

Social Workers in a Modernising Welfare State: Professionals or Street-Level Bureaucrats?

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Abstract

Social workers are often depicted as street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) or professionals interchangeably. However, to find out how social workers relate to new policy measures, a clear distinction between SLBs and professionals is helpful. Ideal-typical SLBs subscribe to new policies although they may diverge from them in practice, to accommodate clients. Ideal-typical professionals weigh new policies against their ethical code. If the new policy goes against their professional principles, they protest on behalf of their clients. In this article, we study Dutch social workers who have to implement a new policy that (i) obliges their clients to actively participate in society and (ii) obliges them to rely on family and friends when they need help. The data for this article are derived from two projects: interviews with twenty-nine experienced social workers and interviews with social workers in neighbourhood teams and observations of their interactions with clients in six municipalities. We found that Dutch social workers think as professionals: they weigh the new policy against their ethical code and have serious doubts about the second part of the new policy. Hence, they find ways to avoid implementation. However, they behave as SLBs, bending the rules in practice. They rarely confront policymakers or higher management.

Keywords: street-level bureaucrats, professionals, activation, social network, social workers' ethical code

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Introduction

Social work is often depicted as an occupation sensitive to changing societal circumstances and policies, be they the advent of psychological case-work in the 1920s, a move towards democratisation in the sixties, marketisation in the nineties or, most recently, welfare retrenchment. However, social workers also have an ethical code focusing on empowerment and dignity, which is meant to guide their work. How do social workers respond to policy changes? Do they directly implement new policies or do they first weigh them and only implement what concurs with their ethical code? In this article, we look at social workers in the Netherlands. We will analyse the response of social workers to a policy reform, using scholarly literature on street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) and professionals.

In the Netherlands, welfare was decentralised to the local level. As a consequence of a devolution that officially started in 2015 (but was already partly in effect before), youth care, care for people with disabilities and psychiatric problems, long-term non-residential care for frail elderly, welfare policy for the long-term unemployed and sheltered work for people with disabilities have all become the responsibility of municipalities. Most municipalities have installed ‘integrated neighbourhood teams’ that are expected to deal with all the new responsibilities in coherence. Most neighbourhood teams are dominated by social workers. Sometimes team members became civil servants. In other cases, a new organisation was established that employs the neighbourhood teams. In most cases, social workers remained in the service of their ‘mother organisation’ and were lent to the neighbourhood team and the municipality. Either way, management eventually has to answer to local governments (Arum and Schoorl, 2015).

The new policy that is studied in this article consists of two elements. The first will be dubbed the ‘participation-for-self-reliance clause’: citizens need to participate in society; if necessary, they should be activated to do so. Preferably, participation should entail paid employment. Participation is deemed to further self-reliance; citizens in paid employment can provide for themselves. If that is unfeasible, citizens should volunteer or provide care to others.

The second element is the ‘last-resort clause’. Present-day policy emphasises that citizens who need help first have to try to find it amongst family, friends or neighbours. If none of them are able or willing to help out, vulnerable citizens should rely on volunteers.

Professional help is still available, but only as a last resort (Trappenburg and Van Beek, 2019).

Similar policy changes are implemented or debated in other countries. In the UK, ‘the Big Society’, formally launched in 2010, put additional pressure on people dependent on welfare to become self-reliant and shifted tasks and responsibilities from government-funded agencies to the voluntary community sector. The context of austerity surrounding this new policy raised various issues previously addressed in this journal (Forde and Lynch, 2014; Hardwick, 2014) and elsewhere (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2013; Turbett, 2014). In Belgium, policymakers talk about responsabilisation (Verhaeghe and Quievy, 2016). In Italy, Muehlebach (2012) observes a neo-liberal call for ‘ethical citizenship’.

The last-resort clause is partly ideological. Taking care of one’s fellow citizens directly, rather than via tax-paid professional help, is supposed to foster social cohesion (Stadelmann-Steffen, 2011). Moreover, care by family members or friends is deemed more personal and hence preferable for vulnerable citizens (Duyvendak, 2011). However, policymakers also hope that unpaid family care will be cheaper (Maarse and Jeurissen, 2016). The devolution came with a budget cut-off 20 per cent on adult care and 15 per cent on youth care (De Rijk, 2018).

How do social workers respond to these reforms: do they weigh them against their professional ethics? Social work’s professional code states that social workers must ‘respect and promote people’s right to make their own choices and decisions . . . provided this does not threaten the rights and legitimate interests of others’. Social work is about dignity, empowerment and self-determination (Ethics in Social Work, 2004).¹ These principles may be at odds with the new policies. We will argue that a professional response would be to explore and address possible tensions, whereas an SLB response would be to implement the policy or to deviate silently.

Investigating social workers’ responses to a new policy is important because street-level bureaucracy and professionalism are institutional set-ups with different consequences for politics and citizens. Professionalism is a way to guarantee individual citizens that their interests (their health, their legal interest or in the case of social work: their dignity, their empowerment and their self-determination) prevail over society’s collective interest. Professionalism can thus function as a form of checks and balances in a liberal democracy. SLBs also often side with individual clients but in a more hidden, less principled, and thus possibly more arbitrary way. Public debate would probably fare better under professionalism.

1 The British Association of Social Workers’ code states: ‘Social workers should respect, promote and support people’s dignity and right to make their own choices and decisions . . . provided this does not threaten the rights, safety and legitimate interests of others.’

In section ‘Professionalism and street-level bureaucracy’, we will elaborate on the distinction between street-level bureaucracy and professionalism. In section ‘Methods’, we will introduce our research methods. In sections ‘Results: the participation-for-self-reliance clause’ and ‘Results: the last-resort clause’, we present our findings. In section ‘Street-level bureaucracy or professionalism’, the research question will be answered along with a reflection on the limitations of our research.

Professionalism and street-level bureaucracy

In this section, we will first discuss the concepts of street-level bureaucracy and professionalism. We will advocate a distinction between SLBs and professionals, concerning, first, their ethical goals and, secondly, acquiescence versus speaking up. The resulting table enables us to characterise the responses of social workers to new policies as leaning towards SLB or professionalism.

SLBs

SLBs possess three identifying characteristics (Lipsky, 2010; Turbett, 2014, ch. 3; Hupe et al., 2015). First, they work in bureaucracies or other public service organisations where they interact with citizens. Secondly, they work under conditions of limited resources. Thirdly, they have discretionary space. Tummers et al. (2015) reviewed the SLB literature and conclude that scholars mostly study how SLBs navigate within their discretionary space to cope with the frustration of working with limited resources while being in contact with clients (Tummers et al., 2015; for social work decisions, Turbett, 2014, ch. 3; Symonds et al., 2018). Do they become cynical in the course of their career? Do they rationalise their decisions, for example, by telling themselves that some clients did not deserve to be helped? (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003; Evans and Harris, 2004; Brodtkin, 2015; Hupe et al., 2015; Musheno and Maynard-Moody, 2015). Tummers and coauthors construct a helpful categorisation for SLBs’ behaviour, arguing that they can (i) move ‘towards’ the client by bending the rules in his favour, (ii) move ‘against’ the client by sticking to the rules regardless the consequences or (iii) move ‘away’ from the client by minimising contact. Our argument will build on this categorisation.

Professionals

According to sociological literature (Freidson, 2001; Cribb and Gewirtz, 2015), ideal–typical professions are assumed to possess three identifying characteristics. First, professionals possess specialised knowledge. Secondly, they enjoy professional autonomy. And thirdly, professions have an ultimate goal with an accompanying ethical code specific to the profession. The first two characteristics do not constitute a principled distinction between professionals and SLBs. With regard to specialised knowledge, of course surgeons or paediatricians (prime examples of professionals) had much more training and consequently more expertise than front line workers who decide on welfare allowances. However, specialised policemen (prime examples of SLBs, usually not considered professionals) possess knowledge and expertise possibly comparable with doctors or lawyers. Specialised knowledge is a matter of degree. With regard to the second characteristic: professional autonomy and discretionary space seem largely similar, although there are aspects of professional autonomy that do not apply to SLBs. Professionals decide for themselves who qualifies as professional (doctor or lawyer) and who needs disciplinary punishment. Professionals enjoy collective professional autonomy, which goes beyond discretionary space.

However, it is the third characteristic that constitutes a principled difference between SLBs and professionals. Evans (2015) rightly argues that professionals set their own ultimate goal, whereas SLBs take their goal from policy directives. The ultimate goal of medicine, which qualifies as a full profession (Freidson, 2001), is the patient's health. Lawyers, another group that is close to the ideal–typical profession, are singularly devoted to their clients' interests (disregarding the interests of the community at large). Both professions have a code of ethics, including, for example, a confidentiality clause.

Speaking up versus acquiescence

Many previous studies categorise social workers as SLBs, front line workers, professionals or public professionals interchangeably (Musil *et al.*, 2004; Jörg *et al.*, 2005; Ellis, 2007; Marinetto, 2011; Bertotti, 2016). However, several authors make a distinction between SLBs and professionals in terms of acquiescence versus speaking up, though usually not in those terms. Musil *et al.* (2004) castigate social workers in the Czech Republic who create distance between themselves and their clients whenever they see a tension between the policy they are supposed to uphold and the interests of their clients. They contrast this with a case of Dutch social workers who got in touch with their municipality to change the reigning policy.

In his comparative study on welfare activation in Milan and Vienna, [Nothdurfter \(2016\)](#) concludes that welfare workers in Vienna behaved as SLBs grappling with the daily dilemmas involved in activation work, whereas those in Milan retreated in what he terms a ‘professional counselling role’, only dealing with the sunny side of activation and leaving the actual decision-making to others. Nothdurfter argues that social work needs to become professional but not in the Milan style: ‘What is needed in social work is ... a notion of professionalism that engages with policy ideas, organisational structures and practice that determine the rights and obligations of social citizenship’ (p. 426).

[Bertotti \(2016\)](#) studied child protection services in Italy in times of neo-liberal cutbacks. She found that many social workers felt torn apart between their organisations’ and their clients’ interests. In a typical SLB fashion, some of them moved towards the client by using their own contacts or helping out on a voluntary basis. Bertotti prefers a critically engaged social worker, who would get in touch with higher management to discuss organisational or procedural improvements.

These scholars all observe a distinction between speaking up on the one hand and acquiescence or hidden resistance on the other hand. This distinction is the second ingredient for our categorisation.

Categorisation

The above account of professionalism is a simplified version of the literature. Systematic comparisons of professions show that many professions never possessed professional autonomy in the first place. For example, [Cribb and Gewirtz \(2015\)](#) observe that autonomous goal-setting never applied to architects and accountants who have to negotiate their goals with their principals. Historical comparisons point to a change from ‘traditional professionalism’ thirty to fifty years ago, to current ‘organisational professionalism’, which entails a loss of professional autonomy ([Evetts, 2011](#); [Branden and Honingh, 2013](#); [Noordegraaf, 2013](#); [Olakivi and Niska, 2017](#)).

[Ellis \(2011\)](#) distinguished four successive types of social work employees and observes that SLBs have lost discretionary space because of technological developments (computers are often the managers’ allies), turning them into ‘practitioners’. Likewise, former paternalistic professionals were sometimes challenged by service-users exercising their social and human rights rather than having their needs determined.

All these more elaborate distinctions are useful to analyse differences between professions and trends over time. However, in this article, we study just one profession (social work) for a relatively short period (2015–2018) and we just want to find out whether social workers accept policy goals when they clash with their ethical goal, and if not, whether

Table 1 SLB versus professional

SLBs	Professionals
Embracing policy goals	Taking goals from ethical code and accepting policy goals provided they concur with ethical code
Moving 'towards' the client, e.g. by strategic form-filling	Critical engagement with authorities invoking professional goals
Moving 'against' the client, e.g. by rigidly sticking to rules Moving 'away' from the client, e.g. by avoiding contact	

they will speak up in any way. For this purpose, a simpler analytical tool will suffice.

Building on the general characteristics of SLBs and professionals on the one hand and the distinction between acquiescence versus speaking up derived from previous social work literature on the other, we constructed a table to categorise workers' responses to the new welfare state policy in the Netherlands (Table 1).

On paper, the participation-for-self-reliance clause ties in with social workers' dedication to their clients' self-determination and empowerment. Participation in society—via paid employment or otherwise—tends to foster self-determination. Self-reliance, empowerment and self-determination share a family resemblance. However, it is also feasible that people choose not to participate and do not appreciate self-reliance. In those cases, policy and professional goals would diverge. For our study, it is important to see what happens when clashes occur between participation-for-self-reliance and respecting people's right to make their own choices.

The last-resort clause sits more uneasily with social work's ethical code, as it is entirely conceivable that clients' flourishing, empowerment and self-determination are not enhanced by their having to resort to their social network.

In this article, we want to find out how social workers relate to these two policy goals. If they subscribe to the new policy elements without restriction, this would classify as an SLB attitude. If clients do not subscribe to the policy, SLB social workers might end up in the bottom row of the table, ignoring clients or moving against them. If social workers see a tension between their own ultimate goal and the new policies, they have two options, identified in our table. They may move towards their clients by strategically filling out forms or creatively adapting the rules, this would qualify as SLB behaviour. Alternatively, they may resist and oppose present policies openly, referring to their ultimate goal or their ethical code, which would classify as professionalism.

Methods

The data for this article are derived from two different studies: (i) qualitative interviews with experienced social workers and (ii) a long-term study of neighbourhood teams.

Interview project

For the first project, twenty-nine experienced social workers were interviewed about their professional training, previous jobs and current position, ending with their thoughts on the present developments. Some respondents volunteered to participate after a call in their professional journal. Most were found through contacts at schools of social work, the Dutch professional association for social workers and snowball sampling. Some respondents were currently working in the new neighbourhood teams; others were 'left behind' in (somewhat) dismantled specialised organisations but knew the goings-on in the new teams via co-workers. Yet others were on the brink of retirement (sixty-five years). Our respondents have been working with a variety of clients: (former) prison inmates, clients fighting substance abuse, children and youngsters at risk, people with financial troubles, multiproblem families, ethnic minorities, psychiatric patients, refugees and more. We interviewed workers in different organisations in various parts of the country so as to avoid drawing conclusions based on the situation in one organisation or municipality.

The interviews were transcribed and then coded using the software program Nvivo. All interview fragments referring to the participation-for-self-reliance clause and the last-resort clause were used for this article. We subcategorised them into positive and negative feelings regarding these policy directives.

Neighbourhood teams project

For the neighbourhood team project (NTP), six municipalities were selected. Besides aiming for geographical variety, we included municipalities with a maximum variety regarding the ways in which neighbourhood teams were organised. In each municipality, we selected one neighbourhood that was representative for the diverse set of problems that neighbourhood teams face in that municipality. This came down to a selection of (partly) poor but not deprived neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhood teams consist of professionals with different educational backgrounds, work histories and expertise, including social workers, district nurses, psychiatric nurses, occupational therapists, welfare

officials and debt counsellors. We held sixty-four interviews of social neighbourhood team members and made 127 observations of house visits and group discussions. For this article, we use data pertaining to social workers in the teams. We selected material pertaining to the participation-for-self-reliance clause and the last-resort clause. This entailed nineteen observations, six interviews with social workers and eight group discussions amongst neighbourhood team members. A qualitative content analysis was performed in ATLAS.ti. We subcategorised the data into positive and negative qualifications regarding both clauses and subsequently analysed the conduct of social workers.

At the start of each interview or participant observation, we informed respondents about the aim of the research and the anonymisation of all data. We then asked respondents orally whether they agreed (thus acquiring informed consent). We use pseudonyms in this article to refer to respondents in both projects. No formal ethical approval by a board and written consent forms were required according to Dutch regulation in 2015, the starting date of both projects ([The Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice, 2014](#)).

Results: the participation-for-self-reliance clause

The participation-for-self-reliance clause holds that clients have to make do with as little help as possible. At first sight, our respondents seemed to approve of this part of the new policy, which they saw as concurrent with social work's core professional principle. Else said:

This isn't new at all. We learned it at the School for Social Work. What can people do themselves? Self-reliance has always been hot. You focused on that, throughout my career. (Else, social worker, interview project (IP) 13 August 2015)

Additionally, social workers feel that making people responsible is a way to respect their autonomy. Cissy explains:

I really feel people should direct their own lives. If they can't do that temporarily, because of their problems, we can help them. Steer them in the right direction. But they remain responsible. (Cissy, social worker, NTP, 16 June 2016)

The ultimate goals of autonomy and empowerment lead to the dictum: 'Make yourself superfluous. I think that is the essence. I am good at that. I like it', as social worker Harry phrased it. Social workers must make the client 'independent' of their help. Jack, a social worker in a neighbourhood team, tries to explain to his client that she can find a rental house on her own:

Woman: 'I need to move, due to my health, and I don't know where to find a new rental house'.

Jack: 'Where would you start searching?'

'Internet?', the woman responds.

Jack turns his iPad towards her.

She fills in '[Place of residence] rental house'.

'I see rentalhouses.nl', she says.

'Click on it', Jack responds, without looking.

The woman scrolls through the houses and asks: 'How do I find something nearby?'

Jack: 'I think you can do that yourself very well. Should I explain how we work?'

Woman: 'I've already noticed that you're just giving the problem back to me'.

Jack: 'It's not my problem, is it?' (Jack, social worker, NTP 10 April 2015)

In this example, the client asks for help, but the worker tries to make her accept the task of becoming self-reliant.

Although our respondents seemed to agree with the participation-for-self-reliance clause, their professional code also led to doubts. Social workers were not sure the emphasis on self-reliance would always benefit their clients. Marjan said:

We live in a culture of talk, but there's people who won't benefit from talk. Because talk might make them more miserable, they may hang themselves ... Presupposing self-reliance, formulating your own goals ... Meanwhile ... what I see is that [politicians] use all of this for cutbacks ... And I also see a group of people with severe psychiatric conditions or learning disabilities ... these things don't go away. (Marjan, social worker, IP 26 October 2015)

Even though social workers are critical of self-reliance as the ultimate goal for all their clients, they still work towards this apparently unattainable goal. The belief in self-reliance (whether taken from the professional code or from current policy) is very powerful. The next observation concerns a house visit to a single man with acquired brain-injury who struggles to get his life in order. Social worker Barbara does not think the man can really live by himself. Nevertheless, she acts towards him as if she believes he will. The man has an administrator who has emailed him about his (paper) mail. Barbara asks for this mail and the man searches for it:

When the man returns with the mail, Barbara wants to make arrangements with him on how to handle this. ... 'First, if you agree, I'll come for half an hour at a fixed time every week. I'm not going to do

everything, you have to learn to do it yourself.' 'Otherwise, it will not work', confirms the man. Barbara takes a look at the email that the administrator has sent. The man repeats: 'I have to do things myself.' 'I can support you in that,' explains Barbara. She asks if this is all the mail he received, ... and where he left the instructions on how to handle the mail. He starts looking but cannot find them. Barbara suggests that he makes a note to remind himself to look for these instructions. The man says he will remember. Barbara suggests she writes a note for him. And so the conversation goes on. Afterwards, Barbara says to the researcher that she doubts if he can still live by himself. (Barbara, social worker, NTP 25 August 2015)

After the house visit, Barbara explains that she lacks the skills to handle such difficult clients. The researcher asks if she discusses her doubts with colleagues. She does. A colleague with more experience in working with people with an acquired brain-injury has recommended her to downplay her expectations regarding the man's progress.

So, while our social workers adhered to the participation-for-self-reliance clause, they simultaneously realised that in the lives of certain clients a social worker can never be missed. How should we categorise this attitude and behaviour? Is it professionalism or should it be put in the SLB side of [Table 1](#)? The problem that some people will never be able to become self-reliant was sometimes placed in a sociopolitical context, as Gina did during a group interview:

I get the feeling ... that we make excessive demands on people. So they dodge; they no longer open their mail. They refuse to participate because they think they can't do it anyway. ... Like, you have to have this type of education, you need so and so capacity. You must be able to write a letter, write a resume, have a nice chat. So if you don't have all of that, people dodge. They start saying things like: 'I don't have to work, I'm on welfare.' But the feeling behind it is: I would really, really like to work, but I can't cope with these demands. That's a big problem and I see a lot of it here. People just can't cope. (Gina, social worker, group interview, NTP, 18 October 2015)

A colleague underscores this problem:

Colleague 1: No prospects, no chances for a better future and no idea how to improve their situation. It is passed on from generation to generation. I often also see a lack of confidence. People are just surviving and they have no room for anything else. (Social worker in the same group interview, NTP, 18 October 2015)

However, the next two colleagues smother Gina's criticism in positivity about working towards self-reliance.

Colleague 2: I like the self-reliance matrix [an instrument to measure someone's self-reliance], since you can show the little steps people make.

That is more than they themselves would see, because to them it's all bad anyway. And if you can show on paper how beautiful that very small step is ...

Colleague 3: And then you celebrate your successes. Yes, that is true, yes. (Social workers, same group interview, NTP, 18 October 2015)

The ethical code of social workers states that they have a responsibility for challenging unjust policies and practices:

Social workers have a duty to bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies and practices are oppressive, unfair or harmful.² (*Ethics in Social Work*, 2004)

Hence, a professional reaction with regard to people that will never be self-reliant could be to raise the sociopolitical issue of excessive demands on vulnerable clients, in the name of human dignity. However, the installation of neighbourhood teams was accompanied by harsh austerity measures. The prospect of losing their jobs was a palpable threat to social workers. As a consequence, social workers seldom alerted employers, policymakers or the general public. As Yvonne explains:

During your work, you learn to adapt and that is totally different from climbing the barricades. We are not politicised anymore and besides, it's your own job that's on the line if you protest. (Yvonne, social worker, IP, 22 August 2015)

We may conclude that the participation-for-self-reliance clause resonates with social workers' own ultimate goal but does not fully equal it. Whereas present policy advocates participation-for-self-reliance because it decreases tax-paid professional help and furthers citizens' (financial) independence, social workers' professional code starts with valuing people's choices and values to further their dignity. Thus, although there is substantial overlap, professional ethics also clashes with policy goals.

Social workers realise that, but austerity measures create an unsafe and unresponsive environment that withholds them from confronting local governors or their own managers about this. This steers social

2 Similar norms can be found in the [British Association of Social Workers' \(2012\)](#) code: 'Social workers have a duty to bring to the attention of their employers, policymakers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies and practice are oppressive, unfair, harmful or illegal.' The [Scottish Social Services Council \(2016\)](#) requires a formal outlet for such complaints about policy. Organisations must 'have systems in place for social workers to report inadequate resources or difficulties which might have a negative effect on the delivery of care'. The Code of Professional Practice for [Social Care in Wales \(2017\)](#) obliges workers to report 'resource or operational difficulties that might get in the way of the delivery of safe social care and support'.

workers towards' SLB acquiescence rather than speaking up as professionals.

Results: the last-resort clause

The last-resort clause dictates that people should seek help from their family or their wider social network. Some social workers approve of the network as a first resort. Gill said:

I believe in this approach; it takes time, but you make people more independent. After all, I am just a passer-by. I prepare them to face their future, with help from their network. (Gill, social worker NTP, 29 April 2015)

Interestingly, Gill sees depending on one's social network as being independent. Many other social workers understand self-reliance as not being dependent on your family, opposed to how it is framed in current policy. Although he subscribes to the ideal, even Gill has doubts about its feasibility:

If someone is able to fall back on their own network, that's the best thing there is. But we need to be careful. You don't want to overburden people's network. (Gill, social worker, NTP, 1 February 2016)

Other social workers also have doubts about asking family, friends or neighbours because they find that many clients do not want that.

The client often says: I have little network and I don't want to burden the people I have. That's an answer I get all the time. (Samira, social worker, NTP, 3 June 2016)

During our observations, we saw that when clients indicate that they do not want or cannot ask their loved ones for help, social workers are inclined to accept those reasons.

Client: Look, I've never been married, so I don't have a husband or children. My cousins are too busy with their own work and family. And I can certainly not expect anything from my neighbours, because look where I live! All oldies. My sister-in-law has sore feet; she can barely walk. ... I can't rely on her.

Social worker: But is that your own interpretation or hers?

Client: Look, I could ask her and then she'd immediately say yes, but she has her own problems. Then I'd rather do something nice with her.

Social worker: If I understand correctly, you are saying: I am not asking her, because I want to keep the relationship good. (Britney, social worker, NTP, 2 March 2017)

Even when clients are only the slightest bit hesitant themselves, social workers are reluctant to involve their social network, as the next observation shows:

Social worker: What do you think of inviting your parents to our next meeting?

Client: I already asked that. They don't find it a problem.

Worker: ... But if you find it annoying, we won't involve them. Then we can do it differently?

Client: Yes, yes, I think it's a little bit strange this way.

Worker: If you say 'this doesn't work', we can also do it differently. I don't want to insist on it either.

Client: Yes, I just like a conversation better, not invite them to a meeting.

Worker: If you find this strange, we won't do it. ... But maybe we can involve your parents, your neighbour or others to help you keep the house clean and quit drinking?

Client: Well my parents don't have to do anything special for me. And I am not going to ask my neighbour to clean here. It's my own mess! No, I won't. I might ask my mother, since she offered ..., but my neighbour. ... (Angela, social worker, NTP, 12 May 2016)

If clients do not want to ask their network for help, social workers are reluctant to force them:

If someone says: 'I have no contact with ... my next-door neighbour, because that is a very annoying man and I want nothing to do with him'. Then I think: who am I to say: you should. ... I don't want to go that far, no. (Harry, social worker, NTP, 6 July 2017)

Occasionally, helping others may stand in the way of taking care of oneself. Social workers may point this out but do not pressure clients to ask help in return, as the next observation shows:

The client says she is happy with her group of friends. Social worker Wilma asks if she also receives help from them. She doesn't, but she proudly tells that she helps her best friend clean up his house and do the shopping. Wilma notices that she is not cleaning up her own house, and asks if her friend helps her in return. The client doesn't want that, she says. Wilma says: that's easy for him. Then a silence follows. (Wilma, social worker, NTP, 22 April 2015)

Social workers also notice that clients are ashamed of their problems, which make it difficult to ask their network.

There's a lot of shame. People want to keep their problems indoors. They prefer not to involve others in their misery. (Samira, social worker, NTP, 3 June 2016)

When people cannot be helped by their families, municipalities search for other cost-saving solutions. Individual help is sometimes replaced by group counselling so as to let clients help each other. Here again, feelings of shame make this difficult:

Researcher: Debts. Isn't that something people feel ashamed of?

Social worker: That's right.

Researcher: They don't want to share.

Worker: No, because they meet members of the group in other roles. That would be awkward. Usually, I resort to individual counselling in those cases. When people come here, they expect to get counselling. They don't want a group session. So, if I were to say: this is it, there's no way round it These people are deeply in trouble and they don't really have a choice. So, I don't know if it would be right to force them. (Cissy, social worker, NTP, 16 June 2016)

Shame also prevents clients from engaging volunteers:

Lydia: Some people just don't want a volunteer. They say so up front: mind you, I don't want a volunteer.

Jane: That's also because not everybody wants to inform his next-door neighbour about his situation. Or someone else from the same neighbourhood. . . . Maybe we should take that more seriously. I myself would not like my next-door neighbour to know all about me. (Social workers in group interview, NTP, 18 October 2015)

The last-resort clause encounters far more resistance than the participation-for-self-reliance clause. Social workers have serious doubts about engaging people's social network. They often rather promote dependence on public services than on family members. This goes against the reigning policy, but this subversion is not openly expressed. Instead, it is practiced silently, to serve what social workers consider their ultimate goal: to support clients' own values and choices and to empower them, in the name of human dignity.

Street-level bureaucracy or professionalism?

How do social workers respond to the new policy in the Netherlands? Do they react as professionals or more like SLBs? There are some limitations of our research that should be taken into account. The policy change discussed here took place only recently, so ours is at best a preliminary assessment of its impact on social workers. We interviewed a limited number of social workers and studied neighbourhood teams in six municipalities. The 2015 law has given city councils latitude to organise social work. There are about 380 municipalities in the Netherlands

Table 2 SLB versus professional

SLBs	Professionals
Embracing policy goals	Taking goals from ethical code and accepting policy goals if they concur with ethical code
Moving towards the client, e.g. by strategic form-filling	Critical engagement with authorities invoking professional goals
Moving against the client, e.g. by rigidly sticking to rules Moving away from the client, e.g. by avoiding contact	

and chances are that studying six of them offers a limited view of the wide variety of practices. On the other hand, we selected a variety of cities and we followed their neighbourhood teams for a number of years. The depth of information we acquired this way compensates for the loss in quantitative terms. Taken these limitations into account, we come to the following conclusions.

The participation-for-self-reliance clause partly coincides with social work’s professional ethics. Sticking to the participation-for-self-reliance clause is often befitting of both professionals and SLBs. We found that social workers tend to subscribe to the clause as far as it is enshrined in their professional ethics. However, they observe that, for many vulnerable citizens, participation-for-self-reliance is hard to realise.

The last-resort clause is alien to social work’s professional ethics. Social workers doubt whether vulnerable people experience more self-determination and autonomy if they have to rely on their social network. For proper self-reliance, they argue, you need to be independent from family members. This can be organised by services, that is: by dependence on municipalities. Social workers’ attitude towards the last-resort clause again shows that they regard their ultimate professional goal as paramount. They reject this part of the reigning ideology and set their own goals, in line with their professional ethics. So, with regard to moral values, social workers are professionals.

However, when it comes to behaviour, social workers are much more SLBs than professionals. Our research shows that workers do not practice what the government preaches. They bend towards their clients, as it is phrased in SLB theory (Tummers *et al.*, 2015). But they rarely critically engage with their employer or the local government about the downsides and limitations of the present policy (our findings are represented in bold in Table 2).

Individual social workers can hardly be blamed for this. They care more about specific clients than about the bigger picture. As Folgheraiter and Raineri (2012) observe: ‘Social work does not operate on a massive, impersonal scale: it always works directly with real people, here and now.’ This seems entirely acceptable and we would not

advocate an overhaul of priorities. However, it is important that social workers also raise doubts about policies that affect present and future clients. We need an organisational set-up that invites professionals to speak up and discuss doubts about policy directives without putting their jobs on the line. Two steps might be taken towards such an organisational set-up. First, social work professionals who enjoy a more independent position (at research institutes, professional associations or social work schools) should organise courses, meetings and conferences where social workers can freely talk about their work. Secondly, we would suggest a corollary to social work's ethical code in the form of an obligation resting on policymakers and employers to actively seek workers' advice on reigning policies. Employers and policymakers might follow the example of Scottish Social Services Council, which requires organisations to 'have systems in place for social workers to report inadequate resources or difficulties which might have a negative effect on the delivery of care'. Sensible employers and policymakers might be willing to co-operate along these lines, especially if they realise that hidden SLB resistance to reigning policies is just as expensive as changing course after professional recommendations.

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