



## UNIVERSAL RULES AND SITUATIONS OF DISCRETION: HOW STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS CALCULATE SUFFERING

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**Abstract:** The process of determining eligibility for social services from the State is a legal procedure whereby it is determined whether the state should provide social assistance to a citizen and, if so, in what measure. The article studies the organisation created in one Russian city to carry out this procedure. The representatives of this organisation are typical street-level bureaucrats as defined by Michael Lipsky. They interact with citizens face to face, and decide the form in which social services will be provided, and if they will be provided at all. The creation of this organisation meant a redistribution of powers in the social sector, the fragmentation of the process of granting and providing social assistance and (formally at least) a stricter division between the process of decision-taking and the resultant action. The article analyses how, under such conditions of fragmentation and the introduction of new tools for automating the decision-making process, a space for discretion — the possibility of influencing at a local level and in some cases determining how the work should be carried out — is maintained. The research is based on a qualitative methodology, the basic material being interviews with employees of this new organisation. In addition, documents regulating procedures and monitoring of these were analysed and observations taken. The author demonstrates how “gaps” that arise in the social sector are overcome, and how the professional and ethical categories of specialists in the organisation determine how the process of recognising need as a whole, and the processes of evaluation in particular, are carried out.

**Keywords:** street-level bureaucracy, discretion, universalisation, bureaucratic perspective, quantification.

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## **Universal Rules and Situations of Discretion: How Street-Level Bureaucrats Calculate Suffering**

The process of determining eligibility for social services from the State is a legal procedure whereby it is determined whether the state should provide social assistance to a citizen and, if so, in what measure. The article studies the organisation created in one Russian city to carry out this procedure. The representatives of this organisation are typical street-level bureaucrats as defined by Michael Lipsky. They interact with citizens face to face, and decide the form in which social services will be provided, and if they will be provided at all. The creation of this organisation meant a redistribution of powers in the social sector, the fragmentation of the process of granting and providing social assistance and (formally at least) a stricter division between the process of decision-taking and the resultant action. The article analyses how, under such conditions of fragmentation and the introduction of new tools for automating the decision-making process, a space for discretion — the possibility of influencing at a local level and in some cases determining how the work should be carried out — is maintained. The research is based on a qualitative methodology, the basic material being interviews with employees of this new organisation. In addition, documents regulating procedures and monitoring of these were analysed and observations taken. The author demonstrates how “gaps” that arise in the social sector are overcome, and how the professional and ethical categories of specialists in the organisation determine how the process of recognising need as a whole, and the processes of evaluation in particular, are carried out.

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In order to begin to provide social assistance to citizens, the state must recognise them as “in need”, i.e. with a legal right to claim social assistance.<sup>1</sup> The procedure for recognising a citizen’s need may be organised in various ways, but what is studied in the present research is the situation when a particular organisation is set up to do this (in the interests of anonymity it will be called “the Centre”), and its only function is to determine whether a citizen needs assistance from the state and, if so, in what measure. It depends on the Centre’s decision whether a person will have the possibility of attending rehabilitation sessions or, for example, send a child to a leisure centre, whether they can receive the attention of a carer, and, most importantly, what such a specialist will do: do the shopping, cook, read aloud, or confine themselves to doing some cleaning every few days. Although the procedure for evaluating citizens is strictly regulated, and there are extensive instructions for taking decisions, forms to fill in and rules, there is more to it than formal documents.

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<sup>1</sup> In Russia this legal category is defined by the Federal Law of 28 December 2013 no. 442-FZ (as amended on 28 April 2023), ‘On the bases for social services for citizens of the Russian Federation’.

The employees of the Centre understand this very well: “Suppose that they [the client] have brought the wrong set of documents. *You can take a formal approach*, process the application and refuse it. [...] On the other hand, yes, you can prompt them, give them a hand: ‘You need to replace this certificate with that one, and you’ll be all right’” (Centre specialist; my emphasis). The instructions for the job do not forbid giving the client an extra explanation of the consequences of submitting this or that certificate, nor do they require it. But it is this work *between* the rules that to a significant extent determines the result of the client’s interaction with the bureaucratic world. Universal rules and uniform compliance with them are regarded as the distinguishing features of bureaucracy, and an inability to depart from the instructions is regularly mocked and criticised. Nevertheless, researchers into bureaucracy ever since Weber [Weber 1972: 125–127] have understood that universal and uniform behaviour is an ideal that cannot easily be attained, and by no means a necessary characteristic of bureaucracies. This article is about how bureaucratic work is conducted beyond the limits of universal rules, and why the road to the unification of the work of bureaucracies is so difficult.

### Street-level bureaucrats: what do we know about them?

The term *street-level bureaucracy* was introduced by Michael Lipsky [Lipsky 1969; 2010] to describe those bureaucrats who, like the specialists of the Centre, interact directly with citizens. Lipsky drew attention to the fact that whatever the rules were, and however their fulfilment might be supervised, there remains a space for street-level bureaucrats to make a choice regarding how exactly the rules and instructions should be put into practice in a particular situation. Lipsky’s work inspired a number of researchers to study the local practices of bureaucracies [Maynard-Moody, Musheno 2003; Brodtkin, Marston 2013; Brodtkin 2017].

A key concept developed by Lipsky was that of discretion. Lipsky used it to describe situations when the bureaucrat’s choice is limited by existing laws and regulations, but not excluded altogether. The example used by Lipsky himself was police work. This would seem to be strictly regulated by the laws, and there are standing orders that describe the sequence of necessary actions. Policemen’s actions are often recorded on camera. But even in such conditions they have a choice: whom to take notice of, whom to observe, whom to ask to show their papers, who deserves suspicion and further investigation, and in what tone to ask questions. All this has a substantial effect on what people’s experience of interaction with the police will be, and moreover is determined by the policeman himself. It is exceedingly hard to regulate such actions on the part of policemen,

or of any street-level bureaucrats. The concept of discretion became a basic concept in the discussion of street-level bureaucrats, and it is still being developed even now [Hupe 2013; Evans, Hupe 2020a]. Among the factors that make discretion possible researchers usually identify a profound understanding of the context by the bureaucrats who have to deal with it directly [Evans, Hupe 2020b], and their liminal position, which includes contacts both with the external, non-bureaucratic world, and the internal bureaucratic world [Protzas 1978; 1979; Tummers et al. 2015].

As they acknowledged the existence of discretion in street-level bureaucrats' work, Lipsky and other authors also supposed that it could be limited or cut back: the fragmentation of tasks, the fact that street-level bureaucrats had no control over the final outcome of their own work, limited information and resources — all these developments, as the bureaucratic apparatus evolves, reduce the space for independent decisions. This leads to a situation where “[t]he key determinant of good practice is defined as being the ability to follow rules and procedures competently, rather than the ability to make individual professional judgements” [Lymbery 2000: 131]. A key role here is played by what Nigel Parton has characterised as a shift “from knowledge to information” [Parton 2008]. Instead of an integral knowledge of their clients, social workers are working with “disembodied, decontextualized and objectified” information [Parton 2008: 262]. Where there used to be the entire history of a person there remains a set of parameters from a form: sex, age, income, category of need.

In this way, one of the debates around the concept of discretion and street-level bureaucrats overall is connected with the attempt to answer the question whether there is still any discretion in the new conditions of supervision of bureaucrats [Evans, Harris 2004]. Perhaps the most radical attempt in this respect was put forward in the work by Bovens and Zouridis, where the concept of *screen-level bureaucracy* is developed [Bovens, Zouridis 2002]. The authors point to a tendency to reduce the immediate contact between the bureaucrat and the citizen, replacing face-to-face interaction with a computer screen, and decision-taking by filling in pre-prepared forms issuing an automatically generated decision. It should be noted that for Bovens and Zouridis, and to a large extent for Lipsky too, the question of discretion is a question of the control of state policy, the possibility of bringing one or another state project into being: “[T]he decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively *become* the public policies. [...] To understand how and why these organizations often perform contrary to their own rules and goals, we need to know how the rules are experienced by workers in the organization [...] and what other

pressures they experience” [Lipsky 2010: XIII]. To a large extent this has led to the fact that part of the debates about street-level bureaucrats takes place more in the context of public administration, with a certain tendency towards a search for practical means of supervising street-level bureaucrats [O’Loughlin 1990].

Nevertheless, alternative approaches to the description of street-level bureaucrats’ work have emerged: focusing on the importance of freedom and professional choice [Jos, Tompkins 2004; Strier, Bershtling 2016], or suggesting a departure from the model of the rational bureaucrat and including an ethical dimension in the description of street-level bureaucrats’ work [Kelly 1994; Evans 2014; Zacka 2017; Kjaerulff 2020; Pors, Schou 2021]. In works of this kind, the ideal supervision of street-level bureaucrats’ work and the effort to impose this is seen not as a desirable result, but as a problem that prevents bureaucrats from doing their work professionally.

This last aspect, which is connected with street-level bureaucrats’ ethical choices, is receiving ever more attention from researchers. The inevitability of ethical dilemmas and the necessity of making moral choices requires a rethinking both of the current descriptive models of bureaucrats’ work and of our ideas of ideal bureaucracies overall.

The research of which the results are here presented attempts, on the one hand, to show why and how the field of discretion is preserved despite the process of the fragmentation of tasks and the unification of the rules of work, which Lipsky regarded as one of the reasons for the reduction of discretion. On the other hand, it demonstrates the importance of the ethical choices encountered by street-level bureaucrats, and the significance of that aspect in the model of street-level bureaucracy as a whole. The article’s conclusion analyses various ways of working with a document to evaluate need. This document allows the citizen’s situation to be ‘digitised’, and could make the decision-taking process almost automatic. Although the materiality of documents is a popular topic in research on bureaucracies [Hull 2012], a significant part of the works dealing directly with street-level bureaucracy focus on the process of the interpretation of rules and instructions by street-level bureaucrats. In the present article the document is regarded as an instrument that may be used by the specialists of the Centre in various ways, not all of which assume automation or a reduction in the role of the street-level bureaucrat in this process.

### **The process of recognising need**

The Centre upon which my research focuses was set up in one of the towns of the North-Western Region of Russia about five years ago. Its sole purpose is to determine whether a citizen is in need of

assistance from the state, and if so, in what measure. In the event of a positive decision the applicant receives an “individual programme of social services” — a document that indicates what assistance they require. With this document they apply to the so-called social service providers, who are engaged in the immediate provision of assistance, for example they provide carers or organise rehabilitation sessions. At present the Centre employs just under two hundred people and has a branch in each district of the city. The general scheme of provision of social services has the following appearance:

1. The city authorities determine the quantity of social services for various categories of citizens and are responsible for the overall regulation of this sector.
2. A separate agency — the Centre — takes decisions regarding specific people regarding what assistance they need and in what measure.
3. In the event of a positive decision, the citizen must choose for themselves the organisation that will be their social service provider and will provide the services designated by the Centre.
4. Both state and non-state providers provide social services and are financed by the city.

In a number of cases, for example when working with applicants who need to have a carer appointed or to be accommodated in a care home, the specialist will use an “act of evaluation of living conditions”, which consists of closed and open questions. For example, one question is “Can the person dress themselves?” There are three possible answers: “independently”, “only with difficulty” and “only with assistance”. Depending on the answer, the person gets no points, half a point or one point.<sup>1</sup> This form is supposed to allow all people to be assessed in the same way. When the questionnaire is complete the number of points is added up, and the person assigned to one or another category with a defined set of standard services that he or she can claim.

The creation of a separate agency engaged in quite a narrowly specialised task fits perfectly the trend towards the fragmentation of work described by Lipsky and other researchers. The Centre evaluates the citizen, but the actual assistance is provided by organisations — the social service providers — that are completely unconnected with it. Formally, even before the Centre was set up, the procedure for recognising a person as in need and the subsequent

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<sup>1</sup> The questions on the form and the quantitative evaluation change regularly, but the essence remains the same: the person’s condition must be assessed through a series of closed questions. The example given was correct for 2021. An example of the form is given below, from which it may be seen that it has become more variable and complex.

provision of assistance were carried out by different agencies: the recognition was the function of agencies of the local government, and the direct provision of assistance was the function of social service providers. However, for a long time this separation existed only on paper. In fact, the providers of social services, who had vast experience of prolonged interaction with persons in need, played a huge part in the recognition of need, and in particular were often themselves involved in the collection and submission of documents and in drawing up the list of the services required, and the local administration's approach to checking these documents was often uncritical. This was probably connected with the fact that local government had a mass of other responsibilities and lacked the capacity for assessing need independently. As one of the participants in the research describes this situation, "Imagine, they had a pile of two hundred cases, so they would simply sign and stamp them. They might choose a couple to have a look at, but no more" (Centre specialist).

The creation of the Centre was supposed to make a final separation between the functions of assessing a person's condition and working in accordance with that assessment. Now the road to receiving social services looks like this:

1. A citizen must receive from the Centre an individual programme describing precisely which services he is entitled to. There are various ways in which they can approach the Centre. Usually a citizen learns from friends, social workers or doctors that they are probably entitled to some social services. Depending on how well informed these friends are, they might be advised to apply to the Centre immediately, or else they might start to look independently, for example ringing up whatever state services they know about. In the end this search must lead them to the Centre.
2. Once they get to the Centre, the citizen goes through the evaluation procedure, during which they receive a document stating precisely which social services they are entitled to.
3. Finally, having received the document from the Centre, they go to the organisations that are going to work in accordance with that document, i.e. provide the designated social services.

The employees of the Centre sometimes speak of the separation between those who take decisions (the Centre) and those who do the corresponding work (the social service providers) like this: "In my understanding our service was created in order to avoid abuses by the providers. So that they didn't prescribe services that weren't necessary" (Centre specialist). The providing organisations' impulse to prescribe as many services as possible is explained by their need to meet state targets and their desire to receive a greater subsidy for

the results of service provision.<sup>1</sup> The empirical task of this research was an attempt to understand how the process of recognising need after these changes had been introduced looks in reality.

### Methodology and description of the field

My research was conducted over about a year and a half, beginning in February 2021. The principal sources of data were interviews with the employees and managers of several regional centres, and also the legislative documents regulating the activity of the Centre. Observation of the work of specialists of the Centre, which was occasionally possible, was a supplementary source. This usually happened when the interviewer arrived early for the appointment or remained after the interview. The most valuable thing in the course of these short observations was the possibility of seeing interaction between employees, or, much more rarely, between them and their clients.

The main aim of my fieldwork was to understand how exactly the work of the employees of the Centre was organised, what demands and tasks they were faced with, what practices there were to fulfil these tasks, what restrictions on their work came about and how they were overcome, and how everyday interaction, both within the Centre and with other organisations, was organised. In a recent study of Russian bureaucracy, published while this article was being written, this method is called “comparative analytical” ethnography, “within which the research focus is *not on the maximum possible immersion in the living worlds of particular people and their social experience, but on the practices and social situations, in which these or those actors interact and which have a significant influence on their identity*” [Baryshnikova et al. 2021: 19; my italics].

Permission to conduct my fieldwork was granted thanks to an agreement with the leaders of the organisation, who were interested in knowing better how their employees’ work was organised.<sup>2</sup> After the first negotiations I was invited to a general meeting where I was introduced to all the directors of the district offices of the Centre in the city.

Within the research twenty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees of the district offices of the Centre, lasting from forty minutes to two hours, with one exception when the

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<sup>1</sup> The financing of state and non-state social service providers is organised in different ways, but, putting it simply, it may be said that it is directly proportional to the amount of services provided.

<sup>2</sup> It was stipulated in advance that I would not publish any of the employees’ personal data, and that all the results would be presented in aggregated form, once the research was complete.



interview lasted over four hours.<sup>1</sup> Ten interviews were recorded using a dictaphone in their entirety, and one partially, since after the question whether the person would like to say something without being recorded, the conversation continued for a few hours more. The remaining participants in the research refused audio recording (they were all offered this possibility), and notes were taken by hand during the interview. My informants were specialists who worked directly with members of the public (seventeen interviews), directors of the district centres (three interviews), and an employee of an organisation providing social services (one interview).

Four district centres were chosen for interviews. The aim was to find a department that was as diverse as possible in terms of such characteristics as the size of the staff and the overall workload (for which the number of individual programmes issued by each department was analysed). The opinion of the director of the organisation about the amount of difference between the departments was also taken into account. There were from eight to fifteen people working at each centre. The selection within the organisation was made as follows. The first interview was conducted with an employee who in one way or another had been selected within the Centre (sometimes it was by their personal initiative, sometimes at the request of the director). In the course of the first interview, it was determined who else was worth talking to (so that participants in the interviews could be found not only through the director or through their own initiative). In addition, during all the interviews it was clarified what characteristics might be significant. One of these was previous experience. Therefore, in each centre an interview was conducted with the least experienced and most experienced employees. Criteria such as the nature of their current work were also taken into account (in some centres people were beginning to specialise in different kinds of work, and in such a case interviews were conducted with representatives of every speciality).

### Discretion and collaboration

An important context for the work of the Centre employees, as mentioned above, is that they do not themselves provide assistance to people, but only take the decisions about what assistance they need. This situation of separation between taking the decision and carrying it out can cause problems, if there is a difference of opinion between the centre and the service provider about the correct

<sup>1</sup> At the end of each interview, when the dictaphone was switched off, the respondents were asked whether they wanted to say anything that would not be recorded. In this case, after that question, the conversation continued for another two hours. The contents of the unrecorded conversation had only a tangential relevance to the research question of the article, and, moreover, cannot be published for ethical reasons.

assessment of need, and this happens regularly. However, a dense network of informal connections has grown up to resolve such disagreements between the Centre and social service providers. A significant role is played here by the fact that many of the employees of the Centre used to be employees of the social service providers: they know how these organisations are constructed, and often know the people who remain as “providers” personally. In certain situations such informal connections can influence the process of determining need and, thanks to co-operation, allow everyone concerned to stand back from the formal rules and standards when this seems appropriate (although formally the provider is not part of the process of need recognition: the programme is drawn up by the Centre, and only the applicant can contest it).

How do such informal connections manifest themselves? For example, some specialists propose that the providers should “prepare” the applicant for the procedure of need evaluation. When prescribing particular services the Centre specialist asks citizens whether they need these (assuming they are entitled to begin with). The services have complicated names, and the applicant might not realise that a particular service would be useful or necessary, for example when it is a matter of complex rehabilitation. “So we meet them half-way [...] we tell the providers too, ‘Prepare them, explain to them [...] so that you can do your work well, and people get everything as a result’” (Centre specialist). Since it is essential for the applicant to confirm that they need such-and-such a service, “preparation” usually means a situation where the social worker explains to the person what to say at the Centre.<sup>1</sup>

All this does not mean that the Centre simply formalises the decisions of the social service providers. Many of its employees consider that the Centre’s task is to control the number of services prescribed by the provider organisations. Almost all the informants mentioned situations of disagreement with the providers and accused them of wanting to prescribe as many services as possible. One factor affecting the relationship between the Centre and the providers is that the Centre specialists often have different attitudes towards the various provider organisations. Sometimes this is connected with the context of the relationship that has grown up, but there are certain regular factors. The most visible contrast may be seen in attitudes to state and non-state providers: the latter are regarded as “businesses” motivated by profit, and therefore less worthy of trust. Thus some employees say outright that they check the documents

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<sup>1</sup> When describing this situation, respondents said several times that citizens are afraid to agree to services because they think that they will have to be paid for and that they will have to spend money. I cannot confirm or refute this hypothesis, but it seems likely and worth mentioning.

from such organisations more carefully. In this way the interaction between social service providers and the Centre is a form of complex collaboration that sometimes leads to co-operation and sometimes to conflict.

Besides their interaction with social service providers at the stage of evaluating the citizen, the Centre specialists may take part in the selection of the provider organisations that will offer the services. Formally, the Centre employees cannot influence the choice of the organisation that will provide social services: that is one aspect of the formal separation described above. In reality, though, it is frequently simply impossible for this choice to be made by the person in need. “In general yes, I have to do it myself [choose the social service provider]. How can an elderly person make a choice if they don’t know anything and don’t use the internet. It would be wrong just to give them the paper and say ‘Choose.’ We try to tell them something, again, with an understanding of how the person lives and what would be best for them” (Centre specialist). Moreover, the Centre employees often act as intermediaries between the service provider and the persons in need, taking the specifics of the provider into account. For example, some of the female carers who work in the provider organisations profess Islam. This becomes a problem if it is a man who requires a carer. In the words of one informant, because of her religious views the carer cannot be alone with a man in his house. The Centre employees know where such carers work, and help people make their choice: “We understand that you can’t apply to that provider, because [...] it just wouldn’t work out” (Centre specialist). Another kind of situation is where someone needs help urgently. In such a case the Centre specialist might come to an agreement with the provider organisation so that it starts providing services before the formal procedure of evaluation of need is complete.

A significant aspect of all the cases examined in this section is the constant independent assessment of the situation by Centre specialists, which allows the bridging of the gap between the decision regarding need and its fulfilment.

### **Supervision of discretion**

Obviously, the Centre specialists’ use of discretion is influenced not only by the relationships that have grown up between them and the representatives of the providers of social services, but also by organisational specifics. The Centre employees are supervised in various manners, first and foremost by various audits. The object of the internal audits are the citizens’ case files. For some Centre employees the main difficulty is represented not by dealing with applicants or the immediate decision-taking regarding services and

individual programmes, but the documentation. It is important that all the documents should be in order, all be stamped, that copies should be made, and sometimes that they should be certified. In the words of many employees, every occasion when their superiors have been dissatisfied with them has been connected with mistakes in the documents. In answer to the question about difficult moments that they discuss with colleagues, almost all of them spoke about collecting the requisite certificates, calculating dates correctly, and other difficulties in correctly entering the applicant's data in the documents and electronic systems.

It is the fear of audits that makes the Centre specialists argue with providers about the services and not always be ready to compromise with them. One reason is that prescribing an unnecessary service is fraught with problems (at least, as the Centre employees themselves see it). "Every case here is hundreds of thousands of roubles out of the budget. [...] If anything is too much, there will be an audit" (director of a district office of the Centre). Many of the employees are wary of audits, and they often say that the law does not define sufficiently clearly to which services people are legally entitled, and to which they are not.

**Inf.:** *We took the decision [prescribed services in a doubtful case]. And what happens next? There's no way of telling what effect it will have.*

**Col.:** *What might happen next?*

**Inf.:** *Well, I mean that the supervisory agencies will have a look at it: "Why did you give it to them so many times?" [...] And someone might say, "Fine." But someone else might say "You were wrong, this may be an inappropriate use of funds" (Centre specialist).*

Employees at different district offices of the Centre have these concerns, although so far there has not been a single external audit of the organisation.

This high degree of indeterminacy (real or in the minds of the specialists) affects their readiness to come to agreements and be flexible at all levels of the organisation. The Centre managers speak of the importance of being "friends" with the providers, and, it seems, in some cases they support informal means of resolving difficulties in the relationships with them. Thus, during one interview an employee was rung up by the director. From the answers and questions, and what I was told afterwards, I understood that the latter had received a direct telephone call from a provider organisation complaining that the Centre specialists had refused to draw up a programme for somebody with whom they had worked previously. The director was not pleased with this complaint, and though the specialist explained that the person concerned had not submitted his

documents correctly, he demanded that the necessary programme should be issued.

This case is susceptible to various interpretations, and I do not have sufficient data to give a definite answer. On the one hand, one might suppose that the director was sympathetic to the position of the provider organisation, who could not begin to provide services to the citizen. On the other hand, some providers are large organisations that might have influence in the social sector, and it might be in the interests of the Centre directorate to maintain good relations with them. During another interview an employee told me that the Centre had had a long struggle for recognition among other organisations in the social sector, since at the beginning there had been a sceptical attitude towards it.

At this stage it seems that the way the Centre specialists behave in connection with their attempts to find the best joint solution with the social service providers is entirely in accordance with the classic model of the “rational” street-level bureaucrat. However, we shall see in what comes next how the behaviour of street-level bureaucrats goes far beyond that model and cannot be explained by structural pressure on the part of their superiors.

### **Discretion, professionalism and a sense of fairness**

Outside the context of their joint work with social service providers, when the Centre specialists prescribe services, they take into account the applicant’s situation. Some employees say that you can tell by the person what services they need, and if the person concerned refuses what is offered, they try to convince them, to explain why such-and-such a service is important and why they might need it: “We talk to the person, ask what they need, and then we go through every service and ask them about each one in turn, because we can’t give it to them without their agreement, even if we think they need it. But if someone says ‘No, I don’t want it,’ and we understand that they actually do need that service, we explain it to them: we read them the regulations and explain what is involved” (Centre specialist). An important aspect of the exchange just cited is that although for any service to be prescribed the applicant’s agreement is necessary, they may be pushed towards that decision in conversation, or conditions may be created in which it is easier for them to agree. One such situation, about which a Centre employee spoke directly, is sending someone to a care home. Many citizens are afraid of that: “Because ‘It’s an old people’s home, it’s a bad place and they’ll finish us off there.’ But in fact it is nothing of the sort. Therefore when talking to an old lady [if she is afraid] one can offer her a short-term stay [in the home]. If she likes it, we can think about her staying there permanently, if not, she can go back to her

family” (Centre specialist). The Centre specialist can help someone put the necessary documents together, or visit an applicant together with a doctor to fill out the necessary certificates. One specialist told me that he helped doctors fill in the necessary forms and went to the passport office to have the document stamped with the registration of a person who was not able to do it for themselves. Another searched the streets for a homeless person about whom she had been told by the local residents. All this goes far beyond their official duties, and they find themselves in a situation when they have to choose between formally doing their job and extra efforts to involve themselves in a person’s situation and provide them with assistance.

Lipsky saw in this one of the basic contradictions within the work of street-level bureaucrats: “On the one hand, service is delivered by people to people, invoking a model of human interaction, caring and responsibility. On the other hand, service is delivered through a bureaucracy, invoking a model of detachment and equal treatment under conditions of resource limitations and constraints, making care and responsibility conditional” [Lipsky 2010: 71]. Jens Kjaerulff writes about this as one of the main limitations of the theory of discretion: it works well with the model of the rational actor, endowed with “individualist values, and economic rationality and calculation”, but it is bad at describing and explaining other types of behaviour encountered among street-level bureaucrats [Kjaerulff 2020: 635]. However, some researchers connect the specifics of the work of street-level bureaucrats who have discretion with the need to make ethical choices: in conditions of indeterminacy, when it is essential to combine the local context with abstract rules, street-level bureaucrats inevitably look for support in their own ideas of what is right when they have to take decisions [Zacka 2017; Pors, Schou 2021]. When I asked about the reasons for such behaviour, I was always answered, more or less, “It is our work, and we want to do it well.”

An important factor here is emotional involvement and empathy [Jensen, Pedersen 2017]. The situations in which social workers find themselves are often charged with considerable emotion. Applicants may inspire pity, sympathy or disgust. “[We helped] because [...] we felt sorry for her, we got close to her, she’s by herself, she asked herself [asked for assistance], it really was a difficult situation, and we always make an effort if we see that there is no one to help somebody, we try to offer a wider range of services” (Centre specialist).

Emotional reactions are connected with ideas of what is right and what is fair [Evans 2014]. For example, one of the Centre employees told me how she had assessed the needs of an unemployed man.

Straight after drawing up his individual programme, she rang her former colleagues at a service provider organisation, found out whether they had any food parcels and gave them the number of the applicant so that they could ask him to come and see him. What is noteworthy is her explanation of why she felt it necessary to help. She noted that the applicant was trying to find a job, did not drink alcohol and “had simply been unlucky, but he wanted to find a way out.” In other words, it was important that the man’s situation was unfair: it was not his own fault, and he was making an effort to overcome it.

Among the factors that determine the informal classification of applicants, age is one of the most substantial. One specialist motivated his more attentive attitude to an applicant by the fact that he was elderly and might be hurt by a refusal. Most of the Centre employees think it necessary to be specially attentive to elderly applicants, explain to them better what documents they need, advise on a provider organisation, and make sure that the person has reached the provider once they have been given the status of a person in need. In this way the employees really do make an internal distinction: they attend to those who are in greater need and who make greater efforts, and single out elderly persons. Citizens of this sort can count on getting more help and sympathy from the specialists.

The behaviour of the Centre employees is, of course, not uniform. While some specialists are ready to accompany their applicants, put their documents together with them, and come to agreement with the “providers”, others are surprised that anyone does this, and sure that this is not the Centre employees’ job. Often this difference in ideas about their own work is connected with their previous experience. Some of them used to work with people with an experience of homelessness, alcohol or drug dependency, or with “difficult” adolescents. Others had no experience of actual social work. It is frequently the former who develop a relationship with provider organisations, form informal connections, and teach the providers how to prepare the applicants for the need assessment procedure at the Centre. Alongside those employees with a great experience of the social sector there are other employees working who do not have such experience. It is the latter who more often consider that a Centre employee’s work is limited to receiving and filling in documents. Sometimes an informal division of labour comes about within the district organisations. For example, the experienced employees are more often responsible for interaction with provider organisations. In the informants’ words, it is easier this way to find a common language, and conflicts are less likely. Other employees may specialise in visiting applicants at home, or meeting citizens at the Centre’s offices. It is important to remember

that the Centre is quite a new organisation (and this was still more the case at the time when the research was carried out). Its internal culture is still, most likely, in the process of formation and it is quite hard to say which model of behaviour will become dominant.

### **Instruments of calculation as new means of supervising discretion**

In the previous sections I first examined the situation of discretion in interrelationships with providers. Then, evaluating the stimuli in the organisation, I attempted to explain the motivation for developing such interrelationships. Finally, in the last part, the suggested model for the work of a street-level bureaucrat was supplemented with an analysis of situations of moral choice encountered by Centre employees. Let us now include in that model the work with documents mentioned at the beginning of the article.

When working with certain applicants, the Centre employees use a special questionnaire about the citizen's living conditions, which, besides basic data about the person, contains a series of closed questions, the answers to which must be provided by applicants themselves or by the employee on the basis of a discussion with them. For each answer the applicant gets points, and as a result of the final count they are assigned to one or another category of need, and on this in turn depends the extent of the social services they receive. Part of one such questionnaire is given below (ill. 1).<sup>1</sup>

To describe such processes of the digitisation of reality, Espeland and Stevens have introduced the term *commensuration* — 'the transformation of different qualities into a common metric' [Espeland, Stevens 1998: 314]. This term well describes what takes place in the Centre: people with different life situations are evaluated through standard procedures and transformed into applicants, and then people in need belonging to a particular category. Commensuration simplifies the perception of reality, and complex and multi-faceted phenomena are reduced to simple, comparable essences, allowing those factors to be ignored which, in the opinion of the compilers of the questionnaire, are not relevant to the case.

One property of such instruments of quantification is their capacity for replacing or displacing other means of reaching a judgment that

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<sup>1</sup> I should make it clear that such questionnaires are not needed in every case. For example, all applicants of pension age are entitled to so-called leisure activities: these may be dances, courses on the use of the computer or the mobile phone, and other such "circles". In such a case there is no need for a questionnaire, it is enough to confirm pensioner status. Nevertheless, the questionnaire is always necessary if it is a matter of providing social services at home (42 % of all applications in 2021) or of temporary or permanent residence in a care home (12 % of all applications in 2021). It is thus used in the most common and at the same time the most critical cases for the applicant (those that concern provision of fundamental needs).



### 1.2 Оценка способности к самообслуживанию

*Расчет для инвалидов трудоспособного возраста и граждан пожилого возраста:*

**0 баллов** - может обслуживать себя самостоятельно без затруднений

**1 балл** - может обслуживать себя прилагая незначительные усилия

**2 балла** - может обслуживать себя с частичной помощью других лиц и/или с использованием вспомогательных технических средств

**3 балла** - неспособность к самообслуживанию, нуждаемость в постоянной посторонней помощи и уходе

Параметры оценки	Баллы
Соблюдение личной гигиены (умывание лица, причесывание, чистка зубов, бритье, прием ванны или душа)	
Посещение туалета, смена подгузников, абсорбирующего белья (при необходимости)	
Одевание и раздевание, включая подбор одежды в соответствии с целью и погодой	
Прием лекарственных средств	
Приготовление (разогрев) пищи	
Прием пищи	
Ведение домашнего хозяйства (уборка, стирка и т.п.)	
Оформление документов (оплата ЖКУ, услуг связи и др.)	
<b>ИТОГО (баллов)</b>	

Расчет оценки степени выраженности ограничений способности к самообслуживанию (зависимости от посторонней помощи)

Количество баллов	Оценка способности к самообслуживанию
0	<b>0</b> Способность к самообслуживанию сохранена
1-8	<b>1</b> Способность к самообслуживанию утрачена незначительно (при более длительном затрачивании времени)
9-16	<b>2</b> Способность к самообслуживанию утрачена значительно
17-24	<b>3</b> Способность к самообслуживанию полностью утрачена, выражена полная зависимость от других лиц

Итоговая оценка способности гражданина к самообслуживанию \_\_\_\_\_.

### III. 1. Questionnaire on living conditions

are not based on calculation [Porter 1996; Rottenburg et al. 2015; Barman 2016]. Instruments of commensuration (such as the questionnaire above) weave themselves into the everyday life of the organisations that use them, and may become the basis for decision-taking. For example, Lars Johannessen [Johannessen 2019] describes how a system for assessing patients' pain was introduced in a Norwegian hospital, and became the basis for prescribing, in particular, painkillers to them. Patients' subjective descriptions of how they felt were replaced by a form on which criteria that were regarded as objective indicators were listed: the position of the body, the temperature, the pulse, etc. It was initially assumed that the "objective" system would supplement the subjective one, but organisational factors (above all lack of time) led to a reduction in the significance of the subjective assessment, because it took longer to obtain it because of the need to have a longer conversation with the patient. In this way, an "objective" evaluation, which was to a large extent based on things that were easier to see or measure, such as the pulse, came to be what the clinical staff relied on in their work. The resulting figures appear to be an objective and "correct" reflection of reality, decisions are taken based on them, and it is hard to argue with them.

However, in the case of the Centre employees it was possible to discover that there were different ways of working with quantification instruments. A task such as administering the questionnaire presented above to a citizen can be performed in at least two different ways. Sometimes the employee asks all the questions on the questionnaire in sequence, thanks the applicant, tells them that a decision will be taken within ten days, and leaves. This is a possible way of doing it, and one that is used. But there is another, when the decision is first taken by the Centre employee based on his impressions, and then the corresponding answers are entered into the questionnaire. Thus, one employee told me that when she was going up the stairs to a person's flat, she would take note of the position of the rubbish chute. This seemingly insignificant detail allows her to determine the course of a person's movements, and to decide in advance whether they need such a service as taking out the rubbish. (If there is no rubbish chute, or if it is down a flight of stairs, it is hard for a person with limited mobility to do this by themselves.) Another Centre employee told me that some men, who are not particularly old, are embarrassed when they tell employees of the Centre (who are almost all women) that they cannot wash themselves independently. A person's needs must be understood not by direct questioning, but from the context: how clean the house is, the smell, how much food there is, and how much of it is cooked, what a person says about their usual day. When meeting someone, one may try to get to know them better and find out more about their situation. This may be important, because people find it hard to talk about their difficulties. The questionnaire is filled in *post factum*, sometimes even after the employee has left the person's home, on the basis of what they have already decided about what the person needs. In such cases the role of the questionnaire is minimal: it does not matter much what questions it contains or in what order. The document does not determine the decision, as it does when the questions are simply asked as they are listed.

These cases are examples of ideal situations. Employees may behave in different ways, partly relying on the questionnaire and partly on their own methods of assessing need. Besides, the questionnaire has other functions as well. For example, the Centre specialists may use the questionnaire to defend their work, and their ideas of what services should be prescribed. Thus, one Centre employee told me that the questionnaires used in their work are a help in disputes with the social service providers. "I can always say: 'There are the answers, there is the result, this is the programme that we prescribe'" (Centre specialist). The result of the questionnaire is regarded as objective and indisputable, and this places the Centre specialist in a strong position when the negotiations with a provider organisation may become excessive.

The scenarios described provide a demonstration of the potential role of the questionnaire in the completion of tasks by the Centre employees. But this role is, precisely, potential: even though there is such a powerful instrument, its use is heavily dependent on the context. The questionnaire, as an instrument for the automation of decision-taking, need not by any means replace the independent judgment of the street-level bureaucrat.

### **Instead of a conclusion: what does the street-level bureaucrat's work consist of?**

The classic theories of bureaucracy imagined the ideal bureaucrats as people capable of exclusively following universal rules without deviating from their standing orders. These ideas are as widespread as ever in popular culture, judging by the comparison of bureaucrats to robots, and our own personal experience of dealing with state structures often supports this view. This image may be useful to the bureaucrats themselves: "I am simply doing my work and following rules which I have no part in laying down." Evidently this image is not altogether exact. The Centre employees, who are literally responsible for taking a single decision, demonstrate this quite strikingly.

It turns out in practice that behind the façade of "simply following the rules" there is often a huge amount of situations of choice, indeterminacy, moral dilemmas and complicated decisions. This space is constructed by a multitude of different factors: the rules, organisational stimuli, informal practices of discussion, documents. All this works together and in the end determines how the state policy put into practice by street-level bureaucrats will look.

It is hard to speak of any single tendency towards universalisation or reduction in discretion in the work of street-level bureaucrats. The separation of the functions of decision-taking and the provision of the corresponding services and the active introduction of questionnaires supposed to lead to automation of decision-taking are factors that ought to favour the universalisation of the bureaucratic process of the evaluation of citizens. At the same time, the potential of these factors is substantially reduced thanks to the counter-measures taken in the Centre itself. For example, the questionnaire on the citizen's living conditions could have served as a means to the universalisation and formalisation of the process of work with applicants, but the leadership of the organisation is trying to prevent that from happening. Thus, according to the current rules, the employee *must* fill in the questionnaire after, and not during the meeting with a person. The opinion of the leadership is that this should favour a more confidential and closer contact between the employee and the applicant.

The simple explanation is evidently that the departments of the Centre have to limit universalisation so that their work can be carried out without a hitch. To this end they are also forced to allow informal relationships with the providers and encourage the professionalism not so much of the bureaucrat as of the social worker. This complex and mutable configuration determines what in the end a street-level bureaucrat will be, the choices they will be faced with and the resources they will have at their disposal for taking decisions.

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