

Libor Musil

**Coping With Dilemmas**

Working Conditions And Interactions Of Social Workers With Their Clients

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## **Coping With Dilemmas**

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## Introduction

The aim of this study is to present for discussion an empirical picture of social workers' approach to their clients<sup>1</sup> that follows up *Lipsky's* concept of "Street-level Bureaucracy" (1980).

From the perspective of *Lipsky's* understanding, it is reasonable to say that the following circumstances are crucial for the forming of frontline social workers' approach to their clients: 1. The working conditions of street-level bureaucrats – of which social workers are a special category<sup>2</sup> – are unavoidably uncertain. 2. Street-level bureaucrats are regularly confronted with dilemmas that are the inevitable consequence of working under these uncertain conditions. 3. Regular working interaction with clients gives street-level bureaucrats a relatively high degree of "discretion". 4. Hence, the working position of street-level bureaucrats permits them to make their own "policy" with respect to their interaction with clients. 5. The purpose of these policies is to establish and justify patterns of behaviour that enable street-level bureaucrats to avoid the aforementioned dilemmas. From these five arguments, *Lipsky* explicitly mentions the first four (*Lipsky* 1980, 1991: 213 ff.). The fifth argument is implicitly contained in his descriptions of the ways in which street-level bureaucrats cope with dilemmas (*Lipsky* 1980: 114 f., 125-131, 145-156, etc.). Even though the fifth argument can be read merely "between the lines", it represents a key element in *Lipsky's* understanding of everyday "client processing" (*Lipsky* 1980: xii) by street-level bureaucrats. *Lipsky's* implicit idea of "avoiding dilemmas" frequently emerges with other researchers of social work and it seems to tempt some of them to emulate him. The empirical research results quoted by me in this text remarkably often interpret the everyday working practice of social workers in a way that is close to *Lipsky's* understanding. There are so many authors who, in their case studies of service organisations, interpret the actions of frontline workers<sup>3</sup> as the outcome

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "client" for the people to whom frontline workers directly provide with their services by organising social work services.

<sup>2</sup> As "street-level bureaucrats", *Lipsky* brands "public service workers who interact directly with citizen in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work". Next to teachers, police officers, judges, non-commercial lawyers, medics and other public employees, he places "social workers" in the same category. (*Lipsky* 1980: 3–4, 27)

<sup>3</sup> The term "frontline worker" as a synonym for the term "street-level bureaucrat" (see *Hasenfeld* 1983: 156).

of an attempt to "avoid dilemmas" that it perhaps would be possible to speak about a specific research tradition. I want to describe this tradition in the following pages while pointing to its limits (see also *Musil et al.* 2004).

Inspired by *Lipsky*, in the first chapter I will explore the idea that it is useful to perceive the approach to clients as a result of an attempt of frontline social workers to cope with equivocal working conditions and the associated dilemmas, which has become part of the culture of a specific organisation. In the chapters that follow, I will show how the approach to clients is based on the attempt of social workers to cope with dilemmas between complex and simplified goals, between the quantity of clients and the quality of services, between neutrality and favouritism, between one-sided or symmetric relationships with clients, between procedural and situational approaches, between providing material and immaterial help and, finally, between the attempt to intervene in a timely fashion and an apprehension that the intervention could be precipitate. I will define each of these dilemmas and show with empirical examples how the given dilemma is "avoided" in practical situations and how this practice influences the approach of workers to clients.

The findings of those researchers who understand the treatment of clients by social workers as the outcome of "avoiding dilemmas" may inspire social workers, social work teachers and their students alike. It should be noted however that *Lipsky* pays attention to just one way of coping with dilemmas in work with clients, and it is hence not advisable to hastily generalise his theoretical assumptions. I will therefore conclude by showing an empirical description of the approach of social workers who face dilemmas in their work otherwise than "avoiding" them.

## The Author of the Book

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Lipsky's view of everyday "client processing" is based on the hypothesis that the purpose of the "policies of the street-level bureaucrats" is to establish, follow and justify patterns of conduct that enable to avoid the dilemmas of the work with clients. Many students of social work services seem to replay Lipsky's concept of "avoiding dilemmas" in interpreting the social workers' everyday working habits.

The aim of the study is to review the results of empirical case studies of aforementioned students in systematic manner and – by doing this – to describe ways by which social workers used to avoid their dilemmas between complex and simple aims, quantity of clients and quality of services, neutral approach and favouritism, one-sided and symmetric interaction with clients, procedural and situational approach to the client problems, material and immaterial help, and between acting and not-acting in a response to the client condition. To discuss limits of the "avoiding hypothesis" by Lipsky, the author points out an alternative way of interpreting the everyday working habits of social workers by Laan.