

# Granting 'Human Dignity'

## How Emotions and Professional Ethos Make Public Services

---

Sophie Andreetta

### Abstract

Building on ethnographic fieldwork in Belgian welfare bureaucracies, this article explores the place of emotions in the administrative treatment of cases—particularly those involving migrants, whose welfare rights are increasingly limited. Welfare offices are responsible for granting social assistance—in the form of medical treatment, material help, or financial benefits—in order to guarantee that those residing in Belgium live in dignified conditions. This article delves into civil servants' emotional engagement, discourses, and relationship to 'the state' and into the way they decide on specific cases based on feelings, administrative guidelines, and instructions from above. It challenges the assumption that street-level bureaucrats' discretion and daily practices often effectively restrict citizens' access to public services and shows instead how emotions, professional ethics and values contribute to assessing deservingness, and to the way civil servants 'do the state' on a daily basis.

**Keywords:** Belgium, discretion, emotions, ethnography, social work, statehood, street-level bureaucracy

It was 9.30 in the morning, and I had just arrived at the welfare office. As the social worker that I was shadowing was about to receive her first 'client' of the day, Sofia, one of her colleagues, gets out of her office with tears in her eyes. She hugs the young woman that is stepping out—also tearing up—and walks her towards the exit. She then turns to us and explains: 'This, her, this is my success story. My happy moment, the reason why I do this job. There are so few of them that I sometimes forget. But she made it. We worked together for years, and now, she is graduating, she found a job. So, this was our last appointment'. Later that day, she further explained: 'After the first time she came in, I cried. She was covered in bruises. Her mother was beating her up. She really touched me. I had just become a mother myself...so I did everything I could. I made sure there was not one single loophole in my reports.' (Excerpt from fieldnotes, June 2018)<sup>1</sup>

Current theories of street-level bureaucracy, drawing from the classical work of both Weber (1995) and Lipsky (1980), often assume that civil servants are rational and enforce public policies in a not always consistent yet detached manner (Brodkin 2012; Holm Vohnsen 2017; Hill and Hupe 2002; Lindhorst and Padgett 2005; Spire 2008). Scholars delve into the multiple and sometimes conflicting norms that bureaucrats have to work with and reconcile on a daily basis, insisting on the social embeddedness of supposedly 'neutral' public servants (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2007), their conflicting loyalties (Andreetta 2019; Dubois 2010; Spire 2008), instructions from above, below and sideways (Evans 2010; Verheul 2013), and the official and unofficial goals that they are working towards (Spire 2008). Most of these scholars demonstrate that the way civil servants exercise discretion, particularly when dealing with migrants, contributes to reducing access to public services (Brodkin 2012; Gabarro 2012; Spire 2008). Building on the idea that affects and emotions could be a relevant entry point into the study of statehood (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2017), this article analyses the place and the role of emotions in the bureaucratic treatment of the welfare requests of migrants with a precarious legal status (Goldring and al. 2009) in order to show how emotional reactions, in connection with ideas about truthfulness and deservingness, can both favour and harm social assistance claims.

The opening vignette illustrates the complex emotional dynamics involved in welfare staff's daily work. Sofia's remarks show her emotional connection to her job—the reason why she does it, to a specific situation, and how her affective connection to the 'client' impacted the administrative treatment of the case—making sure 'there were no loopholes in her reports'. Current theories of affects and emotions mainly explore citizens' emotional connections to the state, as a community, an idea and a set of institutions (Ayata 2019; Laszczkowski and Reeves 2017). Authors use political affects to denote techniques of governance (Slaby and Bens 2019), or affective citizenship to reflect on resident's attachment to the state (Ayata 2019). Only a small number of contributions, however, address the place of affects and emotions in the making of the state 'from below', in the daily work of street-level bureaucrats and the concrete implementation of public policies (Borrelli and Lindberg 2018; Giudici 2021; Lentz 2014). This article addresses this gap by identifying two ways in which affects and emotions matter in civil servants' daily work and discourses. Following this issue's introduction, I understand affects as embodied reactions, and emotions as subjective—accessible through the discourses of those experiencing them. Emotions matter in the way welfare workers talk about their professional commitments and working conditions; affects are an important aspect of their relationship with users as they help assess the truthfulness and needed deservingness (Jilke and Trummers 2018) of client requests.

Recent studies of migration and welfare increasingly mention ideas of 'truthfulness' and 'deservingness' as central aspect in migrants' interactions with state institutions—whether it is about asylum (Gill and Good 2019; Good 2011), residence claims (Chauvin and Garces-Mascarenas 2014), healthcare, or welfare entitlements (De Coninck and Matthijs 2020; Lafleur and Mescoli 2018). Combining

these insights with anthropological studies of the state and bureaucratic discretion, this article explores the place of affective entanglements in the production of stateness (Beek 2016: 8–9) and shows how emotions and affects play a central role in conveying truthfulness, and therefore, establishing the (needed) deservingness of claimants. It illuminates civil servants' attachment to certain professional norms—such as those acquired in training—and institutional values and how these norms and values play a central role in the way bureaucrats deal with requests and exercise discretion. It also traces how 'feelings' and 'impressions' are reported and written about in social reports, therefore becoming bureaucratic facts and eventually a part of 'the state' as a set of institutions and procedures. Focusing on the goals, hopes, and frustrations of civil servants, therefore, constitutes a productive entry point in order to understand how stateness is 'made' and how policies are implemented on a daily basis.

As a part of wider research on the judicialisation of social assistance in French-speaking Belgium, this article builds on ethnographic fieldwork within three different welfare offices and two lower courts of labour between 2018 and 2019. In these different sites, I observed hearings (n=40), interviewed welfare judges (n=15) and lawyers (n=10), shadowed welfare workers (n=15) and read case files. In welfare professionals' discourses, in their interactions with users, and in the documents that they write, emotions seemed to hold a striking place. Lawyers got upset during hearings. Judges sometimes expedited decisions to make up for situations that they deemed 'inhuman'. Welfare reports regularly mentioned how claimants 'seemed'—nervous, annoyed, lost, or depressed—and whether their story sounded truthful. Interviews and informal conversations with the civil servants who worked within welfare offices allowed me to delve into the place of emotions within their discourses about their daily work, both in handling and deciding on specific cases, and as a substantial aspect of their relationship to the state—as an idea and a set of institutions, people, and guidelines. Case workers regularly mentioned their attachment to certain professional ideals and their frustrations with specific state guidelines or working conditions. In talking about specific cases, they declared being 'touched', 'horrified' or 'annoyed' at the applicant or at their situation. Following and observing civil servants throughout the day helped me understand the place of affects—the way beneficiaries 'seemed' and behaved—emotions in examining social assistance requests<sup>2</sup>, and how these could eventually 'tip the scales' one way or the other when case workers exercised discretion.

Beyond the Belgian welfare case, this article aims to illuminate the place of affects and emotions in civil servants' daily work—both in their interactions with users and as a central part of their professional ethos and relationship to the state (see also Andreetta and Kolloch 2018). As a result of their education and the ethical and moral values underpinning their profession, welfare workers often insist on their willingness to 'help', sometimes despite or against 'the state' as a body of rules, institutions and policies. Towards the latter, they sometimes feel frustration, anger or resentment. As the following sections will show, these feelings are not only an

underexplored yet important part of welfare workers' experience but also a useful tool to understand discretion in public service.

## **Affects, Truthfulness and Deservingness in Migration Governance and Beyond**

When investigating the welfare/migration nexus, social scientists regularly mention deservingness as a key issue. Studies, however, mainly focus on how migrants construct, perform and experience deservingness (Chauvin and Garces-Mascarenas 2014; De Coninck and Matthijs 2020; Lafleur and Mescoli 2018) or on how such deservingness is perceived based on quantitative studies (Van Oorschot 2006). Drawing from the works of Fassin (2010), Ticktin (2011) and Giudici (2021), this article, instead, helps unpack how civil servants concretely assess deservingness in welfare claims. It also furthers the aforementioned works by illustrating how needed deservingness—according to which those needing the more help are prioritised (Jilke and Trummers 2018)—is connected to truthfulness and partly assessed based on affective entanglements.

Looking at immigration claims, Fassin (2010) already insists on the importance of moral sentiments in governing the disenfranchised—arguing that the 'humanitarian reason' behind recent policies contributes to masking the inequalities and the symbolic violence at the heart of the state. In a context where migration is increasingly governed through humanitarian rather than political logics—less and less claimants are granted asylum—Ticktin (2011) focuses on the implementation of the illness clause in France and explores how social and medical workers establish deservingness based on medical 'evidence'. She argues that such evidence is partly mediated and constructed through affects—such as performances of suffering, racial or gendered imaginaries. Looking at asylum reception in Italy, Giudici (2021) contends that in a time of welfare cuts, compassion has been replaced by volunteerism: deservingness is no longer established based on suffering bodies alone, 'deserving' claimants are, rather, those willing to perform voluntary work and actively participate in Italian society.

Building on the need to consider precariousness beyond the citizenship/non-citizenship divide, Giudici (2021) also explores how welfare decline has affected both asylum bureaucrats' working environment—generating anxiety, fear, and frustrations—and migrants' ability to access public assistance. In a time of scarce resources, she highlights bureaucrats' 'awareness of working within a system substantially unable to fulfill its moral and legal responsibilities towards protection seekers, leaving them to wrestle with extremely harsh living conditions' (Giudici 2021: 38) and points to the complex ethical and affective consequences of such a situation.

This article aims to further these insights by exploring the place and the effects of affective entanglements in welfare bureaucrats' daily work. Scholars indeed generally insist on ideas of care and control (Perna 2019) or on the way bureaucrats differentiate between their personal and professional bodies and attitudes when

dealing with underprivileged claimants (Dubois 2010). The role of affects and emotions in welfare governance, however, remains underexplored.

This contribution illustrates how, combined with welfare workers' will to help, truthful claims are perceived as more 'deserving' of public assistance and eventually contribute to determining welfare access in practice. It also shows that affective entanglements matter in bureaucratic discretion and public policy implementation, beyond performances of suffering during interactions at the front desk (Ticktin 2011). Civil servants' frustrations with official norms, with working conditions and policy changes are powerful drivers allowing them to sometimes act against or beyond official norms. Belgian welfare cases eventually help illuminate that the way civil servants use affective entanglements to assess truthfulness beyond the front desk—in their reports, or when furthering requests to their superiors—are central in understanding governance 'from below' (Blundo and Le Meur 2009).

### **Feeling Frustrated: Welfare Workers, Laws and Institutions**

The Belgian constitution declares that 'everyone is entitled to live in conditions that conform to human dignity' (art. 23) and that social assistance can be granted to both citizens and noncitizens to that effect. In practice, the right to human dignity is mainly enforced by welfare administrations, also called public centres of social assistance (PCSAs). Since 2007, the federal agency for the reception of asylum seekers (FEDASIL) is, however, responsible for providing material assistance—food and shelter—to asylum seekers. This section describes the legal and institutional context within which welfare bureaucrats work, highlighting how recent policies have gradually restricted their ability to 'help' migrants by granting social assistance requests and how frustrated they sometimes feel as a result. By outlining the various kinds of norms, from international human rights principles to state laws and administrative guidelines, it also points to the discretionary spaces that civil servants can use in order to provide assistance 'nevertheless' (Oumarou 2014).

Francine is in her early fifties. She has been working for the welfare office for almost thirty years: it was one of the first jobs that she got out of social work school. She does not like that she is controlling welfare recipients on behalf of the state and would rather work for a nonprofit organisation. However, as she puts it:

I always thought it would be my first job, that I would do it for two or three years and then move on. More than twenty years later, I am still here. The salary is good, we get good job security as well...these things matter at some point in life. And, working for the PSCA didn't used to be like this. We used to have fewer cases, we used to do real social work. Immigration policies were different, much less restrictive... We used to be able to teach people about where to buy food, how to deal with rent and utilities, where to get healthcare. Now they are in a more and more precarious situation. We go see people every year, to check residency, and...what? To see that they still live in miserable conditions? That they still share one slice of bread between four people?... Under these circumstances, the administration does not take your own, personal suffering into account. (Interview, May 2018)

In large cities especially, welfare workers admit to working long hours yet constantly remaining behind on their caseload. Sylvie, who was recruited two years ago, explains: "I feel like I am a butcher sometimes, calling people up every ten minutes, dealing with one case after another" (Interview, June 2018). Just like many of her colleagues, she admits that social work is hardly part of her daily routine. She mainly examines welfare requests, checks eligibility requirements, and writes reports.

The Commissions for Public Assistance (CPAs) were created by the Belgian state in 1925 to organise help for 'the poor' at the local level—within each municipality. Their help was often arbitrary and associated with charity rather than with the subjective rights that beneficiaries could claim (Martens 2019). Emergency medical assistance for those illegally residing in Belgium was also organised and distributed by the same commissions. In 1976, local welfare administrations (PCSAs), were created to replace CPAs. Aside from social assistance, they were tasked with implementing a minimum income scheme for Belgian citizens with no other source of income: the minimum *de moyens d'existence* (1974), known since 2002 as the Social Inclusion Revenue (Revenu d'Intégration Sociale). Social assistance, on the other hand, could take many shapes and forms: PCSA could, and still can, help people pay for healthcare, give away furniture or household appliances and milk or diapers for newborns. They could also provide financial assistance for non-Belgian nationals. The 1976 law on Public Social Assistance initially did not include specific provisions regarding those without a regular immigration status, which meant that although they were disqualified from the minimum income scheme, they could receive social assistance that included, but was not limited to, medical assistance. The fifty-seventh article of the law was modified for the first time in 1984, in an attempt to limit social assistance for illegal migrants to the bare minimum; however, it still allowed administrations to grant them the same benefits as to Belgian citizens. In 1993, the same article was modified to limit social assistance for illegal migrants to healthcare and the (financial) aid necessary to leave the country. In 1996, social assistance was limited to healthcare (see Andreetta 2019). Conditions to access the minimum income scheme also became stricter with various welfare reforms: from a guaranteed revenue to those without resources, it became conditional to the applicants' willingness to comply with a series of contractual obligations—most often aimed at 'integrating' through the job market.

Citizens and migrants who wish to benefit from the minimum income scheme or from social assistance—medical or otherwise—must file their request with the PCSA office in their municipality. Based on a 'social inquiry' conducted by a caseworker such as Francine or Sylvie, the administration examines whether the applicant meets the legal criteria. A decision is eventually made by PCSA's council and the applicant is notified by post. When granted in compliance with the guidelines of federal Public Planning Service for Social Integration (SPP IS), social assistance and minimum income are funded by the ministry. Those guidelines define, for example, what kinds of medical treatment constitute EMA—which means that costs of other treatments must be assumed by the respective local office—and what kind

of evidence is necessary to grant financial aid. Should they be unsatisfied with the outcome, people can either request a hearing from PCSA's council or take their case to court: both options are generally mentioned at the back of every decision. If the judge finds against the administration, the costs are eventually covered by the federal state, regardless of administrative guidelines (Andreetta 2019).

Francine and Sylvie are representative of two generations of social workers: one envisions social work, even within PCSAs, as centred around people and feels increasingly frustrated with the growing amount of administrative tasks that working for the state entails; the other was trained and started working under the 2002 welfare reform, where public policies substituted the logic of assistance with the idea that minimum income was a right, granted in specific conditions and provided that recipients fulfilled a series of obligations. 'There is a lot of administrative tasks, but I don't mind that part', Sylvie states—something that her older colleagues regularly complain about. Within that logic, welfare workers' role consists of enforcing those rights rather than assisting those in need.

For welfare workers, the aforementioned policy changes also amount to an increase in internal and external control and the administrative tasks that controlling entails. Residency has to be thoroughly checked and reported upon, lack of resources investigated. 'We end up asking Syrian refugees about their families' belongings in Alep', Francine states while rolling her eyes, 'at one point, we dig and dig on behalf of the state, to the point that it becomes absurd'. Social integration contracts have to be drawn up and enforced, verifying that beneficiaries comply with their obligations. Social reports and administrative decisions have to be written in compliance with administrative guidelines or local offices could lose a portion of their state funding. 'We are controlled about controlling', Xavier once commented in a group discussion (Excerpt from fieldnotes, May 2018), referring to the fact that his supervisors, themselves controlled by government inspectors, would regularly check his work with—and his control of—welfare recipients. Francine further explained:

It is very frustrating to work for a PCSA, as a social worker. Because you are increasingly associated with a social inspector, or an accountant. It is difficult because it is not at all what we trained for. And besides, the human aspect of things is no longer at the centre of our work: all that matters now is how much money we will help the administration save. So, we are going to focus on people's debts, security deposits, there are more and more checks before we can give people money, at all levels and regardless of the purpose—whether it is their accommodation, public transport, healthcare. Your ability to act becomes more and more limited, because, and especially in big offices, there is hardly any money. (Interview, May 2018)

Within PCSAs, welfare workers are often professionals who trained in social work. They share education, work ethics and values centred around the will to help and foster change for the people they assist. As I am shadowing Dounia through the day, she talks to her colleagues about our last case: a young, homeless women whose

financial assistance has just been cut, because she failed to provide her case workers with the documents that she requested. Dounia explains:

I find it harsh, to just do this without warning her. I could see that she was lost. She is the kind of person that you almost need to meet with every week, and follow through. Her case worker is ill, and I don't have the authority to overturn her decision, so I went to the boss to ask if we could reinstate her as a recipient. In the end I cannot do anything for her. She really made me sad, because after all, our first and main duty is to help and accompany. (Fieldnotes, May 2019)

Within welfare administration, these professional values sometimes clash with administrative guidelines and instructions from above that are centred around budgetary concerns. Welfare workers, therefore, end up juggling competing, sometimes contradictory logic, as illustrated by something Francine expressed:

There are rules, there are laws, and there are the bosses of the administration, but you are there to help people. My job is to help people, it is not to help my employer not to give money. (Interview, May 2018)

Combining this contradictory logic, which sometimes involves asking absurd questions, often creates frustrations among welfare staff—as many of the foregoing quotes illustrate—who feel stranded between their professional norms and values and their instructions from above.

Similar conflicting logic can be observed in asylum reception, despite civil servants' lack of specific education, hence demonstrating the importance of socialisation at work in shaping the professional ethos of street-level bureaucrats.

In 2007, FEDASIL centres were created in order to provide material assistance to those who requested international protection in Belgium, following European guidelines. Lisette is in her forties and has worked at FEDASIL for eight years. Unlike many of her colleagues whose training is in administrative sciences, Lisette studied social work. She joined the agency because she was interested in migration and willing to help, yet she has grown increasingly critical of the agency's commitment to the latter. Reception policies have indeed become stricter over the years, therefore excluding a growing number of asylum seekers: 'Social work used to be about helping people, whereas now, it is mainly about enforcing political decisions. It has become harder and harder to do social work, and throwing people outside...I can't anymore,' she explains (Interview, June 2019).

All asylum seekers could initially be hosted within these centres. In order to discourage migrants to make multiple claims for the sole purpose of living in federal centres, the law was modified to allow the agency to limit material assistance to healthcare, social and legal support—therefore excluding food and shelter—for those introducing their third asylum request or more. If their application for international protection was taken into consideration—the first step in examining evidence—by the General Commissariat for Refugees and Stateless Persons, who is

responsible for deciding on international protection requests, asylum seekers were then allowed back into the state's reception network. In 2012, material assistance was further limited to first international protection requests with the exception of vulnerable migrants, whose specific situation was to be examined on an individual basis (Reception directive 2013/33/EU; Reception Law, 12/01/2007).

In practice, after having introduced their application for asylum, migrants are asked by FEDASIL workers whether they need accommodation from the state. In order to determine if they qualify, front desk workers check whether it is their first asylum request, if they have relatives in the country, and the age of their children if they have any. If it was not their first asylum request, only an 'exception' could grant them access to a centre. As I am shadowing Nadine, in charge of gathering information at the front desk, she explains: 'The rule is that we don't make any exceptions. The network is full, we hardly have any space left, so they are extremely limited, and only our superior can make them' (fieldnotes, 2020). Our last 'client' was a pregnant woman with a toddler. Nadine asked whether she was pregnant, and how far along. She then explained to me: 'We only makes exceptions for women who are over six months pregnant. She is only five. But I'll ask my boss if we can still make an exception for her...because she has no place to stay, and she seemed really lost' (fieldnotes 2020).

As neither national nor international guidelines provide a precise definition of 'vulnerability' in asylum reception, FEDASIL workers rely on informal 'operational norms' transmitted during internal meetings with their superiors. When this research took place, exceptions included families with children under three months or pregnant women in their third trimester. The applicant in the aforementioned vignette belonged in neither of those categories. After preliminary screening at the front desk, applicants meet with a nurse, get a chest X-ray and receive vaccines if necessary. They then move to the last section of the incoming centre, where FEDASIL workers tell them whether or not they have been granted a centre. They are either handed out train tickets and instructions on how to reach their designated centre, or they are given a limitation of material assistance decision (also called 'code 207 no show'), stating that they can get free medical care in a designated centre. Once all preliminary screenings are done, I follow Nadine to the last section of the building: 'there are still quite a lot of people waiting on their decision, so I am going to go help', she explains. She also tells me that an exception was finally made for the woman we met earlier. 'Exceptions are extremely precious for us', she states, 'so we are very careful not to make too many of them, because if we do, there is a risk that they will be taken away altogether'.

Among FEDASIL front desk staff, Lisette is an exception: the majority of her colleagues were not trained in social work: most of them were recruited through a general call for civil servants, where any college degree was sufficient. Most staff workers, however, still define themselves as 'social workers'—and highlight their frustrations with current policies. They joined the agency hoping to help and welcome asylum seekers in the country, yet quickly realised that material constraints and instructions from above regularly lead to 'throwing people outside', as

Lisette stated. Reception workers, much like social workers within welfare offices, therefore, try to use discretionary space in order to help despite or against recent policies: 'You're here, either you accept the values of the agency, or you quit, or you try to make the system more human', Nadine tells me as I am shadowing her for the day.

As the many quotes in this section show, within both kinds of institutions, civil servants insist on the difficult affective work, and the increased professional frustrations that recent policies and instructions from above generate. Most of them went into the profession willing to provide care, which is rendered almost impossible within the time and resources that the institution allows them to use. At the PCSA especially, the majority of welfare workers initially aspired to work for civil society organisations where they felt that they would do 'real social work' and 'change things'. They saw the administration as a temporary step in their career—one that many then never left because of the financial security it provided them. All of them still, however, try to use their discretion in order to assist users despite or against administrative guidelines and instructions from above.

Welfare workers' willingness to help also contrasts with previous ethnographic studies of (immigration) bureaucrats (Eule et al. 2017, 2018; Spire 2008), which underline how street-level practices often contribute to restricting migrants' access to certain services. Far from having integrated public discourse and policy ideas aimed at protecting the state (Spire 2008) and its social security system against migrants and undeserving claimants, welfare bureaucrats rely on their professional ethos and the values associated with social work. Their frustration with the state, which they think is 'letting them down' by failing to provide the material and human means necessary to the services that welfare institutions are meant to deliver, sometimes drives them to act against or around current policies in order to help 'nevertheless'. As opposed to Giudici's (2021) Italian reception workers, whose precarious working conditions seem to lead to resignation and compliance, Belgian civil servants' frustrations act as drivers to the subtle subversion and challenging of state guidelines and institutions.

### **Being 'Touched': Discretion, Deservingness and Emotions at the Front Desk and Beyond**

Discretion has become a key concept in the analysis of bureaucratic practices, the implementation of public policies and the production of statehood that results from such processes. In welfare administration, discretion takes place in three different bureaucratic steps often associated with specific spaces: first, during interactions with users at the front desk, where requests are first introduced; second, in the way social enquiries are conducted and reports written (see Andretta 2019); and third, within the advice that welfare workers give, in spite of or against the administrative decision. Current studies generally focus on the first step, highlighting civil servants' power to filter claims, sometimes beyond or against official rules and policies (Blundo and Le Meur 2009; Spire 2008). This section will nuance this

view by showing how emotions, because they help convey truthfulness and/or deservingness, can push welfare bureaucrats to go beyond their official, administrative roles and help migrants get access to social assistance—sometimes against official guidelines.

In most welfare offices, social assistance requests are first introduced through the front desk. Asylum seekers mention whether they need accommodation from the state during registration. In PSCAs, people meet with a social worker in charge of formally taking their request. After answering questions about their residence, their immigration status, resources and family members, they are handed out a list of documents to collect and a receipt acknowledging their claim. Although every single request is supposed to be considered, examined and answered, in practice, frontline workers filter claims by discouraging those who they think do not fulfil the legal and administrative criteria (Andreetta 2019). Frontline interactions can also, however, encourage people to make claims by helping them frame their needs within a social assistance request that the administration could approve or by explaining how they could use litigation in order to get assistance despite administrative guidelines:

I had the case of a woman, a bit of a strange case. She was from Russia, she had two daughters of three to four years old. She really touched me. And she won! I sent her to court and she won. One of her daughters had a rare disease, she needed injections that cost 110 000 euros. Because the disease is rare, some researchers asked her to come and test the treatment. They sold everything, her husband was an economist... and the doctors here, they didn't tell her how much the treatment was. I had to refuse her request because she had a visa and her insurance should have covered the costs of the treatment, but it did not. Sometimes, the things we have to do...so aside from the refusal, I advised her to apply for a residence permit based on medical grounds and ask for social assistance again after that. (Francine, Interview, May 2018)

Once introduced, welfare requests are examined by case workers. As a part of their social enquiry, they ask questions, visit people's homes, and eventually write reports summarising the applicants' situation, the conversations that they had with them and the context of their visit. They recommend what should be decided on the case, based on legal and administrative guidelines, and their own assessment of the situation. Romuald, a thirty-one-year-old social worker with the PSCA, explains discretion as follows:

In reality, you have enormous powers. You have the power to tell people's story from beginning to end, and write your social report. And depending on how you write...sometimes just one word changes the way you read what happened. You can throw suspicions at someone extremely fast, or you can objectify what happened. It is almost scary, the power that you have. Social reports are supposed to be about objective facts, but at the same time, the way you write those facts can change everything.

Bureaucratic work does not stop, however, once a decision is made. FEDASIL workers deliver those decisions to the applicants while explaining how they can challenge them if necessary. Within PCSAs, social workers are supposed to inform applicants about their rights, including procedural guarantees against the administration. When handing out a limitation of material assistance decision, FEDASIL workers, for example, regularly hand out a list of lawyers, mentioning that if they still want to get public shelter, they should meet with one and make their case in court, as stated by Véronique:

We can tell people to sue us, and we do, we give them a list of lawyers. Some people even point them to the two or three very good ones, even if we shouldn't. If they win, we are happy for them. (Fieldnotes, June 2019)

Discretion, therefore, also lies within the kind of advice that welfare workers deliver: whether or not they point to the 'good' lawyer or how strongly they encourage migrants to go to court.

To those studying public administration, deservingness helps explain how street-level bureaucrats prioritise when faced with a high number of clients (Hagen and Owens-Manley 2002; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Tummers 2017). Among these, mainly quantitative studies, Jilke and Trummers (2018) distinguish between earned deservingness (those who made the most efforts), resource deservingness (those most likely to 'succeed') and needed deservingness (those needing support the most). Highlighting the importance of being 'active' in Italian society, Giudici's (2021) account of asylum reception in Bologna points to a form of earned deservingness. When it comes to social assistance in Belgium, needed deservingness is at the core of assessing cases: it is meant to help those without any resources so that they could live in dignified conditions.

The case of Belgian bureaucrats dealing with the welfare requests of migrants with a precarious legal status further shows that needed deservingness can partly be assessed based on affects and emotions. Welfare workers regularly admit that they went above and beyond the standard treatment of a case when they felt 'touched'—saddened—by a specific person or situation and that they denied additional benefits to applicants who they felt did not 'really need' them. In this section, I aim to illustrate, first, how welfare bureaucrats prioritise and help based on emotional or affective reactions; second, how such reactions often contribute to assessing needed deservingness; and third, how such deservingness is partly assessed based on how truthful claimants' stories seem to those at the front desk—based, among other things, on affective performances.

Welfare workers' willingness to help within, despite, or against administrative guidelines is mediated by their emotional reactions—most often, sadness—to a specific case. Sofia was extra careful in her reports about the abused teenager; FEDASIL staff reacts to people they perceive as 'lost'. Because she felt 'touched' by their situation, Francine advised certain, very specific claimants to sue the welfare

administration in court after denying their claim. These stories of ‘getting touched’ depict situations where claimants’ need for public assistance was obvious to the case workers in charge. Talking about one of her long-term recipients, Melissa states:

It is someone with whom I had a good trust relationship. I helped her a lot, but for me...it was help they needed. I carried that family, but it was necessary. And aside from that, a lot of other families can get by. (Interview, May 2018)

Melissa has been a social worker within a PSCA for eight years. She tells me about this case as one of the most striking she ever had: a woman and her four children who used to live without food or heating. Because they lived in extremely precarious conditions—‘conditions like I’ve rarely seen them’, as Melissa puts it (Andreetta 2019)—she pushed their claim forward with her superiors and the administrative board of the PSCA. She recommended a lawyer and helped the family build their case so that they could apply for a permanent residence permit. She also helped them obtain financial aid from the PSCA, despite their initially precarious legal status. Just like a lot of welfare workers, Melissa distinguishes between those who ‘really need’ public assistance, and others who are less needing and, therefore, less deserving of help.

‘Real need’ is often assessed based on what claimants ‘seem’ or ‘look like’: how they are dressed, how well they can communicate, whether they are crying, shaking, or showing affective reactions when answering questions and telling their story. Welfare workers are often unable to explain *how* truthfulness is actually established but rather talk about their affective reactions to specific stories. ‘You can feel it, when someone is not being honest’, Sofia explains, ‘but like all of us, there are times where I’ve been fooled. And that’s infuriating, because when people come back, you know you’ve been lied to.’ Applicants who manage to perform helplessness or vulnerability elicit sadness and compassion, giving ‘the accent of the truth’ to their story. Social workers are then willing to go against or beyond instructions from above in order to truly help applicants. Those who, on the other hand, seem aggressive, inconsistent or nervous are often asked more questions. Social workers ‘dig in’ and establish truthfulness based on the consistency and the details of the information provided. They usually grant what state laws and administrative guidelines allow for but do not feel compelled to help, assuming that the applicant does not ‘really need’ assistance, as stated by Melissa. Beyond truthfulness, the two main categories of emotional reactions on the side of the case worker produce different kind of effects. Sadness and compassion are used as a baseline for what honesty and neediness ‘feel like’; while negative emotions such as anger are often set aside: when annoyed, civil servants refer to administrative guidelines and follow instructions from above to the letter. As one of Romuald’s (a thirty-two-year-old social worker with the PCSA) beneficiaries leaves the interview room, he explains: ‘I suspect that he is lying, because something is off with his story...but until I can prove it, he has a right to public assistance. I will grant it to him, but I will be careful’ (Excerpt from fieldnotes 2019).

In welfare, discretion lies in welfare bureaucrats' assessment of applicants' deservingness. This section illustrated the central role of affects and emotions in the way they are performed by migrants and experienced by welfare workers in examining and determining social assistance requests. Far from being purely legal or rational, civil servants' decisions, which involve determining the truthfulness and needed deservingness of assistance claims, are partly based on feelings—whether they are of sadness, compassion, or frustration.

## **Conclusion**

Building on ethnographic fieldwork in Belgian welfare bureaucracies, this article explores the place of affects and emotions in the administrative treatment of cases, particularly those involving migrants with a precarious legal status. Welfare offices are responsible for granting social assistance—in the form of medical treatment, material help, or financial benefits—in order to guarantee that those residing in Belgium live in dignified conditions. In order to avoid the 'welfare-magnet effect', recent immigration and welfare reforms have contributed to restricting migrants' access to both financial, and material assistance. This article asked how welfare bureaucrats, who perceive their own role as 'helping' civil service clients, concretely enforce these policies.

In a context where most of them went into the profession willing to help, welfare officers regularly express their frustration towards the state—as a set of people and institutions—which they feel is failing to provide the equipment and the manpower to answer client demands. Older generations feel cheated by recent policy changes, which have shifted the logic of their daily tasks from care and assistance to administrative control. These frustrations allow us to better understand welfare workers' expectations of the state and can be analysed as the affective manifestation of a mismatch between expectations of care and recent policies of control and exclusion. Focusing on civil servants' affects and emotions also helps illuminate normative ideals of what the state should be and should do in the eyes of those performing it (see Andretta and Kolloch 2018): protecting and welcoming those in need.

As a consequence, welfare bureaucrats regularly use their discretion in order to help despite or against policy guidelines, illustrating the importance of professional ethics and values—whether they are shared through education or embedded in specific work environments—in state-migrant interactions. The article delves into the way social workers decide on specific cases based on feelings such as sadness, compassion or anger. It shows how 'feelings' of truthfulness are often based on affective reactions, which can push civil servants either to help claimants despite or against official guidelines or to follow instructions from above.

These findings help nuance current understandings of discretion in public services in various ways. They first illustrate how, in a context of increased border and migration control, civil servants do not only rely on affects to select 'deserving' claimants (Ticktin 2011) in line with humanitarian policies: they also criticise, infringe upon, or circumvent policy guidelines in order to further migrants' case

against or despite state institutions. Second, the affective and emotional practices of welfare bureaucrats help identify a new logic according to which administrative practices and daily governance can be understood. African bureaucracies are often described as embedded within wider social networks and solidarities, governed by clientelism and a logic of proximity (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2007). The ethnographic vignettes in this article help point to an affective logic—which might be applicable well beyond the specific case at hand. Third, the case of social assistance requests ultimately helps challenge the assumption that street-level bureaucrats' discretion and daily practices often effectively restrict citizens' access to public services (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Blundo and Le Meur 2009; Spire 2008) and shows instead how sadness and compassion can be used to establish needed deservingness in favour of the client. It shows how emotional entanglements, together with a professional ethos centred on client assistance, contribute to the way civil servants 'do the state' on a daily basis.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all of the welfare offices and civil servants who agreed to participate in this research. I also thank my colleagues Susanne Verheul, Luisa Enria and Pauline Jarroux as well as the anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this text. This research was funded by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

**Sophie Andreetta** is a research fellow with the Belgian National Fund for Research (FRS-FNRS). Her work focuses on how laws and public policies are appropriated by (non)citizens, civil servants and legal professionals and how these various categories of actors use law and litigation in order to achieve social or political effects. Her most recent publications include an article in *Migration Politics* and a special issue in the *International Journal of Law in Context*.

Email: sandreetta@uliege.be; ORCID: 0000-0001-9427-3007

## Notes

1. Fieldwork, including interviews and informal conversations, was conducted in French. Quotes and anecdotes were translated into English by the author for the purpose of this article.
2. Observing welfare workers' interactions with migrants also allowed me to share affective experiences: much like those I was observing, I felt sad about certain stories, annoyed at others, and frustrated with the system that couldn't always assist those who seemed to need it.

## References

- Andreetta, S. (2019), 'Writing for different audiences: Social workers, irregular migrants and fragmented statehood in Belgian welfare bureaucracies', *Journal of Legal Anthropology* 3, no. 2: 91–110. DOI: 10.3167/jla.2019.030206.
- Andreetta, S. and A. Kolloch (2018), 'Money, morality and magistrates: Prosecuting and judging in the Republic of Benin', *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 50, no. 2: 145–166. DOI: 10.1080/07329113.2018.1494407.
- Ayata, B. (2019), 'Affective citizenship', in J. Slaby and C. von Scheve (eds), *Affective Societies: Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge).
- Beek J. (2016), *Producing Stateness. Police Work in Ghana*. (Leiden: Brill).
- Bierschenk, T. and J-P. Olivier de Sardan (eds) (2014), *States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies* (Leiden: Brill).
- Blundo, G. and J-P Olivier de Sardan (eds) (2007), *État et corruption en Afrique: Une anthropologie comparative des relations entre fonctionnaires et usagers (Bénin, Niger, Sénégal)* (Paris: Karthala).
- Blundo, G. and Le Meur, P.Y. (eds) (2009), *The governance of daily life in Africa. Ethnographic explorations of public and collective services*. (Leiden: Brill).
- Borrelli, L. M. and A. Lindberg (2018), 'The creativity of coping: Alternative tales of moral dilemmas among migration control officers', *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* 4, no. 3: 163–178. DOI: 10.1504/IJMBS.2018.093876.
- Brodtkin, S. (2012), 'Reflections on street-level bureaucracy: Past, present, and future', *Public Administrations Review* 76, no. 6: 940–949. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2012.02657.x>.
- Chauvin, S. and B. Garces-Mascarenas (2014), 'Becoming less illegal: Deservingness frames and undocumented migrant incorporation', *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 4: 422–432. DOI: 10.1111/soc4.12145.
- De Coninck, D., and K. Matthijs (2020), 'Who is allowed to stay? Settlement deservingness preferences towards migrants in four European countries', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 77: 25–37. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijintrel.2020.05.004.
- Dubois, V. (2010), *The Bureaucrat and the Poor: Encounters in French Welfare Offices* (Aldershot: Ashgate).
- Eule, T, L. M. Borrelli, A. Lindberg, and A. Wyss (2018), *Migrants before the Law: Contested Migration Control in Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Eule, T., D. Loher, and A. Wyss (2017), 'Contested control at the margins of the state', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 16: 2717–2729. DOI: 10.1080/1369183X.2017.1401511.
- Evans, T. (2010), *Professional Discretion in Welfare Services: Beyond Street-Level Bureaucracy* (New York: Routledge).
- Fassin, D. (2010), *La raison humanitaire: Une histoire morale du présent* (Paris: Seuil).
- Gabarro, C. (2012), 'Les demandeurs de l'aide médicale d'État pris entre productivisme et gestion spécifique', *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* 28: 35–56. <https://doi.org/10.4000/remi.5870>.
- Gill, N. and Good, T. (2019), *Asylum Determination in Europe. Ethnographic Perspectives*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Giudici, D. (2021), 'Beyond compassionate aid: Precarious bureaucrats and dutiful asylum seekers in Italy', *Cultural Anthropology* 36, no. 1: 25–51. DOI: 10.14506/ca36.1.02.

- Goldring, L., C. Berinstein and J. K. Bernhard (2009), 'Institutionalizing precarious migratory status', *Canada Citizenship Studies* 13, no. 3: 239–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020902850643>.
- Good, T. (2011) Witness statements and credibility assessments in the British asylum courts in Holden, L. *Cultural Expertise and Litigation. Patterns, Conflicts, Narratives* (London: Routledge), 94–122.
- Hagen, J. L., and J. Owens-Manley (2002), 'Issues in implementing TANF in New York: The perspective of frontline workers', *Social Work* 47, no. 2: 171–182. DOI: 10.1093/sw/47.2.171. PMID: 12019804.
- Hill, M., and P. Hupe (2002), *Implementing Public Policy: Governance in Theory and in Practice* (London: SAGE).
- Holm Vohnsen, N. (2017), *The Absurdity of Bureaucracy: How Implementation Works* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).
- Jilke, S. and L. Tummers (2018), 'Which clients are deserving of help? A theoretical model and experimental test', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 28, no. 2: 226–238. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muy002>.
- Lafleur, M. and E. Mescoli. 2018. 'Creating undocumented EU migrants through welfare: A conceptualization of undeserving and precarious citizenship', *Sociology* 53, no. 3: 480–496. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518764615>.
- Laszczkowski, M. and M. Reeves (eds) (2017), *Affective States: Entanglements, Suspensions, Suspicions* (London: Berghahn Books).
- Lentz C. (2014), "I take an oath to the state, not the government": Career trajectories and professional ethics of Ghanaian public servants, in T. Bierschenk and J-P Olivier de Sardan (eds), *States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies* (Leiden: Brill), 175–204.
- Lindhorst, T., and J. D. Padgett (2005), Disjunctures for women and frontline workers: Implementation of the family violence option, *Social Service Review* 79, no. 3: 405–429. DOI: 10.1086/430891.
- Lipsky, M. (1980), *Street-Level Bureaucracy: The Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation).
- Martens, J. (2019), 'La dignité humaine comme mesure de l'aide sociale', in C. Bedoret and S. Gilson (eds), *Les contours de l'aide sociale* (Limal: Anthémis), 27–52.
- Maynard-Moody, S. W. and M. C. Musheno (2003), *Cops, Teachers, Counselors: Stories from the Front Lines of Public Service* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).
- Oumarou, H. (2014), "We make do and keep going!": inventive practices of ordered informality in the functioning of the district courts in Niamey and Zinder (Niger), in T. Bierschenk and J-P Olivier de Sardan (eds), *States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies* (Leiden: Brill), 145–175.
- Perna R. (2019), Bound between care and control: Institutional contradictions and daily practices of healthcare for migrants in an irregular situation in Italy, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, 2103–2122. doi: 10.1080/01419870.2018.1533645.
- Slaby, J. and J. Bens (2019), 'Political affect', in J. Slaby and C. von Scheve (eds), *Affective Societies: Key Concepts* (London: Routledge).
- Spire, A. (2008), *Accueillir ou reconduire: enquête sur les guichets de l'immigration* (Paris: Raisons d'agir).
- Ticktin, M. (2011), *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- Tummers, L. (2017), 'The relationship between coping and job performance', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 27, no. 1: 150–162. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muw058>.
- Van Oorschot, W. (2006), 'Making the difference in social Europe: Deservingness perceptions among citizens of European welfare states', *Journal of European Social Policy* 16, no. 1: 23–42. DOI: 10.1177/0958928706059829.
- Verheul, S. (2013), "'Rebels" and "good boys": Patronage, intimidation and resistance in Zimbabwe's attorney general's office after 2000', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39, no. 4: 765–782. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2013.858544>.
- Weber, M. [1921] (1995), *Économie et société, tome 1: les catégories de la sociologie* (Paris: Uge Poche Pocket).