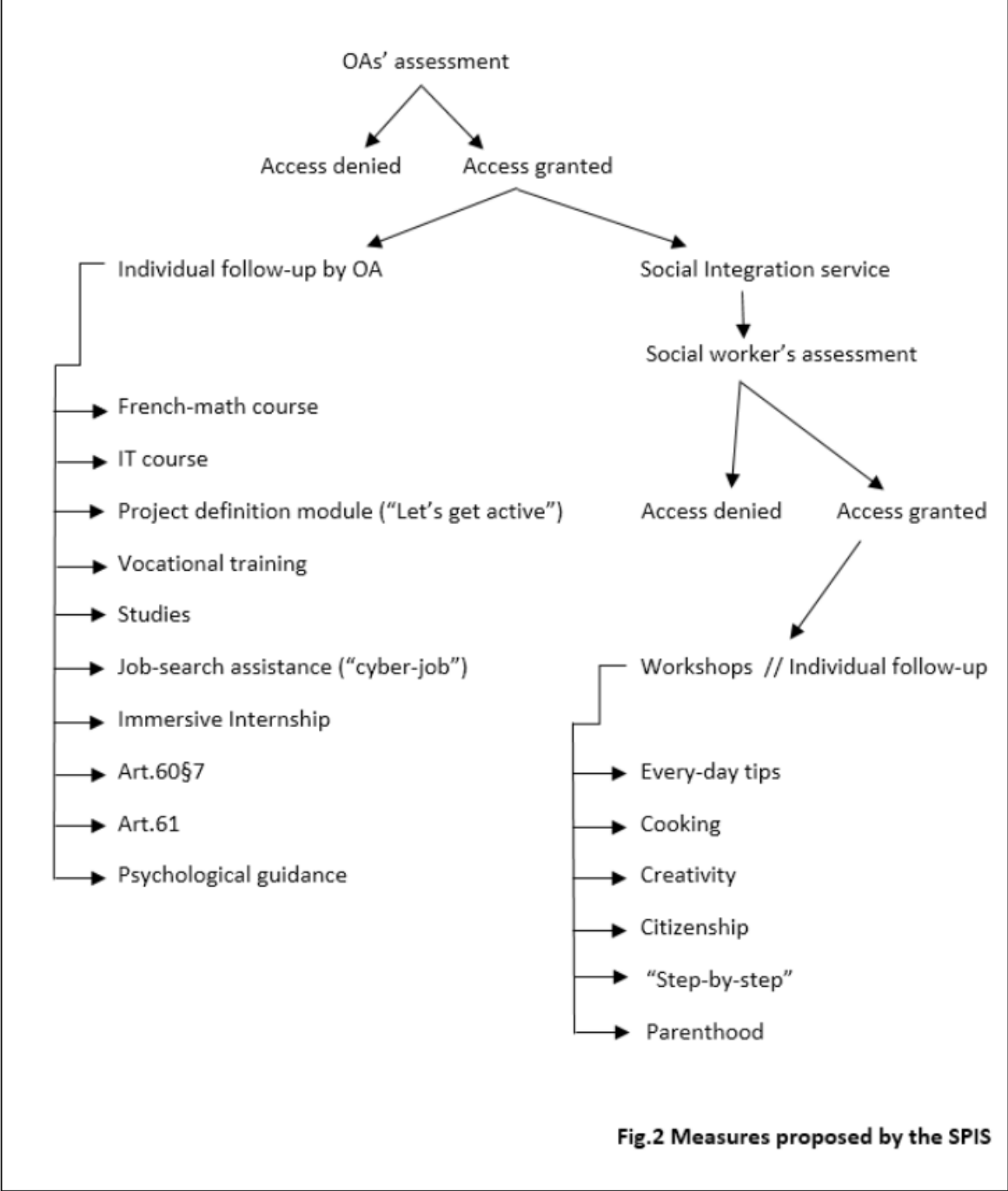


Fig.2 Measures proposed by the SPIS

Creaming practices in the socio-professional integration service

Those observations lead to nuancing of the notion of creaming. Indeed, creaming does not seem to be a general rule when each measure is examined separately. The legal demands for individualisation, the organisational autonomy granted to workers, the multidimensionality of CPAS mission and the lack of clarity of evaluation criteria lead to a case-by-case evaluation based on medical, behavioural and psychological aspects. What is more, measures themselves are used in a variety of ways and are also evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Several measures are thus used to test recipients' abilities and willingness: cyber-job sessions, French, mathematics and computing courses and immersive internships.

Two hypotheses can be proposed to explain this usage: on the one hand, workers' definition of their role can lead them to give as many chances as possible to recipients. Further analysis of other material such as interviews will be needed to assess it. On the other hand, SPIS workers are not necessarily aware of the internal dynamics of Committee sessions. Even if analysis has proved them to be responsible for their own decisions, they have no control over the way first-line social workers present cases to Counsellors. OAs must delegate their argumentation to workers who are not specialists of socio-professional integration practices, who must themselves present them to politicians who are not trained in social work. Consequently, testing recipients is a way of giving an appearance of objectivity by providing behavioural proofs to support their conclusions. Therefore, it appears that some measures are used as much as ways to reinforce SPIS workers' professional legitimacy as to help them decide what to propose to recipients.

By contrast, the selection process is stricter for some measures such as the project-definition module called "Let's get active", the SIS parenthood workshop and art.60§7 contracts. Interestingly, different logics seem to operate: scarcity of resources implied by the structure of the module on the one hand, and professional legitimacy towards partners on the other hand. Indeed, "Let's get active" and the parenthood workshop have a set programs, duration and amount of places. The public targeted by those measures is therefore precisely defined. Even if this logic also applies to art.60 contracts, since only a limited number of "art.60 jobs" is available, it is also combined with the necessity to maintain trust relationships with partners by selecting recipients who are the most likely to respect the norms of the workplace. Through the recipients OAs propose for those jobs, it is their own professional legitimacy which is at stake. This can explain the difference with art.61 contracts: letting recipients find an employer by themselves allows OAs to avoid engaging their own responsibility towards the workplace.

Nevertheless, a strict selection process does not mean that creaming processes are operating: indeed, it is rather the contrary regarding the parenthood workshop. Only the "worse" parents are accepted, not the best ones, which reflects a criteria of need more than chances of success. Therefore, creaming practices only seem to exist in cases of referral to the project definition module and art.60§7 contracts. This means that creaming can be defined as "task-dependent", which is consistent with Aurélien Buffat's analysis of discretion as plural depending on the type and complexity of tasks as well as on control mechanisms (2015: 93). Nevertheless, it mitigates the importance of control mechanism and incentives (Lipsky, 2010 [1980]), since available resources (time, places) and goal clarity sometimes seem more relevant, as shows the example of "Let's get active".

In addition to defining creaming as task-dependant, another distinction can be made between "task-related" and "process-related" creaming. Indeed, a selection process takes place in the course

of referrals to the measures proposed by the SPIS. Workers constantly reassess what they must do with recipients depending on the results at each step. Even though the flexibility and non-linearity of the process can be understood as reflecting an enabling version of activation (Brodkin, 2013), only those who are deemed the most employable are eventually proposed to art.60 jobs. Consequently, even though creaming is not the dominant logics when each measure is analysed separately, it seems to be diluted in several steps through a progressive evaluation process realised by a variety of actors, from the OA to the SIS animator.

Eventually, temporality must also be taken into account. There seems to be both “short-term” and “long-term” creaming logics which refer to the amount of “chances” granted to recipients. I define “short-term creaming” as creaming processes taking place at an early stage, whereas “long-term creaming” refers to recipients who went through all the steps of the process but accumulate failures or don’t eventually find any job, e.g. someone who began in the SIS, followed the “Lets’ get active” module as well as the French-math courses, failed his exams at the end of a training and received a negative evaluation after an immersive internship.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen that Belgian social assistance system was increasingly structured by activation policies. In 2002, a law created a right to social integration which changed the logic of rights provision. Not only did it institutionalise individualisation but it also defined integration as professional, which led to the development of specialised services in charge of socio-professional integration of recipients. Nevertheless, providing jobs is only one of the modalities of the right to social integration, as it can be limited to assistance benefits – with or without contracting. Consequently, the vagueness of the law delegates the concrete definition of the implementation process to street-level social assistance agencies, called CPAS. I thus turned to a street-level bureaucracy perspective to understand how this individualised logic is implemented in a socio-professional integration service, drawing upon an ethnographical study of a French-speaking social assistance agency.

Following Brodkin's definition of practices as political (2013), I analysed the underlying logics of referrals to socio-professional services and the various measures they propose with the aim assess the existence of creaming practices. In order to do so, I first analysed the extent of social workers’ autonomy to make decision related to socio-professional issues. The dynamics of the decision process demonstrated that SPIS workers possess an actual power of decision, even if it is legally granted to a board composed of local politicians.

I then turned to the examination of the ways they justified the uses of each measure in written reports. Accessing the SPIS proved to be the result of a several-step evaluation process involving first-line social workers, a “linking-agent” and SPIS orientation agents (OAs). It emerged that non-access is more systematically and more precisely defined than access, even if most criteria are vague, e.g. “health or equity” motives. Indeed, workers mainly seem to look for obstacles that would impede a socio-professional integration process, while evaluating their importance relatively to each person’s specific situation. Consequently, those who are directed to the SPIS are not those who are the most able but those who are the least unable, which would support the absence of creaming practices regarding access to the service.

Nevertheless, this conclusion must be nuanced as far as access to measures proposed to the SPIS is concerned. Indeed, their uses proved to be multiple, since only some of them lead to creaming

practices. Recipients' referral to the services proposed by the SPIS can thus be understood as a dialectic between the evaluation of recipients' needs and the goals of the measures, which constitute a toolkit invested with a diversity of meanings. Creaming must then be understood as a multi-dimensional process.

To begin with, it can be regarded as task-dependent, depending on the meaning attributed to the measure, the resources available (time, number of places) and the source of their professional legitimacy (internal hierarchy of external partners).

Secondly, the creaming process can be task-related, if each measure is analysed separately, or process-related, if the socio-professional integration process is analysed as a whole with professional integration as a goal. In this regard, creaming practices are not the general logic guiding most tasks but is rather diluted along the multiple evaluations which structure the process.

Thirdly, it can be distinguished between "short-term" and "long-term" creaming, in the sense that the socio-professional integration process encompasses multiple temporalities. Indeed, the follow-up can be cut short after weeks, months or years, depending on the variety of measures that recipients already accessed.

Creaming practices are thus neither rife nor uniform. They must be related to the meanings workers attribute to recipients' needs, abilities and motivation on the one hand, and to the purpose of each measure on the other. Aggregated "pragmatic improvisations" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2012, 2015) lead to a diluted creaming process regarding access to art.60 jobs. Nevertheless, this analysis must still be confronted to other data such direct observation and semi-structured interviews, in order to analyse the practical knowledge leading to the justifications analysed in this paper, as well as the ways workers define their role. Indeed, it may be that, in their view, integration is not reduced to access to jobs. More attention must then be paid to the cognitive and normative dimensions of their practices.

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