

CONCLUSION PART III

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As gatekeeper of the access to social services, social workers have significant power over newcomers' integration in Belgium. The second part of this book analysed in detail how this power is institutionally organised and how it is perceived and performed by social workers in the interactions with newcomer beneficiaries. The third part of the book approached the same relation from the perspective of the newcomers.

Chapter 9 addressed newcomers' perspective on the accessibility of PCSW's services, starting from the emergence of certain needs to the actual reception of appropriate services. Our research allowed to identify different ways through which newcomers became beneficiaries of PCSWs. These different ways imply different experiences in terms of access, from the refugee who is referred to PCSW by social workers from reception centres or LRI, to the newcomer who has arrived with the family reunification programme and who is referred to PCSW by a friend after a divorce. Despite this diversity of pathways of access, our research shows the importance of being embedded in a social network (either through institutions or through personal network) in the host society for accessing welfare services. Another result brought in Chapter 11 is that – among the newcomers we interviewed – the majority did not have a precise idea of the type of services offered by PCSWs before their first contact with the institution. Being registered to a PCSW is not necessarily enough to ensure access to services. Here, the circulation of information appears as key, especially for newcomers who do not have the appropriate cultural capital (language skills, administrative know how, and so forth) to have a good understanding of the numerous services of the PCSW. Four main channels of information are mentioned during the interviews with newcomers: PCSW social workers, other professional/organisations, newcomers' network of friends or relatives, and knowledge gained by newcomers during previous experience. Social workers are one of the most important providers of information for beneficiaries. However, our interviews with newcomers show significant differences in the ways social workers inform

their interlocutors. Many interlocutors pointed out the limited and fragmented nature of the information they received from their appointed social worker. In this context, and despite the fact that they sometimes provide incorrect information, secondary channels such as friends or other professionals are often crucial for newcomers to access some services. Chapter 9 shows how newcomers perceive their access to services as being mainly dependent on the discretionary power of social workers. Put differently, they perceive their access as a matter of favour rather than a matter of rights.

Chapter 10 moved to the question of the access to PCSW to the question of newcomers' perception of the institution. Three dimensions of these perceptions have been addressed: newcomers' perception of PCSWs' services and their appropriateness, newcomers' perception of social workers' practices, and newcomers' perception of themselves as beneficiaries. Regarding newcomers' perception of the appropriateness of PCSW services, the interviews show a form of tension in the way beneficiaries describe the institution and its action. On the one hand, the vast majority of the interviewees tend to express a positive appreciation of the support provided by PCSWs. Such a support is perceived as temporary – as a sort of springboard – by newcomers who typically express their aspiration for autonomy and proper access to work during the interviews. On the other hand, newcomers also often express criticism regarding the practices of control and sanctions applied by social workers. Such controls are perceived by some newcomers as obstacles rather than support to achieving effective autonomy. In this perspective, newcomers sometimes perceive the institutional praxis of PCSWs as contradictory with its objective of supporting the autonomy of beneficiaries (an objective that many newcomers agree with). Regarding the perception of social workers' practices and discretion, many newcomers perceive the personality, competences, and goodwill of social workers as critical factors to the access of social services. In this context, while social workers' discretion is often perceived by social workers as a way to provide more equity, it can be interpreted by newcomers as a form of inequality of treatment. More generally, many respondents also emphasise the need of a specific approach for new immigrants as opposed to a more generalist approach that would tend to produce discriminating effects against newcomers who are less knowledgeable about the system. Regarding newcomers' perception of their situation as beneficiary, Chapter 10 shows that becoming a PCSW beneficiary is often accompanied by an experience of downward social mobility. Our research also describes newcomers' perspective about 'deservingness'. We found that most newcomers express definitions of deservingness that present elements of convergence with the definition of the institution (such as the necessity to be proactive) and thereof

also reaffirm the moral hierarchy between ‘deserving’ and ‘non-deserving’ beneficiaries. Still, from the point of view of newcomers, deservingness is also experienced as something that needs to be performed in front of social workers in order to ‘prove’ that one is justified to benefit from social services.

Finally, Chapter 11 addresses the question of the agency of newcomer beneficiaries by looking at how newcomers can engage with the structurally asymmetrical relationship with social workers. This engagement was analysed through three dimensions: the attitudes that newcomers can adopt in front of social workers, the responses that they can develop to cope with difficulties in the relation, and finally the possibility of non-take-up practices. It has been found that the vast majority of newcomers are actually developing compliant attitudes when engaging with social workers. Compliance cannot be understood as a purely passive attitude, however, as it can be performed in different ways: through a form of active collaboration with social workers or through more minimal forms of collaboration. Some newcomer beneficiaries can also adopt – often temporarily – more assertive attitudes in front of social workers. Becoming more assertive often requires perceiving PCSWs’ services not as ‘favours’ but as ‘rights’, based on ‘rules’. This illustrates the difference of perspective that social workers and newcomers can have about the rules. While for the former, rules are sometimes perceived as a limiting factor in providing adequate support to newcomers, for the latter, it can constitute a resource to try to mitigate social workers’ discretion and therefore ensure equity. The capacity to develop assertive attitudes is not evenly distributed among newcomers. Indeed, cultural capital (under the form of language skills, administrative know-how, and basic understanding of regulations) appears to be of importance to developing such attitudes. Chapter 11 then described a variety of responses that newcomers can adopt to cope with difficulties in interacting with social workers. These responses include negotiation, protest, bypass, and also more ‘passive’ responses, such as enduring or even avoiding the interactions with social workers. Here again, our research found that the type of responses that newcomers can have are highly dependent of the type of capital that they can mobilise locally. The research shows how being embedded in social networks in Belgium is important for the capacity of newcomers to cope with difficult relations with social workers. Chapter 11 then addresses the question of non-take-up by describing how – despite the common representation of immigrants as social welfare profiteer – newcomers do not necessarily benefit from services they are entitled to. Beyond the instances of non-take-up that are independent from newcomers’ choice, the research also found that newcomers can also, on some occasions, consciously renounce to certain services based on moral considerations.