PART III
Questioning the Institutional Order

While institutions are defined by relatively stabilised norms, adjusted behaviours and relationships, in no institution is such order immutable, nor are the basic rules and roles promoted by the institution always applied with absolute efficiency (see Lagroye 1997). Indeed, the agents employed by an institution and the people who have to deal with it always have a degree of leeway, and, in using it, develop practices that limit the institution's influence, or even transform it.

Such is the case in desk interactions, these 'sensitive' relationships in which the institution's order and functions are at stake.[1] During these interactions, institutional incoherencies are revealed and denounced. It appears that the institutional functioning can cause problems just as much as it solves them: administrative troubles can be added to social and financial ones, making things worse. These relationships also reveal that strictly enforcing the rules can end up contradicting the goals officially pursued and overwhelm the underprivileged rather than relieve them or encourage 'entitlement' rather than 'integration' in searching for a job. In turn, this spotlight on the failings of the institutional system threatens the fragile balance of face-to-face interactions. How can an agent retain their authority when they are directly or indirectly held responsible for mistakes made? How can one trust the institutional norms if they turn out to cause injustice?

Moreover, visitors' institutional conformism is never guaranteed. Visitors, indeed, cannot be reduced to mere receptacles of institutional discourse, who submit to its injunctions with docility. Despite the asymmetry of the relationship, strategies are also at work on the weaker end. First of all, strategies are developed to deal with the institutional order and micro-subvert it: individuals move away from the role and the character assigned to them by the institution through 'secondary adaptations' (Goffman 1961); those who are dominated claim their share of symbolic autonomy in 'contextual forms of asserting non-dependence' (Grignon and Passeron 1989). There are also strategies to manage appearances, when visitors play the game of institutional conformism because they are directly exposed to the institutional gaze. You can put on the 'good recipient's' clothes in front of the institution's representative and take them off as soon as you have left

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

1 Obviously, the same holds for other relationships, such as those between the benefit offices and political authorities (on a governmental and parliamentary level), public institutions and other social organisations, and the 'partners' gathered in executive boards.

the room. Distancing, bypassing institutional norms or even challenging them: the reception desk is the place where the limits of institutional injunctions are shaped.

Such secondary adaptations and other insubordination strategies are related to the issue of the uses of the institution: what you can do in it, what you can ask it to do, what you can expect from it. There is a 'good use' of the institution through reception, i.e. an institutionally defined use: coming in when necessary; limiting the visits to the demands of file processing. But as many visitors find themselves in precarious and difficult situations, therefore diverging from the institutional norms, other uses are developed: regular visits, unjustified on an administrative level; new expectations in terms of advice; consideration; and ability to listen. New uses of the institution are invented at reception.

These uses have effects on the institutions themselves. Here, the concept of 'secondary adaptations' comes in handy again. Erving Goffman points out that they depend on socio-historical variables: what is at one point secondary can become part and parcel of the institution's normal practices and 'missions' in another context. The 'marginal advantages' that can be expected from a relationship can become, if not central, at least less marginal. The individuals' secondary adaptations to the institution may then contribute to an adaptation of the institution. Like many other public organisations, benefit offices have been undergoing such a transition for a few years – a period of uncertainty which renders problematic the definition of what, in the uses of the institution at the desk, is normal or marginal. We can argue that the visitors' lateral uses (looking for moral support, all kinds of advice) and the secondary benefits they get out of them (displays of consideration, sociability) tend to have an increasing importance and hence progressively become part and parcel of reception's 'normal' functions, and more generally of these institutions.

Indeed, the definition of an institution's social functions – its 'functionalisation' – is known to be based on the institution's uses. Bernard Lacroix and Jacques Lagroye write that:

> From the multiple relationships established between all the agents who have to 'do with' the institution, or who, more simply, have to deal with it, results its assimilation to a presumably indispensable 'social function'; the institution's *functionalisation* transcends individuals and practices, even though it only exists through the intervention of these practices and the constant adjustment of the beliefs in the institution. Hence, analysing the uses means analysing the genesis of the institution (Lacroix and Lagroye 1992: 11).

In this perspective, the *usagers* (or 'users': those who make use) of the institution factor in the definition of its function, but, in contrast with the optimistic thesis of a 'co-production of service' (Godbout 1992), do so not so much through bargaining or 'citizen' practices, but rather through the social positions and situations they display, which entail expectations extending far beyond technical problems or benefit payouts. Within the context of tension in benefit offices between a strictly

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

familial orientation and a more 'social' role, turned towards the treatment of precarity and 'exclusion', the transformations of the uses of reception might be among the elements likely to push them towards this social role – this would come as additional evidence of the key strategic importance of reception in these institutions.

The uses of discretion

The case of injustice shows this: applying the rule is not enough to retain control over relationships with the public. In implementing public policies, street-level bureaucrats cannot only stick to merely implementing the regulations: they make 'arrangements' (Dupuy and Thoenig 1985), use their discretion and apply the rule according to their interests (Bourdieu 2005). These adjustments in enforcing the texts are admittedly necessary for bureaucracy to function (Blau 1955); but the uses of discretion can also prove arbitrary or at least be denounced as such – another threat to the institutional order.

Two main types of discretion use can be distinguished. The first occurs when settling 'problematic' cases: those that are not considered in the texts or those that are in-between two categories. This is a far from rare occurrence, in particular for criteria related to child care (which entitles to family benefits) or the possibility of applying for the RMI (Strobel 1997). Such disputes are solved not so much by bargaining between the agent and the recipient, but rather according to a form of jurisprudence that is elaborated on a daily basis in relationships between benefit office agents, thereby drawing up 'secondary rules of application' (Lascoumes 1990). This activity occurs on several levels, as high up the hierarchic ladder as the problem is complex. The first level is that of discussions between colleagues. 'When we have doubts about a file, we talk amongst ourselves. Before we go and see a manager, we ask each other: "What would you do?"', Frédérique Rouet explains. If the case is particularly difficult, the jurisprudential process continues with the recourse to a manager, then to another office, and eventually, in the most complex cases, the CNAF's expertise. A complex problem in the processing of an RMI application file illustrates this process. A 60-year-old man, with a heavy Italian accent, had filled out an RMI application form in the recipient file of the woman he lived with; the two have since separated. When the CAF recorded the separation the application was not processed. The man finds himself alone with no resources. The problem then consists in determining whether to consider the file – in that case he has to apply again, adding a month of delay for his RMI payment – or the applicant. The question elicits contradictory stances. The agent who receives the applicant thinks that the person should be considered first, but the

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

liquidators who processed the file applied the opposite principle. Frédérique Rouet calls headquarters. After a rather long wait, she argues in terms that the recipient cannot really understand.

> I don't really agree here. The one applying is the one who signs the integration contract. It's not normal. I don't agree here. This is not normal. [The interlocutor replies]. Well yeah, but she's not the one who's doing the integration. I don't agree. Apparently, not everyone does the same thing. [The interlocutor replies]. Well, no! He loses a month! [About a liquidator]: She's a piece of work, that one! [She puts the phone down, tells the recipient] We have a disagreement here.
> - Well, I don't have any resources now.
> - We're going to ask for a manager's input. [She calls headquarters again, explains the case and mentions that some agents agree with her whilst others do not]. The recipient and the applicant are two separate things! [She gets the upper hand, says the recipient]. It's okay, it's going to be regularised in two weeks.
> - [The man smiles]. As fast as possible, please, because I don't have any income right now.
> - Yeah, we're doing it urgently. It's going to be in two weeks.
> - Thank you very much... Sorry about that. Goodbye (Crépel, 3/8/95-6).

As this example shows, such technical arbitrations do not provide an opportunity for the recipient to actively intervene in the treatment of his problem; all he can do is call attention to the outcome's individual consequences. This type of problem also reinforces the image of a complex system, impossible to understand for outsiders. It also reinforces the belief – partly well founded, in this case – that the reception agent has an important role, which gives him more credit in the recipient's eyes. However, the vision of decisions made on a partly arbitrary basis by the agent also gains more strength.

Reinforcing the reception agent's power at the risk of discrediting the benefit office: this is also the issue raised by the second type of discretion use, namely the small liberties that reception agents may allow themselves or allow the recipient to take in deviating from institutional norms, which can be observed in a similar manner in many other administrations (Weller 1990). Doing small favours, taking distances from administrative 'inconveniences', overlooking omissions or mistakes: such flexible administrative practices are undoubtedly indispensable to the functioning of an institution, whereas being overly strict can prove counterproductive. That said, by definition, these practices lack a clear basis. The reception agent's position towards the benefit office, his relationships with the back office allowing him (or not) to have an incomplete file 'go through', his subjective appreciation of the recipient and their problems and other random factors have to be taken into account. Being humane, understanding, 'mak[ing] use (and profit, be it a purely moral profit from ethical conformity) of one's freedom of

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

play' are arrangements with the rules through which 'socially constituted drives' are expressed (Bourdieu 2005: 131).

Julien Arthaud's seniority, and his position as an 'outsider' in the benefit office (he only works in decentralised branches), allow him to distance himself from what he considers as 'inconveniences': administrative demands which he thinks are pointless. During our interview, he begins by telling me that he has little leeway. 'We've got rates to respect, we can't ignore them. We're shackled.' Nevertheless, he soon admits that he readily makes compromises and tries to be flexible on details which might cause the file to be rejected at the administrative processing stage. He chalks this attitude up to experience. 'There comes a time when you tell yourself you're not going to get in people's hair over bullshit.' For instance, he approximately deduces the surface of a flat on the basis of his experience of apartments in given locations and of the recipient's (often vague) statements instead of having them come back with an exact measurement. 'You shouldn't bother people.' After a recipient's visit, he tells me: 'All this paperwork! You see? The original of the lease is missing, but it will do' (La Plaine, 21/6/95-3).

The reception agent's relationship with the services in charge of processing the files also conditions the small indulgences he grants to recipients. Hence, when a young woman of North African origin, shabbily dressed, comes to hand in a health examination form for her child on blank paper, rather than on the form serving that specific purpose – which means her document is not in conformity with administrative rules and might be rejected – Cécile Peugeon makes a compromise: she takes it, and says she will arrange for the back office to 'accept it anyway' (Béville, 10/4/95-35). The following interaction is particularly telling on this aspect:

> A young woman (born in 1972) comes in quite annoyed, because her former employer refuses to give her a certificate that is necessary for her RMI application. 'They don't want to know. And I'm alone with my kid. I don't want to get into this kind of trouble again.' Audrey Becker assures her that the CAF will directly ask the employer to send the certificate.
>
> - I already know I'm going to get less. If on top of that it's late, I'm going to have a terrible time again. So, I'm doing what I can to find work, but I don't want you to give up on me, either.
> - No, no, we're not going to give up on you.
>
> Audrey calls headquarters, explains the case, asks if it is possible to have the file go through without the certificate from the employers, argues that 'the lady should be reassured'. She discovers another problem on her screen: 'You didn't declare your change of situation. Here it says non-compensated unemployment since September 1994.' The woman does not say a word; she looks distraught. 'Well, I'm going to write to your former employer and I'll try to convince the office worker to have your file gone through. I talked to her colleague, she can't vouch for her. Don't worry, I'll take care of it tomorrow' (Dubarcq, 18/4/95-29).

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

The reception agent's – more or less accurate – vision of the recipient's situation is also a key element in explaining the liberties they take with the rules. When Claude Ligeot consults the screen to answer a question from a couple with a child and very few resources (which they get from their work, not from benefits), she does not correct a mistake that she spots in the declaration of situation. 'We're not going to nitpick, it would make you miss one more month' (Dominay, 31/7/95-17).

Such perceptions of the situation can also lead agents to encourage recipients to deviate from standard practice. Such is the case when Thierry Courtecuisse asks an elderly North-African man to sign a loan application for his hospitalised wife. 'Sign here, and then forge your wife's signature. We're not going to bother her with that' (Véribel, 12/6/95-6). Similarly, Josiane Delpol tells a couple of RMIsts to 'lie' in their housing application file: 'If it's only 24m^2, you'll tell him [the landlord] to write 25, right?' [Housing benefits are granted according to minimum conditions of surface] (Dombourg, 14/6/95-4). Similarly, Josiane Delpol also incites a recipient to a small lie justified by her situation and meant to avoid administrative problems when she tells a young woman of Asian origin who did not provide a pregnancy certificate on time, so that none of her benefits would be suspended: 'You have to get a medical certificate stating that you were late for the visit due to medical reasons', which was not the case (Dombourg, 1/6/95-8).

A certain form of arbitrariness also lurks behind these small decisions through which agents mark their distance from their institutionally defined role and their personal involvement in the relationship with the recipient – this play with norms, when I observed it, was always beneficial to the client. The indulgences granted in some cases by a reception agent may not be granted systematically and according to objective criteria. They may not be granted by all reception agents either. These small favours do reinforce the personal credit of the agent with 'his' recipients, but this happens potentially at the expense of the other agents (what happens when an agent has tolerated something that the next agent does not?) or even of the credit of the benefit office itself. If one tolerates doing without certain documents, it means that they are not indispensable and that they are actually just 'inconveniences'. On the other hand, if deviations from the rule are alternatively accepted and refused, this is evidence that files are treated arbitrarily, etc.

Hence, the impact of these small favours granted by reception agents who tend to refrain from 'nit-picking' is difficult to assess. On the one hand, these favours remain limited to the margins of the application of rules, and are therefore of little consequence. On the other hand, they can bring about discredit and conflict. Such discretionary decisions enable the system to work on the long-term, but they also make it vulnerable to criticism. 'Bureaucracy's human face' is also the face of favours and favouritism, especially for those who do not profit from such 'arrangements' (Dupuy, Thoenig 1985).

Ultimately, the failings in the system I have mentioned here are not the main risks to the institutional order. While they can be used as pretexts for complaints, mistakes are usually surprisingly easily accepted at the desk. Injustice rarely leads

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

to scandals. And while discretionary decisions are made at the desk, this happens on the agent's initiative, in his relationship with other departments of the benefit office, much more than in negotiations between agent and recipient. Accordingly, this analysis should be complemented by that of other, more diffuse forms of adjusting to the institution by visitors and vice versa.

II. Putting up with the institution

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

IV. Adapting the institution

A wide gap often separates the official uses of an institution and the actual ones. Hospitals and emergency rooms receive requests for services that have nothing to do with medical care (Ogien 1986; Peneff 1992: 161 ff.; Camus and Dodier 1996). Libraries are not only places where visitors consult books: they also find shelter there, heat and opportunities to meet other people. Likewise, the elaborate design of the Georges-Pompidou Centre in Paris outlines an institution that is very different from the one that visitors have progressively shaped, making the place theirs (Heinich 1986). Every institution has its own geography of 'free spaces' (Goffman 1961): individuals adapt it and suit it to their needs.

Occasionally, the scope of these unplanned uses is such that they question the institutional order and hinder the execution of its official functions. In hospitals, dealing with welfare cases delays the handling of 'actual medical problems', in libraries, idle adolescents and the homeless have a problematic cohabitation with the 'good readers', etc. New institutional practices then appear, between the purist retreat towards the institution's 'true' functions, with an emphasis on the rules, and the control and restriction of access, and adjustment, when the institution adapts to the visitors' adaptations.

While benefit offices inevitably experience tension between these two types of practice, the direct confrontation to the public organised at reception clearly plays in the favour of adaptation. The multiform effects of a deteriorated social situation have as a corollary a deep transformation in the structure of the expectations towards the institution. The proportion of at least partially unplanned uses is increasing. A key element among the roles that objectivise the institution for those who have to deal with it, the role of reception agent has been extensively transformed by the new demands involved in these uses. The structure of expectations and the roles which constitute the institution are transformed and the institution itself is transformed as new uses are developed.

A place to talk

'Up until the 1960s, it could be in the parish, in the 1970s, it could be in the youth centre or in the neighbourhood association; but today, in what places can one get their social identity back?', Isabelle Astier asks (1995: 125). In fact, while I do not mean to indulge in a nostalgic litany of 'crises' and 'ends' (end of family, school, unions, the Church, etc.), I have to admit that the classic venues of socialisation have undergone massive alterations in the past decades. The dominated fractions of the social space, those who are first in line to face the effects of economic and social problems, are the ones who have suffered from them the most. Hence, I posit the hypothesis of a shift of these venues of socialisation towards places that formerly did not fulfil such functions, or seldom did. The offices of public institutions, which are by definition open to all, and in particular those of welfare institutions, are certainly among these new venues.

As many visitors of family benefit offices experience unemployment and family break-ups, they are deprived of the main venues of identification and social relationships: work and family. With them, an entire set of memberships and social relationships (from co-worker friendships to contacts between parents) collapses. Instable professional situations force people to move repeatedly and bring about a sense of rootlessness that favours isolation. Additionally, the low amount of financial resources which characterises a vast majority of recipients reduces mercantile exchanges to the strict minimum, as well as the social relationships they involve (such as conversations with shopkeepers or regular relationships with service professionals, for instance).

For this growing fraction of the population that is exposed to 'disaffiliation' (Castel 2002), the place and the role of welfare offices are probably more important than ever. For this changing, heterogeneous section of the social space, the front desk of a family benefit office constitutes a sort of functional substitution to these exchanges which make up social life. The number of visits which have no valid technical reason attests to this. They illustrate not only the economically and socially determined worries regarding file issues, but also more generally the fact that social agents in difficult and precarious situations can feel as 'lost' in their life as a whole as they are in administrative paperwork. 'I think sometimes they don't really know who to talk to, so they come here', Frédérique Rouet ventures. During interviews conducted in the waiting rooms, a significant number of visitors told me they were coming 'because there was nothing else to do', or because 'it was an outing like any other', an opportunity to see somebody, in other words to compensate the insufficiency of the exchanges through which people exist socially.

> A 48-year-old woman, working as a cleaner with a workfare contract [CES] in a school, former factory worker. She is physically weak and her entire body is shaking: 'I don't know anyone in Béville. I like coming here.' A 22-year-old woman, unemployed (former domestic worker), 'single mother': 'I'm coming

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

because there's nothing else to do. Once a month' (Dombourg). Undergoing dialysis because of a kidney disease, another woman, 39, cannot work. She comes rarely, because she does not live in the city – only once a year for the means-test form, like today: 'It's only for the green paper'. 'I like coming here. You have to wait around, but I like coming here. It's an outing like any other. It always goes well. It's great. They're marvellous, they're always very nice to me' (Dombourg).

These social conditions entail new expectations. Visitors do not only come to receive a technical answer to their file problem, they are also looking for marks of concern, attention to their problems and humanity towards them: they want the reception agents to 'listen', as the latter say, because this is the only place where they can expect it to happen. These expectations are only expressed in a roundabout manner, in the grievances exposed at reception or in the comparisons made with reception in other administrations. The recurrent denunciation of reception as overly perfunctory indirectly reveals the expectations of consideration for their problems and their person; a consideration that they do not necessarily get elsewhere.

A young woman, 26, working as an intern in a factory where household appliances are manufactured, makes the following description of her visits: 'Well, the visits don't generally go that well. They're always in a hurry, they don't have time. I'd like them to last a little longer. 'Cause there're always things you forget. You don't always understand everything either, because sometimes they don't explain very well' (Dombourg). A 19-year-old woman, working in a food-processing factory: 'They should listen a bit more. The first time, I wasn't even in the office for two minutes. And the next time, she didn't even want to calculate the housing allowance. [...] I'd rather not say what I think about that' (Dombourg).

When visitors compare reception in various administrations, often in the favour of family benefit offices, they also reveal the presence of such expectations. Among the positive terms mentioned are 'pleasant', 'familiar', 'warm', 'welcoming', 'nice', 'personalised', 'friendly', 'kind', 'social'; negative ones are 'coldly', 'military', 'quick', 'abattoir', 'treating people like dogs', a 'machine': these terms illustrate how important the human dimension of the relationship is as a criterion of appreciation.

Here, the wait is more pleasant. It's more familiar. Reception is much better at the CAF than in other administrations. Often, we're received coldly. They ask questions that hurt us. Here, it's more pleasant, it encourages people to come more' (woman, 26, RMIst, Dombourg). 'Here it's nice and warm, welcoming, nice. Better than the town hall. At the town hall, it's more... military! They don't speak in the same way. Here, they talk to us properly. At the town hall, it's

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

> [he imitates a sharp and authoritarian tone] Yes! No!' (Turkish couple, 28, the man is a construction worker and the woman is unemployed, Dombourg). 'It's nice here. It's more personalised than the *Sécu* [nickname given to the health insurance social security office]. I feel more at ease here. At the *Sécu*, you have to wait a very long time, and reception is a lot quicker. They expedite people. Here, it takes longer. They go over the file' (a 39-year-old housewife, Béville – her husband is a truck driver). 'At the *Sécu*, they are less friendly. You get the impression you're bothering them when you go there. It's not the same staff at all. Here, everyone's kind. You don't feel like you're bothering them when you come in' (woman, 39, unemployed, five children, Béville – her husband is a builder). 'The *Sécu*'s a bit of a machine. And things never get done in just one visit. You always have to come back, because there's loads of paperwork to do. Here, it's more social (man, 34, truck driver, lives with his partner and child, Béville).

In light of the usual discourse on the conditions of the administrative relationship, the fact that the 'warmth' of the relationship is a category of the perception of reception and an expectation appears surprising. That encounters at the front desks of benefit offices should be discussed in such terms tells us a lot about the lack of 'human warmth' some visitors must experience in their social lives. This expectation informs the visitors' practices; in turn, these practices affect institutional roles.

New uses of the institution, new institutional roles

These reinforced and renewed expectations are indeed matched by new practices and new uses of relationships at welfare desks. The desk has become a place of self-expression, where life stories and tales of woe are told, and this does not occur solely as part of a self-pitying strategy. 'People do confide in us, maybe they don't have other opportunities to talk', Véronique Colomb says. The desk, a symbol of administrative coldness and rigour, has become a place to talk and to exchange for people who lack opportunities to do so.

In practice, it often happens that visitors talk about issues that bear no link with the problems the CAF is supposed to deal with. Having come to recount a 'real' problem in the administrative sense, visitors often come to mention other worries, as the interaction leaves room for the possibility of a partly 'free' discussion (i.e. not exclusively focused on the technical dimension of file processing). Although evidently less frequent, there are cases where the visitor does not have a direct motivation to come, in the sense that there is a specific problem with their file. Occasionally the reception agent does nothing but let the recipient talk about their troubles and show them a few signs of concern.

Two examples illustrate this well. In a small local branch of the Béville CAF, located on the premises of a town hall in a rural area, the reception agent, who has worked there for several years, is well known by 'her' recipients. Today,

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate, Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

another agent is filling in for her, but the 'regulars' drop by, as they are wont to do: among other things, they talk about their problems. A woman in her fifties, who has made a noticeable effort to dress well, has nothing particular to discuss with the reception agent, but came because she is worried. She is trembling, visibly very tense. She is waiting to know if her workfare contract [CES], transformed into a 'strengthened contract',[5] is really going to allow her to get a 'real' job. Her contract had been signed by the left-wing mayor who recently lost the municipal elections. The newly elected municipality has informed her that this commitment would not be honoured: there will be no new position created. Nevertheless, she has received a letter summoning her for a meeting with the deputy mayor, with no additional explanation. She pulls out the letter, where no object is mentioned. She shows her shaky hands: 'The worst part of it is, I've been like this since this morning. Since this morning, I've been taking medication for my nerves. The last time I went to see her [the deputy], she told me "Oh, there's no use working since your husband works"' (Crépel, 3/8/95-11, Frédérique Rouet).

At the Béville headquarters, a woman in her sixties, of Spanish origin, very tense, has come to say that her tenant's lover has been released from jail. She interrupts herself several times to apologise for the inconvenience. 'To prove that [she is] not making this up', she shows a doctor's certificate stating that she has suffered a nervous breakdown. She starts crying, then regains some confidence, then resumes telling about her nervous breakdowns. Her eyes are red: 'I cry day and night.' 'I've been all alone, since my husband died.' She complains about her tenant: 'Maybe you can do something...' The reception agent has listened to her patiently and she walks her back as she continues to talk. He then tells me that this woman comes every month to talk, notably about her problems with her tenant, whom she wants to evict with no valid reason (Béville, 10/4/95-14).

As we can see, while visitors ask for consideration, they also frequently ask for help to deal with their problems. When they pay a visit to reception, aside from discussing their personal problems, some recipients hope to solve those problems. Hence, the boundaries between public and private, administrative and personal can become porous. Such is the case when a woman makes a reception agent read the last letter she received from her ex-husband to ask her what she should do (Béville, 14/4/95-11), or when a 30-year-old man asks if, based on his financial means, he should live with his girlfriend or not (Véribel, 19/6/95-20).

The following two examples are quite revealing. A 38-year-old woman, shabbily dressed, comes into the Dubarcq local office (18/4/95-6, Audrey Becker). 'Let me introduce myself first. I'm Mrs Marcel. I've been getting the RMI since 1989. Moreover, I have a specific situation that I'm going to explain to you.' She goes on to explain that since 1971, she has stayed in the family house to take care of her bedridden father and of her mildly intellectually disabled brother. The explanation lasts several minutes; after it ends, the reception agent goes back to

5 '*Contrat consolidé*', another welfare contract supposed to be a step towards stable employment for people in difficulty.

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

the RMI problem and points out the fact that the CAF pays, but does not decide. She admits that she does not understand the problem which brings her here:

> - Your problem is actually a personal issue. There's nothing we can do about it.
> - Yes, but I wanted advice, and also, I wanted to show you that I'm doing what I can, given my family situation.
> - You should make an appointment with a social worker.
> - Oh, you know, we're foster children, so, social workers ...

She resumes her account, repeating several times that she is reluctant to 'get everything off [her] chest'. The reception agent listens, then advises her to 'take matters into [her] own hands' in order to 'get out of this situation'. The woman thanks him and wishes us a nice day as she leaves.

At headquarters in Béville, Marie Annaud receives a shabbily dressed 45 year-old woman.

> - I've come to see you because I'm living with Mr Raynaud. And he's taking stuff with him all the time. I'm wondering if he isn't going to go and live somewhere else. Did he come to tell you that? Because we live in the same place, but we're not a couple, you know.
> - Yeah, you know, even if you're not a couple, since you live in the same place, we consider that you're living maritally, okay?
> - Yes, yes.
> - [Consulting the screen]: No, no change has been declared.
> - I don't want to seem like a thief. I get insulted. Because he doesn't give anything for the rent, the bills, and I receive his son's benefits.
> - Yeah, we can't intervene in this situation ourselves. We can't check: we have no evidence. But if it is so, he'd better get a flat of his own. We consider that it's an arrangement between the two of you, and we can't intervene.

With new expectations and new uses come new institutional roles:

> When people come in and they're completely anxious, that's when you should take the time to listen to them. To let them talk. Because when have they been able to talk? [...] I don't know if outside, they meet a lot of people who receive them. We live in a selfish world. So, at our level, we have to bring some warmth (Agnès Coubertin).

Likewise, Sylvie Véra explains: 'There's also a problem in this society: we don't talk enough. People sometimes they tell you about their file and then they tell you a little bit more. Well, if that can help them feel a little bit better...' 'I don't want to do charity work, but people need someone to listen to them, I guess that's about it', Christine Duval explains.

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909

The reception agents, who do not have the training or the means to invest these new 'social' functions, have to face many hazards in doing so: nothing is more difficult than taking on this new role. Visitors make new uses of family benefit offices: in the process, they change the agents' roles and by doing so, drive street-level bureaucracies to complex and unplanned transformations.

© Dubois, Vincent, Sep 01, 2010, The Bureaucrat and the Poor : Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Ashgate , Farnham, ISBN: 9781409402909