



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 6
Issue 6 *November*

Article 3

November 1979

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SOCIAL SERVICES IN THE IRON CAGE

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ABSTRACT: Interview and documentary data from a study of a voluntary job placement agency revealed that counselors were effectively weeding out the hard-to-place clients. These clients were the target population of the agency and its funded programs. The clients who were weeded out tended to be younger, with less education and less work experience. Weeding out was accomplished by discouraging unrealistic clients, and by not retrieving clients who were insufficiently motivated to keep in touch with the counselor. This marked a change in the counselors' practice compared with an earlier period, and appeared to be in conflict with the agency's mission, the counselors' altruistic orientation, and the expressed intent of the government-funded programs. The change in practice was associated with increased dependence of the agency and its counselors, and with the increasing demands for bureaucratic accountability from funding organizations.

The findings suggest that as social services are increasingly funded by government, the agencies and practitioners find themselves in the "iron cage" of bureaucratic rationality and accountability, less able to hold to their organizational purposes and to enact their altruistic values.

Social services appear to be faced with increasing demands for rational accountability, as government finances more and more of the services and on a larger scale. Social services become market commodities, and calculation of the cost per unit of service becomes more common. However, the study of one agency indicates that under some conditions, the detailed specification of goals, standards, and timetables may be in contradiction with what is often thought to be the main purpose of such programs: viz., providing services to those most in need of them.

Max Weber saw the highly rationalized modern world, with its typically bureaucratic form of organization, as an iron cage from which there were few escapes. Once fully established, bureaucracy was said to be the hardest of all social structures to destroy because of its technical superiority and because of the dependence it engenders: societies are increasingly dependent on the "steady and correct functioning" of bureaucracies, and propertyless bureaucrats are "chained" to their work by their "entire material and ideal existence."

Weber's description of the fully developed bureaucracy is well known. However, three of the features are important here and should be mentioned. The first is the connection between discipline and dependence that is implicit in the concepts of impersonal authority and, at the same time, the motivation of regular salaries and organizational career prospects. The second is the form that bureaucratic rationality takes. Personal feelings and emotions are eliminated in the work. Persons are objectified as "cases," and by implication, performance is evaluated by case-counting. The third feature is that of accountability. This is inherent in Weber's description of the hierarchical structure of bureaucracies: lower-level officials are accountable to those at the next level up.

Weber did not discuss the role of professions within bureaucratic organizations. It can be argued, however, that within the organization, professionalism serves as a counterweight to bureaucratic dependence, rationality, and accountability. Professionals have transferrable credentials, are more oriented to the individual case than the categorical case, and in the ideal are accountable to themselves and the professional standards for their work. Lubove (1973) has argued that in the past, social workers had to "attain hegemony within the agency" in order to attain professional status and autonomy. To this we might add that professional autonomy was necessary to do the work consistent with the reformist and altruistic orientations of early workers in the field.

Externally, however, it is a different situation. The social services agency must deal with other organizations as an organization, not as a profession. And as government, the non pareil of bureaucracy, finances more and more social services, the organizational relationships between government bureaus and social services agencies are strongly influenced by the bureaucratic imperatives of government. The dependence that ensues opens the door for the return of bureaucratic rationality and accountability. For those professionals

employed by government bureaus, the emphasis on categorical cases and case-counting has always defined their struggle with their employers. Their most persistent complaints are that they are rule-enforcers rather than client-helpers; that clients are often fragmented among different bureaucracies or their problems are not covered by abstract regulations; and that there is an excessive amount of paper work required (for accountability).

In general, for those in the helping professions, bureaucracy is like Weber's iron cage, although for a different reason. For Weber, the issue was freedom. For helping professionals, the issue is altruism: a feeling concern for others and appropriate, particularistic action. The case study reported here led to this perspective. The most notable bureaucratic effect observed was the weeding-out of a substantial part of the target population. This conflicted not only with the purpose of the funded programs, but also with the mission of the agency and the altruistic orientation of the counselors.

The Agency and its Mission

The Youth Employment Agency (YEA) is a voluntary agency located in a large eastern city. The mission of YEA has traditionally been defined by its Board as providing job placements for youths "in trouble with the law." Clients are referred to YEA by other agencies. In recent years, the agency has sought more government funding to remain competitive with other organizations in the field, and to expand its operations. Virtually all agency clients were already unskilled, and most had not completed high school. The new contract programs, however, added categorical target populations with additional employment handicaps: narcotics users, probationers, and parolees. The agency welcomed these contracts, since it had long claimed to specialize in serving the "hardest to place" clients.

Weeding Out Clients

A study of the organization was conducted over a four-year period (1972-1976). In reviewing client records for one of the new contract programs, it was observed that clients frequently did not return to the agency after registration and the initial interview with a counselor. When the problem was discussed with counselors and administrators, it seemed evident that little was being done to retrieve many of these clients. This was contrary to the practice of the agency three years earlier, and was also contrary to the proclaimed "mission" of the agency, as well as the expressed intent of the funded programs.

The change in the agency's practice was evident in the increase, in recent years, in the percentage of clients who did not return after the initial interview. In 1973, the agency began its first large contract program involving detailed performance standards, with job placement and retention quotas, a monthly timetable, and penalties for sub-standard performance. The following table compares the three-year period prior to 1973, and the three-year period after 1973, with respect to the percentages of clients who did not return after one interview. The figures are derived from a sample of the agency's files.

TABLE 1: Percentage of Clients Not Returning After One Interview

<u>Period</u>	<u>One-Interview Only</u>
1970-72	17% (6/36)
1974-76	41% (22/54)

Prior to 1973, counselors were expected to maintain a list of clients who were "available for work," along with the type of job desired and the client's traits and skills. When a suitable job was available, the counselor put a "hold" on the job and contacted the client by phone. Clients who did not return after the first interview were thus not necessarily deprived of a job. Counselors seemed to work harder at keeping in touch with the client and in encouraging them with job offers. The "available-for-work system" was based, in part, on the belief that clients were not sufficiently "motivated" to come to the agency's office frequently in the quest for a job. By 1976, however, clients were required to "keep in touch" with the agency's counselors in order to be considered for job placement. Jobs were not held for clients, and clients were persuaded to take any job that was available regardless of their interests, backgrounds, or experience.

The counselors themselves described the new practice as a test of clients' motivation. One counselor said: "There are different ways of testing motivation--in terms of how badly does that person want to be helped. Then you allocate that amount of time to that particular person. And the other ones just have to be weeded out."

One counselor described the clients who are "weeded out" as "the ones who need agency services the most." They were classified by counselors as not sufficiently "motivated" to work, compared with other clients. The counselors had fewer jobs available and focused their attention on the "more motivated clients" to help assure placements in a competitive job market.

Examination of a random sample of cases seen in 1974-76 suggested that at least three variables could be used to characterize the clients who were weeded out in all programs. These are age, education, and work experience. The findings are summarized below.

TABLE 2: Client Age and "Weeding Out"

<u>AGE</u>	<u>NUMBER</u>	<u>NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS</u>	
		<u>One</u>	<u>More than one</u>
16-18	22	14 (64%)	8 (36%)
19-21	32	8 (25%)	24 (75%)

That is, only 36% of clients in this sample who were 18 years or younger had more than one interview, while 75% of the older clients had more than one interview.

In addition, only 10% (2 out of 20) of the "one-interview clients" had 12 years of education, while 23% of the others had at least a high school education. A few of the latter had some college.

Those clients who received two or more interviews had had an average of 1.85 previous jobs, while the others had an average of 1.35 previous jobs. The difference here is not striking, though it must be noted that most clients were young and had relatively little work experience. Within that context, small differences may be important. It may also be true that other factors such as kind of job held and duration of previous employment were important influences on the counselors' efforts to aid individual clients. However, no analysis of these factors was possible.

In general, it appeared that the counselors' criterion of motivation ("keeping in touch") weeded out the clients who needed help the most: the youngest, the least educated, and the least experienced. These clients were more difficult to place on jobs, and were sacrificed by the agency under the increasing pressure to meet placement and retention quotas. The change appears to be associated with a new type of contract that demanded greater accountability. The new contracts did not completely eliminate the counselors' efforts to place individual clients by "reaching out" for them, but apparently the effort was more selective and was most focused upon clients sufficiently "motivated" to keep in touch with the counselor. Frequently, it was the younger, less educated, and less experienced client who did not pass this test of motivation.

The Process of Weeding Out

To what extent "motivation" is an independent factor, outside the counselor's control, is a troublesome and interesting question, but one which cannot be easily answered here. It appeared most likely that not all clients are equal in their desire and readiness for work. It also seems reasonable to suppose that what the counselors say and do has some effect on the motivation of clients.

A small number of new clients (fourteen) were interviewed for this study both before and after the first counseling session. On both occasions, the new clients were asked to estimate their chances of getting a job they would like and of getting any kind of job. Sometime later, the records on these clients were examined to see how much effort they had made to "keep in touch" with the counselor either by phone or by keeping office appointments, and whether the clients were placed on jobs or not.

The link between "keeping in touch" and placement on a job was fairly clear, as expected. None of the three clients who made no effort to keep in touch were placed. Two of the three clients who made a sustained effort were placed on jobs; the third client would accept only one kind of work, and the agency had no jobs of this kind to offer. Thus, those clients who "kept in touch," who called back, appeared to have a better chance of placement.

It also appeared that counselors induced motivation for some kinds of jobs while discouraging clients from believing they could get the kinds of jobs they wanted. In effect, they pre-screened clients, discouraging those who were hard to place or too highly motivated and encouraging those who would accept any job to return. Most clients

(5 out of the 9 useable cases) saw less chance of getting a job they would like after the first counseling session. Only two clients reported their chances for getting this kind of job improved, and one of these wanted a messenger job because he "liked to travel." This was a type of job the agency could easily offer. Most clients (5 out of 7 cases) saw a greater chance of getting some kind of job after the first counseling session. When the client's estimate of his or her chances of getting a "good job" decreased (as they typically did), the client made no effort to "keep in touch" unless the estimated chances of getting a "job of any kind" increased. Even maintaining the same level of optimism (no change) did not have the same effect.

Thus, job placement depended upon "keeping in touch," and the effort made to keep in touch depended in part on what happened in the first counseling session. It appeared that the weeding out process involved more than the client's objective demonstration of motivation. Counselors may have encouraged certain clients to weed themselves out by communicating doubts or pessimism regarding the chances of job placement.

Undermining Agency Mission

The mission of a voluntary organization is seldom given the attention it deserves. Mission refers to the sense of purpose of an agency, defined matter-of-factly in terms of the clientele to be served and the services to be provided. But beneath the surface, we often find the fire of crusade, reform, and concern, as well as rudimentary theories of motivation, power, and stratification.

YEA's mission, strongly influenced by the views of its founder and long-time Board chairman, was to help juvenile offenders avoid criminal careers by offering them job counseling and placement. The mission had survived the transition from a predominantly white clientele in the 1930's and the postwar period, to one that in recent years was composed largely of minority groups. In the 1950's, YEA was an important organization in the city's campaign to "socialize" the youthful gangs that were prevalent at the time. The agency had adjusted its intake standards in the 1960's to accommodate the "dis-advantaged" client as well as the youthful offender, but its primary purpose was still thought to be serving the latter group. They were young and hard to place, and YEA viewed itself as being unique in its concern for them.

On the basis of my study, it appeared that this mission was undermined in part by the necessity of achieving satisfactory placement statistics under the agency's new contracts--at a time when the local labor market was not favorable for unskilled (and stigmatized) workers. We have already noted that it was the younger, less educated and less experienced clients who were weeded out. Many of these were young probationer and parolee clients of the agency's newly-funded Crime Prevention program--just the sort of program that was most consistent with YEA's mission. The Crime Prevention program had the highest percentage of one-interview clients of all the funded programs: 46% of a sample of these clients had one interview only, and were not retrieved.

In the Addict Program, the average age of clients in 1976 was 28. These older clients were accepted, even recruited by the counselors so as to be able to meet contract placement quotas. This was far beyond the maximum age set by the Board as part of its mission to serve youthful offenders: 21 years of age.

The Board was not aware of these innovations, the effect of which was to significantly alter the operative mission of the agency.

Bureaucratization of Altruism

It doesn't seem farfetched to think of altruism as a valuable resource in a competitive and stratified society. With the expansion of welfare-state services, certain occupations (including the "helping professions") become more important as vehicles for the expression of concern for others. We ignore the full reality of social services work if we over-dramatize this. But short of that, it seems fair to say that the welfare state has reduced the urgency of private and personal altruistic behavior. At the same time, it has created altruistic occupations. But the practitioners of these occupations may be increasingly hemmed in by the demands for accountability emanating from the welfare-state bureaucracies. In other words, it may be getting harder to be altruistic. Whether this is generally so or not is an open question. But more concretely, it was observed at YEA that while the counselors reported the most gratification from working on the difficult cases, these clients were being steadily weeded out. There was no time to waste on the unmotivated and poorly-prepared client.

One counselor described how "exalted" she felt when one of her clients had finally been hired after numerous attempts. Another reported, with evident satisfaction, how he had worked with one client over a

period of three years, a time when the client had trouble keeping jobs despite a promising beginning each time.

The level of altruism of the agency's counselors was assessed in other ways. For example, counselors were asked whether they would accept a job in private industry if it paid \$1000 more annually--up to a hypothetical increase of \$4000. They were also asked how they handled expressions of gratitude from clients. And their previous (and subsequent) employment histories were examined. These and other measures were used to arrive at a rough estimate of the level of altruism of the counselors. There were, of course, variations among them, and the general level of altruism was affected by agency recruitment standards (which tended to eliminate excessively altruistic applicants). But the counselors were as a whole at least moderately altruistic, with some at the higher end of the scale devised.

This problem could be analyzed in different ways: e.g., as an organizational problem, one involving stress, job morale, etc. But we can also view it in a broader context, having to do with the opportunities for altruistic behavior--the most moral kind of behavior--in modern societies, and the forces such as scientific management and bureaucratic accountability that distort the act of concern and label it as uneconomical and inefficient.

Discussion

Blau's (1963) study of a public employment agency offered some guidance in understanding the problem. There, performance standards (and evaluations) led to displacement of organizational goals, unless mitigated by "professionalism" and "job security." However, work-performance standards at YEA were seldom measured. "Keeping busy" seemed to characterize the operating standards. A placement-quota system for counselors had been tried briefly and abandoned when it produced conflict and resistance. Thus, YEA's environment was increasingly rationalized, but the agency was not.

Blau's investigation also either did not find or did not find significant any degree of altruism involved in the work of the counselors he studied. Varying kinds of concern for clients is not a rare phenomenon in social service occupations. Social workers, for example, apparently must learn to control and to manage their concern for the client. Halmos (1970) has written extensively on this subject: "The crux of the matter is that love is expressed in all counseling." The counselor, Halmos added, "cannot but betray his kindness, concern, and idealism about man in general...above all, because of his deter-

mination to procure more happiness for others." There was abundant evidence of altruism found in YEA's counselors (making the weeding out of clients more remarkable). However, Halmos neglects to consider how altruism is severely limited by the demands made by organizations upon counselors. He also appears to base his observations on the presumption of a strong profession engaged in individual practice.

Lubove (1973), as we noted earlier, describes social work within an organizational setting. The growth of professionalism within the occupation is related to both a desire to escape "the historic affiliations of philanthropy with charity, sentimentalism, and paternalism" and with a desire for personal and professional autonomy within the agency.

Social workers have succeeded in establishing a relatively strong profession based upon specialized education and professional certifications. Professional definitions of their work carry considerable weight in the organizations that employ them. At YEA, by contrast, there was no cadre of professionally trained counselors. Although the occupation of Vocational Counselor is professionalized to the extent that there are graduate training programs leading to a degree recognized in the field, YEA rarely hired them. Only two (out of 15) of the "professional staff" had graduate degrees in vocational guidance, and one of these was the Executive Director. Not all the counselors had college degrees. When they did, the degree might be in almost any field, ranging from Divinity to Marketing.

If a low level of professionalism can be considered as meaning dependence on the organization, then the counselors at YEA were very dependent. They were also dependent in another way. Historically, counselors had not been encouraged to make a career at the agency. The work, as defined by the agency, did not require costly professional training and there were few supervisory positions to be filled. Expansion of the agency in the late sixties and early seventies was paralleled by the creation and expansion of other similar agencies and the growth of minority-affairs positions in private industry. If counselors did not like working at YEA, there were numerous opportunities elsewhere. In recent years, however, the decrease in the number and size of community-action programs and neighborhood service centers has left fewer alternative job opportunities for YEA counselors. Moreover, business organizations decreased their hiring of personnel to coordinate "minority affairs," reducing the number of positions of this kind into which some YEA counselors had previously moved.

YEA itself was also in a dependent position. Emerson noted that organizations are dependent on their external environment, according to their need for resources or their ability to perform activities which the environment requires. Dependence is the obverse of power. Thompson adds to this the notion that organizations may be dependent on other organizations supplying inputs (materials, financial resources, etc.), those disposing of outputs, both, or neither. YEA was seen to be dependent on both the input and the output side.

On the input side, we may consider financial resources. YEA is a philanthropic organization, but over 90% of its funding comes from governmental contracts, and funding is never assured for a long term. The agency's budget for 1976 was made up of the financial inputs shown in Table 2.

TABLE 3: Organization Dependence Measured by Financial Inputs (1976)

<u>Source</u>	<u>Amount</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Government-funded Programs	\$959,583	93.3%
Chairman's Fund-raising	70,000 (est.)	6.7%
TOTAL	\$1,029,583	

It can be seen that the agency's unrestricted funding, represented by the Chairman's annual fund-raising, constituted only a small part (6.7%) of its budget in 1976. In 1972, the unrestricted funding comprised an estimated thirty to forty percent of the agency's budget.

On the output side, the agency has always been dependent on employers in private industry to accept (i.e., hire) its clients. There is usually not a strong demand for labor of the kind represented by YEA's clients. Counselors develop a facility for misrepresenting in a "positive" direction their clients' qualifications. However, when economic conditions worsen, as they did after 1972, even these techniques were often fruitless. A decline in the number of unskilled job openings, and even greater competition for those remaining characterized the situation facing the agency's counselors in the mid-seventies. In 1976, the local unemployment rate was above 11% for much of the year. Moreover, the Labor Department reported in 1976 that the city had lost

522,000 jobs, mostly in manufacturing between 1969 and 1975.

The combination of these factors appears to have resulted in a dependent staff within a dependent organization. At the same time, new contracts demanded more specific performances. It remains to be seen what the terms of the contracts were, and especially their effects on the basic mission of the agency, job placement of the hard-core unemployed.

Prior to 1973, contracts merely stipulated that YEA would accept a given number of clients referred to it by the funding agency (a government department), and would make its "best effort" to place them on jobs. Contracts of the "best-effort" type were typical of the 1970-72 period, and are associated with the low rate of "one-interview clients."

The contract for the agency's Addict Program (begun in 1973) states that "The Contractor (YEA) agrees to place at least 256 enrollees (clients who are accepted for service)," and that "The Contractor shall place at least 50% of these persons in jobs on which they shall be retained...for at least 30 working days." Clients were to be offered a minimum number (3) of placement opportunities. The hirings were to be verified by the funding agency. A quota of satisfactory job placements was required on a monthly basis under the contract. The funding agency retained "the discretion to reduce the Contractor's budget or take other appropriate action if the Contractor's performance falls substantially below the minimum placement levels set forth in the summary schedule" of the contract.

The Addict Program funded a specified number of staff positions and other anticipated expenses--even if it did add numerous constraints aimed at providing guarantees of accountability. The Crime-Prevention Program, on the other hand, projected an estimated number of clients (young probationers and parolees) who would, under the contract, have to be placed on jobs. This flexibility was offset by the fact that YEA was paid only for actual accomplishments, with scheduled payments for each initial placement and each retention for specified periods. Although the contract envisioned "remedial instruction" and "vocational training" for many of the clients, the schedule of fees made job placement and retention more important to the agency than remediation or training. This arrangement allowed no fixed income for staff salaries and overhead. This "purchase of services" contract was essentially a piecework system, but like the Addict Program contract, it also contained penalties for non-compliance and procedures for monitoring the work.

Taken together, these contracts and others required the agency administrators to be constantly aware of the agency's production according to specified contract standards. Monthly reports were compiled, comparing targets with performances. Agency success was achieved, in part, by counting each placement of the same individual towards its placement quota. But the individual counselors had no quotas, and no records were maintained showing how each counselor performed. Nevertheless, it appeared that the counselors internalized the situation of the agency; they performed as though they were on a quota system by weeding out the most difficult clients to place and by stimulating recruitment of new clients to replace those weeded out. Much of the time of the Addict Program's staff was devoted to recruitment of clients.

Conclusions

The implications of these findings for public policy and the social services are fairly simple, although necessarily quite tentative. Bureaucratic accountability--involving "hard" standards, rigorous verification, and meaningful penalties--will produce at least the illusion of success (such as quantity of job placements), but real success, as defined by the original purposes of the activity, may remain uncertain, even elusive. There may be a point beyond which distrust is counter-productive. This point seems to be reached sooner when one party is highly dependent on the other or others.

Rationalized accountability appears to have the tendency of ultimately orienting the organization's activity to generating those categories of statistics that provide for additional funding. Initially, these statistics are intended to be a perhaps imperfect but necessary indicator of performance; but as they become incorporated into agency practice and internalized by counselors, they become increasingly the goal of the counselors and the mission of the dependent agency. The agency and counselors, often without knowing it, abandon their original mission, in order to generate accountability statistics so as to insure the survival of the organization. To do so, they may have to sacrifice their original goals because those goals are not as easily quantified.

Centrally for YEA, the rationalization of standards in the performance contracts resulted in a sacrifice in its original mission, placement of hard core unemployed, in order to gain and maintain contracts. The new contracts resulted in the agency and its counselors placing less demand upon themselves as defined by the intensity of service to clients, and a change in the characteristics of clients, serving the most easily and "objectively" served, and cooling and weeding out the

others. A change in the target population was the ultimate outcome. The hard-core problem client became increasingly isolated from services because serving him produces poor or unrewarding statistics.

This process was facilitated by bureaucratic and universalistic categorizations. To a government bureaucracy, the problem is a categorical one: drug addicts, delinquents, etc. Within categories, all are equally "deserving." Thus, it makes little difference if some are weeded out as long as those who are serviced meet the formal criteria for service and are satisfactorily processed. This conflicts with the counselor's altruistic-particularistic tendency to help the most needy among the category. Here, the altruistic orientation was outweighed by the bureaucratic-universalistic one. The agency and its counselors could not simultaneously meet both demands. The contradiction, if we may conceive of it as such, was for the time being resolved by abandoning the target population to a great extent.

The distrust implicit in accountability and the loss of altruistic behavior may be the highest costs we pay for bureaucratic efficiency.

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