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## The bureaucracy's voices in Norwegian client interviews

*This article concerns a sociological study of face-to-face interaction taking place in social welfare offices in Norway. Qualitative data from interpreted dialogues between Norwegian social workers and their clients from minority groups of refugees and immigrants, bureaucratic voices and discourses are examined.*

*For the social worker, face-to-face interaction is a matter of a professional performance characterized by an ambiguity between impartiality on the one hand and participatory involvement and understanding on the other. Power and control prevails significantly within the interactions as they strive to perform communicative actions between equals. Through some specific examples from my own observational studies, I have attempted to describe issues that can illustrate how the bureaucratic voice and prevalent discourses can be expressed in a variety of ways. For the social worker, it is a matter of a professional performance which is characterized by impartiality, counselling, objective verbal actions, the exercise of discretion, information distribution, etc.*

**Keywords** face-to-face interaction; social welfare; bureaucratic voices; discourse; ambiguity

### Introduction

This article concerns social interaction and communication in concrete client interviews at social welfare offices in Norway. I have conducted 10 observation sessions of interpreter-assisted interviews between social workers and clients with minority backgrounds (Ørvig, 2007). Although the analyses of the interpreter's role in the interaction play an important part in my PhD study of interpreted interviews in the social services, the focus here to a greater degree is on the roles of the social worker and client. The data are based on 10 case studies distributed over four social welfare offices in three municipalities in Rogaland County in Norway. Each individual case is constructed on the basis of the observation of an interpreted client interview, in addition to focus groups and interviews with the involved participants.

I was present as an observer at all 10 client interviews, including both reception dialogues and consultation interviews. The analysis in this article is primarily based on findings from these observational studies.

There is a range of research contributions and literature in the field of communications and counselling in meetings between professionals and laypeople in healthcare and social services (Roter & Hall, 2006; Tucket, 2005; Barlow *et al.*, 2003; Barge & Loges, 2003). The aforementioned studies include analyses of doctors, nurses, homecare services and teachers. Generally speaking, the research in this field focuses on the interaction in doctor/patient meetings. To a lesser degree, there has been research conducted into other parts of healthcare and social services. A particular interest in the context of this contribution will be on *concrete* meetings between professionals and laypeople (Hall & Slembrouck, 2009, p. 461).

Four main questions are discussed in this article: What *bureaucratic voices and discourses* arise in face-to-face interactions between social workers and clients with minority language backgrounds? How do the participants interpret the relevant voices in the interviews? What *ambiguities* apply in the interactions? How are *power and control* expressed in these interactions?

Through some examples from my own observation sessions, I will describe issues that can demonstrate how the bureaucratic voice and prevalent discourse can be expressed in a variety of ways in the course of the client interviews. The examples may reveal power, control, powerlessness and ambiguities in the relationship. In addition to the bureaucratic voice that is audible through the social worker's verbal actions, I will demonstrate that the use of various forms is also a type of bureaucratic voice.

From a theory perspective, the article focuses on face-to-face *interaction*. In order to illustrate this specific interview situation, I have taken my point of departure in Erving Goffman's system of terminology. It is especially his concept of 'interaction order' (1983) that seems to be fruitful in analyses of client interviews in social welfare offices. The concept of interaction order can illustrate what is taking place in the entire social context, both verbally and non-verbally, when the social worker and client interact in client interviews in social services.

Goffman (1972) argues for the adapting of the role concept in face-to-face interaction. The role concept illustrates how various participants (in this case the social worker and the client) perform activities that are related to the institutional and professional roles they have been allocated.

Client interviews at the social welfare office entail a bureaucratic and professional activity between service provider and user. This meeting takes place in a bureaucratic organization in a public administration system. Max Weber's description of the bureaucratic public administrative system is used as a theoretical point of departure, which can incorporate the bureaucratic and professional activity that exists between the social worker and client. Weber ([1922] 2000) emphasizes the importance of objectivity, distance, neutrality and impartiality in the performance of modern bureaucracies.

When a client makes contact with a social welfare office/social worker, a public servant is required to treat the client with impartiality and neutrality. The public servant at a social welfare office shall avoid conducting personal dislikes, partiality and emotional sentiments. Neutral treatment demands that different social workers treat different cases indifferently regarding personal attitudes, appearance, culture and gender. Impartiality implies that only required information relevant to the specific case is requested. Neutrality, distance and impartiality form the one aspect Weber emphasizes regarding the demands and normative requirements related to the public servants performance in a modern bureaucratic context. Language, behaviour patterns, rules and norms in a bureaucratic organization should reflect these requirements and penetrate into the utterances and dialogues performed by public servants. This is to be understood as the objective aspect of the bureaucratic voice. Another aspect of the bureaucratic voice regards the public servants necessary inquiry into specific cases in order to *understand* the causes behind the actual situation to be investigated.

Weber emphasizes the importance of understanding through empathy as a basis for being able to explain the action. This constitutes the other (subjective) aspect of the bureaucratic voice. The voice is expressed in the interaction situation and is especially communicated through the social worker. Distance, neutrality, etc. on the one hand and understanding, empathy and involvement on the other, make present an ambiguity in the performance of the bureaucratic voice in modern bureaucratic organizations.

An aspect of the bureaucratic professional activity that Weber does not emphasize adequately concerns how particular *types* of knowledge are produced and expressed through institutional interviews. I am referring here to the way in which through the interview with the client, the professional actor negotiates and justifies a specific perception of reality. This reality that is communicated by the professional actor will also be the perception that he/she prefers. In this way, the professional actor contributes in making dominant institutional discourses relevant (Miller & Silverman, 1995, p.729). Examples of dominant institutional discourses could be publicly discussed norms and ideals regarding health, fitness and proper codes of conduct (see below).

In order to explore how institutional discourses can be expressed as voices in the client interview, I will employ some central concepts from Michel Foucault (1999, 2000a). It is his concept of power, and the relationship between power and knowledge, that is relevant in this context. Foucault's perspective on power can show how power can be rooted in social relations and activities in certain situations/discourses, particularly how power is produced. In this respect, power is produced through dominant discourses that address bio-power. Examples of these discourses on how we should live our lives as healthy citizens are transmitted through discourses by specialists on nutrition, fitness, health care, etc. (Aakvaag, 2008).

## **Client interviews at social welfare offices**

Social work as an activity covers two basic categories: the social worker and the client. This entails that the participants constitute themselves in certain asymmetrical roles (Juhila, 2003). In this concrete relationship, the social worker has a position that entails, among other things, that it is his/her responsibility to map out the client's problems, and he/she can also provide advice and counselling.

The client's role is associated with seeking professional help, providing information about his/her private affairs, accepting help and advice and being prepared to submit to particular types of institutional routines. This type of categorization will depend on there being some common cultural characteristics, activities that can be associated with these categories, and with these common cultural characteristics being related to the relevant institutional rules that apply in a particular setting. There are institutional rules that the participants are expected to respect when they meet each other in the client interview. In their own way, both must adopt but play different roles as client and social worker, respectively. In the same way as they adopt and practice these roles, an unequal dominant-submissive ordering of the role is defined.

The social workers who agreed to participate in my study are all qualified practitioners. Their working tasks include different types of services in local government, and social work with individuals, families, groups and the local community. This means casework, advice and treatment as well as preventive action.

In order to structure the social frames of dialogues in the social welfare offices of Norway, it is common to differentiate between two main types of interviews. These are the counselling dialogue and the public administrative dialogue. The former directs its focus on the discussions and negotiations that may arise between the parties in the various settings. This may be the case when social workers suggest different types of actions in helping the clients to manage their lives. In that frame of reference, it is usually the social worker who takes the initiative (Oltedal, 2004). According to Miller and Silverman (1995), an advice or action towards a client often occurs in settings in which the purpose of the professional is to direct a client towards something that he/she intends to implement. There are no rules or institutional norms related to the advice, i.e. the social worker cannot carry out the advice offered. Instead, he/she needs informed consent, and it is the client who decides if he/she wants to comply with the advice or not.

Concerning the public administrative dialogue, a fast and routine categorization of the client characterizes the typical type of interview. As I will demonstrate in the illustrations (p. 8), the public administrative dialogue also includes the allocation of status and identity on the client. Such a system of categorization allows the social welfare office to be able to differentiate between those clients who have the right to and meet the requirement of service, and those who do not. Another reason is related to filtering out which type of services the client needs (Solheim & Øvreid, 2001), thus there exist distinct guidelines and standard procedures.

## **Power and control**

In the following section I will describe two concrete situations that can be said to characterize client interviews at social welfare offices, which may reveal an inherent power and control in the relationship.

*This is how we do it here!*

In addition to the social worker and interpreter, the participants in the interview are a family with two children which has recently arrived in the municipality in question and been summoned to a meeting in order to receive information in relation to their 'settling in'. Among other things, the interview concerns the purchase of equipment for the home allocated to the family by the municipality.

During the interview, the social worker recommends that the family purchases certain types of equipment for the home e.g (curtains and lamp shades), in addition to furniture, beds and carpets. The social worker uses a large amount of the time discussing this information. In order to show what is 'normal to have' in Norway, she produces several different types of catalogues from discount chains. She argues strongly for the necessity of both bunk-beds and curtains, although members of the family say they prefer that the children sleep on mattresses on the floor for the time being. According to the family, curtains are not something they wish to prioritize at this stage. The social worker justifies her 'advice' based on the fact that 'this is how we do it here'. In this context, the bureaucratic voice is expressed as a paternalistic attitude in which the social worker acts as 'expert' in terms of the client's preferences.

The specific exercising of the role exhibited by the social worker in this interview demonstrates her position of power over her clients. The social worker suggests the equipment that *she* regards as being necessary for a home. At the same time, this can also be an illustration of particular norms with regard to what is *acceptable* equipment in a Norwegian home.

The social worker's preference may reveal an inherent power and control in the relationship, with the clients held hostage to the social worker's *power to define*. This can be perceived by the client as a situation of powerlessness. The client may feel that he/she is subject to the social worker's power to define because he/she is dependent on the financial support of the social welfare office. It can be difficult for the client to present his/her own requirements regarding the equipment in the home. At the same time, the assistance for setting up a home is a legal right they are given due to their status as refugees.

Another factor that can support the fact that the social worker has the power to define in the interview is that the social worker states that she must help the clients with purchasing equipment for their home, which can be useful for the clients. As new residents in the municipality, it is not always easy to know where to go in order to find whatever one requires. However, the offer of assistance can also be a form of control. The clients may experience that the control of furnishing their own home as they wish has been taken away from them. This can result in a sense of powerlessness for those concerned since establishing one's *own* independent household and one's *own* independent life is an important element in the process of becoming settled. This powerlessness can be further reinforced if it is experienced as a loss of dignity (Gullestad, 2002).

Reference has been made above to some circumstances that can be said to characterize client interviews at social welfare offices. In this connection, I referred to the *asymmetry* inherent in the relationship between the social worker and the client (p. 3). This entails that it is the professional social worker who has the power and control in the relationship. Another concrete interview can also help to further illustrate what is involved in the aforementioned asymmetry.

### *One-way oriented information*

There are *five* persons present at the interview: a married couple (Ali and Latifa), a male interpreter, a refugee consultant and a social worker. This is the first interview the family has had with the social welfare office in question. The intention of this interview is for the family to receive information on social welfare payments and the establishing of a home for themselves. There is a number of papers and application forms on the table in front of the two public servants.

The social worker and the consultant open the interview by presenting themselves and their respective work tasks in relation to the clients. During this process, they use words and expressions such as 'documentation', 'decisions', 'social welfare payments', 'income adjustment' and 'criminal liability'. During the interview, the social worker and consultant begin to speak more quickly, while at the same time Ali becomes confused and tense about different parts of the information being given.

In the reception interview with Ali and Latifa, the manner in which the social worker and the consultant present themselves suggests that they signify a specified competency, which can benefit the clients in the form of an overview of the regulations and a control of the financial resources. In addition, the presentation of the work assignments establishes a framework for the interview that is in line with the institutional regime at the social welfare office in question. The consequence of such a framework is that it is the social worker/refugee consultant who has the authority and defines the situation.

In the follow-up interview with the social worker, she explains her behaviour in the reception interview as follows:

The special thing about reception interviews is that it is the first time we meet the refugees and there is a great deal of information to be communicated. So I feel I was in a bit of a dilemma and I considered whether I should ask them to explain back to me everything that was said, taking account of the time pressure. And this is something that applies to reception interviews. Because then we make a framework for all the information and we can provide information afterwards.

This statement shows that this is a person concerned with following the practice that is normal at the social welfare office in question. In general, as much new information as possible must be provided when the clients come to their first interview at the social welfare office. This type of *information surplus* can be perceived as being oriented in one direction, and is primarily connected to the fact that there is not enough regard for *recipient competency*. Although the informant says that the shortage of time makes it difficult to provide much information and simultaneously ensure that the information has been properly understood, the public servant decides to provide as much information as she can.

## **Bureaucratic voices**

### *Paper forms as a type of bureaucratic voice*

Filling out forms is a general activity in the client interviews in social services, and the form itself can therefore be regarded as an actor. Filling out the form imposes requirements for information and information type, something that also contributes to a controlling of the communication. The use of forms becomes an institutional voice. In the words of Bakhtin (1981, cited in Holquist, 2004), this activity demonstrates how the role of being a social worker is *populated* by the common practice employed at the social welfare office,<sup>1</sup> which can appear to be present as an impersonal and absent interaction partner who monitors the interview's regime as defined by the social worker.

In my study, there are no interviews that proceed without one or more forms being completed, but this is particularly common in the first-time interview as demonstrated in the previous section. In this concrete interview, the social worker and refugee consultant take turns filling out various forms they have lying on the table in front of them at the beginning of the interview. The social worker and consultant do not inform the clients about what they are writing or even about whether it has anything to do with Ali and/or Latifa. Ali and Latifa are asked to sign the completed forms, and do so without asking any questions.

In client interviews, the social worker is generally dependent on obtaining relevant background information about the client, which is necessary and important information for the social worker. Without this type of information it would be difficult for him/her to evaluate which financial payments the social welfare office can provide in order to help meet the client's acute financial requirements. The question of social welfare payments is therefore a performance on the part of the social worker, which is in line with the expectations associated with his/her role in the client interview. At the same time, this type of activity will be in accordance with the practice that forms the basis for the type of work that takes place at a social welfare office, which is embedded in the particular discourses that are socially dominant: knowledge and power.

The social worker's information gathering is a means to construct the *knowledge base* that he/she possesses based on his/her role as a professional. He/she has acquired this knowledge base through education and practice, and this contributes to him/her achieving an insight into the situation, unlike the client and interpreter (Terum, 2003). The particular situational insight that the social worker has acquired through education and practice includes procedures such as carrying out the project focus in the present interview. By going directly to the issue and starting with the question concerning social welfare payments, he/she contributes to a presentation of him/herself in which the emphasis is on objective verbal actions and the use of discretion. Such behaviour is in line with Weber's bureaucracy, while also indicating ambiguity in the bureaucratic administrative process.

### *Bureaucratic voices and discourses*

In Norway the role of a social worker includes an obligation to evaluate each individual case in order to better understand the person that he/she shall assist. It is also a social worker's task to assess whether the client meets the legal requirement for financial social assistance and to provide *counselling* to those who do, which is demonstrated in one of the interviews in the concrete observation session.

There are five persons at the client's interview: a female social worker, a male interpreter and a female client with two small children. The client can only speak a little Norwegian and is therefore completely dependent on the interpreter. It is the client herself who contacted the social welfare office for the interview, and she has taken a large bag with her which she places on the table in front of her.

The social worker begins the interview by asking the client whether or not she has received cash payments.<sup>2</sup> The social worker speaks in a calm voice while looking at the client and the interpreter communicates the message, although the client does not respond to the question. In the interview, the client says that she does not understand what is involved in the 'agreements' with the social welfare office. She also says that she has problems understanding how the Norwegian public assistance system works, particularly in relation to filling out forms, reporting changes of address and applications to the National Insurance Office. Additionally, she feels that it can be difficult to differentiate between the different invoices. On several occasions, she produces piles of invoices and various letters and papers from the large bag lying on the table in front of her.

After this has continued for a while, the social worker informs the client about the social welfare office's procedures in connection with decisions and the rejection of requests. For example, she offers a suggestion as to how the client can reduce her high telephone bill by using a pay-as-you-go solution for her mobile phone. The client shows no indication that this information is something that she is interested in hearing since her focus is primarily on what she must do about her financial situation.

In this context, the advice can be thought to be preventative with regard to the client's future telephone bills and not a measure that can assist with her acute need for financial assistance here and now. Even so, this type of support represents a specific understanding of reality. One can say that the social worker justifies a perception of reality that is the one she prefers in this situation. In this way, she makes relevant the discourses that are currently in use at the social welfare office and, in this case, it is pertaining to the fact that they do not cover telephone bills. This type of practice is expressed through the social worker's bureaucratic voice, which in the present situation is being used for support as she gives the client some advice on how to save money.

Support can also be perceived as having a paternalistic attitude on the part of the social worker, who is supposed to be an expert on the client's economic life. Such an interpretation of this supporting activity is in accordance with Ronnby (1987, cited in Ylvisaker, 2004) when he says that social workers have adopted a pedagogic role in relation to their clients. According to Ronnby, this pedagogic role is a result of an individually oriented approach that has given social workers legitimacy in terms of having a professional, expert-like attitude in relation to their clients (Ylvisaker, 2004). Such an understanding of this role entails an emphasis on the fact that there is a dominant/submissive relationship in the exercising of the respective roles, which sometimes comes into conflict with the requirement for mutual recognition in the social worker's performance of his/her role. There is a possibility here for ambiguity in the exercising of the role and in the rational model of bureaucracy, characterized by the ambiguity between equal treatment and the exercise of discretion.

## **Ambiguities in social interactions**

Ambiguity is an expression directing attention to basic social dilemmas stated as contradictions between individuals and society. In the context of this article, ambiguities make themselves apparent in the bureaucratic voice of the social worker. Through some concrete examples from my own observational studies, I have attempted to describe issues that can illustrate how the bureaucratic voice and prevalent discourses can be expressed in a variety of ways. For the social worker, it is a matter of a professional performance which is characterized by impartiality, counselling, objective verbal actions, the exercise of discretion, information distribution, etc. In the presentation of this role, the bureaucratic voice acts more or less implicitly in the situation as an aspect of the professional framework, as was seen in the first example when the social worker recommended to the client to switch to a pay-as-you-go solution for her mobile telephone. This suggests that the social worker may have a perception of herself as the person who knows best in how the client can resolve her financial problems.

Some of the same factors are evident when the social worker recommends equipment for the home that is 'normal to have' in Norway. She also expresses bio-power through her statements concerning the discourse on normal and 'the way we do it here' (see Foucault *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, the two situations can help to illustrate the power that the social worker has to influence the client to perform certain actions. This concerns the discursive power that is expressed through the social worker's voice that is associated with her role as a professional in a bureaucratic system. At the same time, the concrete situations can demonstrate that we have a situation in which public authority figures exercise their roles as professional persons (providing counselling, information communication and the use of forms).

In contrast, the client may have expectations from the social worker that do not always correspond with reality. As one example, this can be seen when the social worker states that the social welfare office does not cover telephone bills, thus suggesting that the client has a problem in relation to understanding the logic of the social system (Ylvisaker, 2004). When it is also taken into consideration that there is a *meeting of cultures* between persons who lack a common language, the client can experience unpredictability as far as knowing what financial assistance she can expect from the social welfare office. The client may not understand the regulations or the practice being exercised. Therefore, the issue is when and whether assistance is provided and also that the client's efforts to tackle difficult life situations are not always 'accommodated' within the framework of the social welfare office (Ylvisaker, 2004).

The degree of the exercising of discretion, empathy, etc. being displayed by the social worker/social welfare office can underscore the client's confusion pertaining to the system, thereby reflecting a possible ambiguity between distance and empathy. The exercise of discretion that forms the basis for the social worker's activity can represent grounds for uncertainty, and this uncertainty and the way in which it is handled can affect the client's role performance. Here, the bureaucratic voice and the management of this voice come into play, e.g. expectations for social welfare payments are not fulfilled, despite the social worker being 'nice'.

There is also the matter of the activities that suggest that the client lacks important knowledge concerning her rights and regulations (system knowledge and cultural competency) with concern to public services. This may be a sign of poor recipient competency on the part of the client, something that can lead to uncertainty in relation to the rights that she actually possesses, which can subsequently lead to the client experiencing a sense of powerlessness with the situation in question.

The ambiguities and dilemmas in regard to the requirements and expectations for the playing out of roles for the bureaucratic representative (the social worker) are expressed here through the exercising of that role. It concerns the concrete handling of the regime that is practiced by the individual participant in the interview situation. The bureaucracy and its associated ambiguities are presented with their own voice through the social worker. Identification of such a non-physically present voice is inspired by Goffman (1981) and Foucault (1988, 1999, 2000a), who both refer to the significance of several voices (including non-physically present) voices to assist in the progress of the interview.

Goffmann's emphasis on voices from participants in the interview who are not physically present can identify the presence of the bureaucratic voice in the interview. This applies not only to the social worker but the client as well. We can see this based on the exercising of roles in the concrete interview situations. In conclusion, I will briefly sum up the possibility for this presence.

## Conclusion

In the situations described above, the social worker expresses her authority when it comes to managing order. However, such authority is not unconditional. Some of the status and power that the social worker has is connected to her role as a representative of the host country's bureaucracy. As such, this entails the handling of ambiguous requirements and expectations for the performance of the role. On the one hand, the social worker must employ objective case management in order to identify requirements of the client which are worthy of assistance and support. For instance, the objective case management must ensure equal treatment for clients with equivalent needs. At the same time, the social worker must display involvement, empathy, etc., in order to achieve an understanding of the actual and concrete needs that the client has for assistance and support. The latter involves a requirement to make a break with the same objective case orientation. The result of handling these requirements will be expressed by the social worker in relevant, concrete interview situations, in which the ambiguity is present as a type of 'bureaucratic voice' in the social worker's presentation of herself.

The client can choose a strategy in order to reply to the bureaucratic voice by presenting themselves as a worthy recipient. The client explains her difficult financial situation as being related to her linguistic problems, as well as a lack of overview of the organization of social assistance apparatus. Regarding the client's strategy, if she achieves sympathy through her narrative, this may contribute to the social worker perceiving the client as being a worthy case for assistance. Such a status could increase the client's financial support from the social welfare office.

Clients can select strategies in order to demonstrate their requirements in order to achieve the best possible result in connection to fulfilling their need for assistance and support. At the same time, the client must also behave objectively by adequately replying to the project that the social worker has been appointed to implement (replying to answers regarding welfare payments). The client's competency can also reveal a certain understanding for the fact that the social worker has a dilemma between acting objectively correct, e.g. in regard to equal treatment, in addition to the need for sympathetic insight into this particular client's requirements for assistance and support as set out by the client. In other words, the presence of the bureaucratic voice requires a recipient competency on behalf of the client if he/she is to translate and understand the message that this voice communicates through the presentations of the social worker. The same applies in relation to replying to this voice. Here, the client will also have a dilemma in replying relevantly and carefully to the social worker's questions, hence, the client will be dependent on pursuing his/her own interests in order to present him/herself as a worthy applicant in an advantageous manner. This type of presentation could contribute to him/her achieving the best possible result in satisfying his/her requirement for help and assistance. Both the client and the public servant are trapped by the modern bureaucracy and the corresponding dilemma of the public administration. This can be clearly demonstrated in meetings in which the participants each represent different cultures (minority/dominant); as a consequence, recipient competency on behalf of the client becomes especially challenging. An important

question then concerns the possibilities for a person with a different cultural background in understanding the type of ambiguities I have described through the examples of the bureaucratic voice. This implies the possibility for understanding what it is that forms the basis for the perceptions of reality and the definitions of situations that face people as actors in a host country culture, which is the case for many refugees and immigrants. A critical interpretation problem arises, that neither client, interpreter, nor social worker has the competency to fully manage. Herein lies some important factors that can explain variations, diversity and dynamics, as well as regime problems and failures in the interview situations that I have attempted to demonstrate through the use of some empirical examples in this article.

## Notes

- 1 As used by Bakhtin, the concept of populated entails that every statement, both in verbal and written communication, is the result of others' words, voices, attitudes and intentions. The words, voices, etc. are expressed through what we might call micro-dialogues (Holquist, [1990] 2004). G.H. Mead (Strauss, 1977) was among the first to present an inner dialogue with a non-physically present person.
- 2 These are social welfare payments made to the parents of children aged 1–3 who either never, or only partially, use day care facilities that receive state support.

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