

**Confronting Unemployment in a Street-Level Bureaucracy:  
Jobcentre staff and client perspectives**

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## Declaration

I declare that none of the work contained within this thesis has been submitted for any other degree at any other university. The contents found herein have been composed by the candidate, Sharon Elizabeth Wright.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis presents an account of the roles played by social actors in the implementation of unemployment policy in the UK. Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy has been adopted, updated to the contemporary context of the managerial state (Clarke & Newman, 1997) and developed in the specific case of the Jobcentre. The analysis is based on data collected during an ethnographic investigation of one case study Jobcentre office in Central Scotland. The methods consisted of six months of direct observation, interviews with 48 members of Jobcentre staff, semi-structured interviews with 35 users and analysis of notified vacancies and guidance documents. The argument is that front-line workers re-create policy as they implement it. They do so in reaction to a series of influences, constraints and incentives. Users therefore receive a service that is a modified version of the official policy. Users do not necessarily accept the policy that they are subjected to. They do not identify with the new managerialist notion of customer service because as benefit recipients they are denied purchasing power, choice and power. Unemployment policy is not delivered uniformly or unilaterally because front-line staff are active in developing work habits that influence the outcomes of policy. Policy is accomplished by staff in practice by categorising users into client types. This is significant because staff represent the state to the citizen in their interaction. Users are also active in accomplishing policy, whether they conform with, contest, negotiate or co-produce policy. Understanding what unemployment policy actually is, and what it means to people, depends on understanding these social processes by which policy emerges in practice.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

Having their roots in the welfare to work policies of the USA and being embraced more recently by European member states, active labour market policies have become increasingly popular. A widespread trend towards active labour market policies as a response to unemployment has been identified (Clasen, 1999, Lødemel & Trickey, 2001, Sarfati & Bonoli, 2002, Sinfield, 2001). Often, the impact of these policies has been evaluated at a macro level. By contrast, with the premise that 'policies cannot be understood in isolation from the means of their execution' (Elmore, 1978: 185), this thesis provides a micro level analysis of unemployment policy in practice. The argument is that policy does not fully exist until the social actors who deliver and receive policy bring it into being. Implementation is not simply a peripheral matter of technicality or practicality, but is central to understanding the constitution of what policies are and what they mean to people. The emphasis is, therefore, on how service delivery is accomplished and emerges in practice, through social interaction. The research presented in this thesis is designed to explore both sides of the contemporary staff-user relationship through an ethnographic case study of one UK Jobcentre office.

It was Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy (based on the USA in the 1970s) that sparked interest in the role of front-line workers as policy makers. However, this has come to be a neglected perspective (Hudson, 1993), particularly, it would seem, in the UK context<sup>1</sup>. With the important exception of Blackmore's (2001, also see Finn et al., 1998) study of the Stricter Benefit Regime, little has been written recently about the street-level implementation of social security. Research from the 1980s (Cooper, 1985, Howe, 1990) has not been updated to the contemporary context of the managerial state (Clarke & Newman, 1997). This means that the impact of a series of significant changes in the funding, management and delivery of social security benefits has not been analysed in its implemented form. This thesis aims to fill this gap by providing an in-depth investigation of the constraints, incentives and influences that shape staff decision making.

The Jobcentre provides a particularly interesting case for an implementation study since the formal goals of the organisation present front-line staff with several tensions. A network of Jobcentre offices exists<sup>2</sup> both to administer Jobseeker's Allowance to those registered as unemployed and to match those looking for work with vacancies. This means that front-line staff are required to police users for benefit purposes at the same time as assisting and enabling them to find work (Fletcher, 1997). Perhaps it is vacancy matching that presents the greatest source

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<sup>1</sup> In the USA, for instance, studies have kept better pace (cf. Anderson, 1999, Kingfisher, 1996, Miller, 1991).

of dilemma for front-line workers. Should Employment Officers send hard to place unemployed Jobcentre users to employers? Or should the employer's wants and needs be prioritised in order to secure future vacancies?

In addition to these questions, this study has a wider objective of understanding the social processes by which unemployment policy comes into being at the interface between citizens and the state. As a process of interaction, implementation necessarily involves those who are subject to policy as well as those charged with its delivery. The policy developments of the 1980s and 1990s have had particular consequences for unemployed Jobcentre users, who have been rebadged as customers but have been subjected to increased compulsion. Claiming benefit for unemployment has become more conditional on actively seeking work (Clasen, 2000), with the threat of tougher sanctions. Meanwhile, benefits have been devalued and their insurance base has been undermined (Erskine, 1997). Despite the registered unemployed being compelled to seek work, the Jobcentre has lost its hold on the vacancy market, having come to deal mainly in low quality vacancies (Whiteside, 1995). How, then, do Jobcentre users experience the service?

Staff-user relationships are 'imbued with power' (Adler & Asquith, 1981), particularly because users are non-voluntary (Lipsky, 1980). Unemployed people are situated in a relatively powerless position. They are subject to

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter Nine for an explanation of the current transitional arrangements as the

policies that have been designed by a set of powerful social actors. Politicians and civil servants, who have their own values and belief systems (which can be far removed from the concerns of the end user), formulate formal policy. In doing so they are influenced by personal or group interests and respond to ideological, political, economic, historical and social factors (Levin, 1997). At street-level, these two conflicting interests confront each other. In this thesis, the aim is to explore these issues from the perspective of front-line staff and users. How do officials relate to formal policy? Do they accept rules and guidance or do they challenge and resist? How do users respond to the implementation process? Do they comply with what is required of them or do they attempt to be more active in negotiating or contesting the policy that is presented to them?

The direction of social security policy development in the UK has also meant that the choice of a Jobcentre as the research setting has been more important than originally foreseen. The Employment Service model of advice has become an exemplar for the administration of benefits to a very wide range of recipients, much beyond the original group of unemployed people that this research aimed to understand (this will be elaborated upon in Chapter Nine).

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service moves towards being replaced by Jobcentre Plus, under the new Department for Work and Pensions.

## **Research Questions**

The research presented in this thesis has been designed to investigate the following research questions:

- What roles do front-line workers play in the implementation of current UK unemployment policy?
- What are the dynamics of the interaction between staff and Jobcentre users?
- How do users receive policy, particularly in relation to the new managerialist language of customer service?
- What are the implications of the implementation process for unemployed Jobcentre users?
- How do users engage in the implementation process at street-level?
- How does policy emerge in practice through the face-to-face interaction between staff and users?

## **Outline of Chapters**

Chapter Two locates these research questions within the body of literature that has informed it. The primary influence has been Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy, but this is placed within the wider context of the policy process. In particular, policy making and policy implementation are considered as processes of interaction involving social actors. Micro level studies of policy design and implementation are drawn on to build a case for the examination of contemporary UK unemployment policy from a street-level perspective. The theory of street-level bureaucracy is outlined and the front-line staff practices of discretion, rule

breaking, client categorisation and rationing are explored. Since this study is concerned with interaction as a two-way process, the second part of the literature review is dedicated to understanding the ways in which service users are conceptualised within the street-level bureaucracy literature, the user involvement literature and the co-production literature.

This framework is applied to contemporary UK unemployment policy in Chapter Three. The history and development of the Jobcentre is traced, identifying the provenance of the dual roles of benefit administration and vacancy matching. This joint function is highlighted as being a potential source of tension for front-line workers who have to simultaneously police and enable users (Fletcher, 1997) whilst also managing the conflicting interests of employers and job seekers. This job has become even more complex in the context of the managerial state (Clarke & Newman, 1997), in which incentive management, cost-cutting and Civil Service reform have influenced the work of front-line staff. On the other hand, trends in benefit eligibility and work conditionality are outlined in terms of their impact upon Jobcentre users, who have been subjected to greater compulsion while the value of benefits has declined. The active labour market policies of Jobseeker's Allowance and the New Deal constitute a significant policy trend and the consequences of this development are outlined for unemployed people in the light of their new label as customers.

Chapter Four describes the interpretivist approach and ethnographic methods that were adopted to investigate the ways in which various

tensions were managed by front-line Jobcentre staff, played out within face-to-face interaction and experienced and negotiated by users. Direct observation of the interaction between staff and users, a range of in-depth interviews with 48 members of staff and semi-structured interviews with 35 users were supplemented by documentary analysis of staff training and guidance materials and analysis of a manual count of notified vacancies. These methods generated rich data that forms the basis of four chapters, exploring how policy was re-created, received and accomplished by street-level staff and service users.

The data-based analysis is presented in Chapters Five to Eight. Firstly, the staff role in implementing policy is examined to determine whether or not Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy is applicable to Jobcentre staff in the UK in the late 1990s. Three examples demonstrate the ways in which these workers implement policy and how it is affected by a series of constraints and influences that shape their daily work practices. Chapter Six then focuses on how Jobcentre users receive policy and explores whether or not they identify with the notion of being a customer. Chapter Seven moves the argument a step further to demonstrate the importance of interaction. Here it is suggested that policy is accomplished in practice through social processes. The particular example shows how front-line staff categorise clients for administrative purposes and more subjectively in moral terms. Chapter Eight shows the ways in which users are active in policy accomplishment, demonstrating that some users are acquiescent

while others are more troublesome. Policy is shown to be contested, negotiated and co-produced in certain cases.

Finally, the conclusion synthesises the main arguments of the thesis and relates these to recent policy developments. An emerging research agenda is identified and conclusions are drawn about the wider significance of the findings.

This thesis aims to make two distinct contributions to social policy literature. Firstly, it hopes to contribute to knowledge of active labour market policies through an in-depth ethnographic account of implementation in one Jobcentre office in the late 1990s. Secondly, the arguments presented are intended to advance understandings of the policy process by concentrating on the roles played by both Jobcentre staff and users in accomplishing policy through interaction.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Street-level Bureaucracy: policy implementation from front-line staff and user perspectives**

#### **Introduction**

The primary concern of this thesis is with the ways in which policy is put into practice through the micro level interaction between front-line staff and users of welfare organisations. The purpose of this chapter is locate the research questions of this study within an existing body of street-level bureaucracy literature and to identify themes that will be developed in the analysis that follows. The intention is to emphasise how decision making and service delivery emerge in the practices of individuals and through social processes.

This chapter begins with an outline of the development of understandings of policy making and implementation. The focus then shifts to policy delivery, central to which is the description of Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy. Three central themes will be identified as emerging from the analysis of front-line workers: their use of discretion, the practice of categorisation and the process of rationing. The role of users in the implementation process will then be elaborated on,

considering how their perspectives are represented in the street-level bureaucracy literature, investigating their involvement in the accomplishment of policy in practice and considering the ways in which users have been seen as active in policy making in terms of user participation and the co-production of policy.

## **Making and Implementing Policy**

A wealth of literature has been generated on the topics of policy making and policy implementation, the former having dominated historically (c.f. Hill, 1997). As inter-related processes, they cannot be separated cleanly for examination. A major difficulty is to reconcile the theoretical and methodological tensions of different levels of analysis (i.e. micro, meso and macro) and to represent the relationship between structure and agency for the purposes of policy analysis. Interpreting the processes of policy making and policy implementation can involve a range of different constructs (e.g. the state), organisations (e.g. the Employment Service) and individual human actors (e.g. key politicians, civil servants or prominent campaigners as well as front-line workers and the recipients of public services themselves). This section outlines the ways in which policy making and policy implementation have been understood and demonstrates the value of investigating the interaction by which they emerge and are accomplished.

### *Policy making*

Theorists of policy making have tended to adopt a rational actor model of human behaviour to explain and predict the workings of the policy process. But even Simon (1957), who provided the classic ideal type of policy making (involving the identification of possible options, consideration of consequences and values then the choice of a preferred solution), acknowledges certain psychological and organisational factors that limit the capacity for real humans to act in a perfectly rational way. A more 'realistic' version of policy making is elaborated in Lindblom's (1959) incrementalist approach, which reflects some of the reasons why policy making could be more accurately depicted as 'muddling through' rather than as making careful and rational decisions.

Most useful for this study, however, is Levin's (1997) micro level analysis of the processes of negotiation that top level politicians and civil servants are involved in when they make policy. Levin contrasts his approach to that of other analysts (e.g. Hogwood & Gunn, 1984, McGrew & Wilson, 1982), arguing that studies of the policy process should be recognisable in the framework and language used by politicians, officials and ordinary people, rather than having conceptual frameworks imposed upon them. The value of Levin's work is that he reveals the centrality of negotiation in the process of policy accomplishment at the top levels of government. He does not use the rational/incremental debate as his point of reference, but presents decision making as 'a product of a rationale', 'a selective response to interests', 'the outcome of a process' and 'a reflection of the

power structure' (1997: 29-65). In this way he incorporates a wider range of influences to explain how the written version of policy is arrived at.

In my view, this realm of policy making can be more usefully labelled as policy design. As the next section will demonstrate, policy making happens throughout the implementation process, rather than as a separate stage (which is an implicit assumption within the rationalist accounts and an explicit feature of 'stagist' models of the political system like Easton's, 1965). I follow Knorr-Cetina in believing that 'it is through micro-social approaches that we will learn most about the macro order' (1981: 41). Organisations are made up of individuals and social action takes place through interaction. Addressing the processes of interaction will therefore illuminate what is sometimes articulated as collective organisational action (Mouzelis, 1995).

### *Policy implementation*

The history of the study of policy implementation can be traced back to Pressman & Wildavsky's (1973) classic book, although, as Hill (1997) is keen to point out, implementation was investigated in a more peripheral way in a variety of other studies for considerably longer, before it was subjected to separate scrutiny. Traditional understandings of policy implementation have been based on an ideal type, with perfect implementation as the goal, presenting implementation as a problem rather than an area of study or a source of understanding (Hill, 1997). Within this conceptualisation, implementation is seen as occurring in a

distinct place and time outside of the inner decision making sanctum that is inhabited by elite politicians and civil servants of the central state. Policy implementation happens after policies have been 'made' and consists of processes that involve 'low level' local officials who put the written words into action. For example Pressman & Wildavsky (1973) contrast federal level mandates with the realities of later state level implementation in their US study.

Although it has been acknowledged for some time that perfect implementation is unattainable (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984), and might even be undesirable, explanations of the policy process have continued to be centred on why policy in general, or certain policies in particular, are not implemented as intended. Barrett & Fudge (1981) make an important contribution, criticising 'top-down' articulations of the policy process that see policy making and implementation as a linear process:

Rather than treating implementation as the transmission of policy into a series of consequential actions, the policy-action relationship needs to be regarded as a process of interaction and negotiation, taking place over time, between those seeking to put policy into effect and those upon whom action depends (1981: 25).

This 'bottom-up' approach is also advocated by Elmore, who argues that policy is best understood as a form of 'backward reasoning' (1981: 138)

from individuals to organisations and policy making. This type of perspective has been praised for its flexibility and ability to analyse policies as they are rather than policies as they should be (Hill, 1997). Bove et al. note that 'policy is not simply received and implemented within this arena, rather it is subject to interpretation and then recreated' (1992: 21-22). For Hill, essentially, 'the implementation process *is* the policy making process' (1997: 146).

## **Delivering Policy**

Lipsky's (1980<sup>1</sup>) theory of street-level bureaucracy encompasses this reasoning and forms much of the theoretical basis for this thesis. Lipsky argues that policy making can take place as much at street-level as it does through the traditionally accepted top down approach. He defines street-level bureaucrats as 'public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work' (1980: 3). This includes a wide range of public sector workers such as doctors, police officers, social workers and benefit officials. Lipsky sees these actors as policy makers within an environment that they do not control. The legal framework, policy context and organisational apparatus structure street-level bureaucrats' work and limit the scope of their actions. Despite these constraints and also because of them, street-level bureaucrats make policy in two senses: in their

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<sup>1</sup> Lipsky first coined the term 'street-level bureaucracy' in a short article published in 1976, but his main exposition of the theory was in the 1980 book. He acknowledges the collaboration of his colleagues Weatherley (1979), also see Weatherley & Lipsky (1977), and Prottas (1979) in developing the ideas.

discretionary decision making and through the collective effects of their individual actions.

According to Lipsky, these officials experience dilemmas that are centred around conflicts in their goals. The core tension is between serving user-centred goals and organisation-centred goals. Street-level bureaucrats are required to provide a flexible, responsive and caring service to meet individual needs, but at the same time they are bound by the impersonal and detached rules of the organisational bureaucracy within which they work. The site of this dilemma is in their interaction with, and decisions about, users. They are also constrained by the lack of resources for the extremely high demand for the services they provide (in fact Lipsky argues that demand for public services is unlimited and will increase with supply – meaning that rationing would be inevitable, a view shared by Hall, 1974: 18). Street-level bureaucrats therefore organise their work in response to these pressures in three ways: by limiting demand for services, by maximising the use of available resources and by ensuring user compliance.

Lipsky (1980) portrays street-level bureaucrats as idealists who are attracted to working in public services because they want to do a job that they see as socially useful and worthwhile. When they realise that the dilemmas involved in the work mean that they cannot do what they thought they could, they either leave or adapt. He argues that service sector workers adapt by modifying their conception of their jobs, lowering

their expectation of what they can achieve and modifying their conception of the users they work with. In response to this they develop their own 'routines and simplifications' (1980: 83) as practical solutions to make their jobs manageable. The main 'psychological coping mechanism' is to process people by treating individuals according to types in order to categorise users and differentiate between their demands. Ultimately, 'the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out' (Lipsky, 1980: xii).

Lipsky's analysis should be seen in the context of debates about the nature of bureaucracy (Albrow, 1970, Crozier, 1964, Gouldner, 1954, Morgan, 1986) and professionalisation (Blau et al., 1966, Friedman, 1977, Vollmer & Mills, 1966, Wilensky, 1964). The classic point of reference is Weber's (1991) ideal type of bureaucracy, which provides a useful picture for comparison with empirical studies of bureaucracy in practice. Weber presents a historically specific model of the development and domination of bureaucracy as a large scale organisational formation that epitomised predictable efficiency and rationality. The 'bureau' is based on written documents that have an official status. It is staffed by permanent officials who perform formal duties within a strictly rule-bound administrative hierarchy and are subject to the authority of the more highly ranked decision makers above them. Bureaucrats see their jobs as a vocation of public service and are specially trained and qualified to treat their users in

a standardised, unemotional, impersonal and unbiased manner - 'without regard for persons' (1991: 215).

The defining features of professionals have been presented as being based on expert judgement (Blau et al., 1966, Friedman, 1977, Vollmer & Mills, 1966, Wilensky, 1964). Professionals train to achieve specific educational qualifications and to establish professional knowledge and expertise, which in turn gives them power and authority. Their work involves detail and technicality and they hold high status positions that allow autonomous judgements and decisions. Accountability is secured by ethical codes of practice and their actions are open to judgement only by fellow professionals. They are not subject to bias from external pressures. Professionals are dedicated to their vocation and display attitudes of public service.

There are, therefore, several similarities and differences between bureaucrats and professionals. Some of the earliest sociological analyses (e.g. Blau et al. 1966) assumed that they bore an inverse relationship to each other, i.e. the more professionalised a particular group were, the less likely they were to be bureaucratised. However, this view has been challenged since Hall's (1968) work and professionalisation and bureaucratisation can be seen to have:

an elective affinity with each other . . . they jointly promote  
and reinforce a long-term trend towards a more rationalised

– that is abstract, codified and integrated – systems of surveillance and control (Reed, 1992: 207).

The organisational arrangements and management practices of welfare bureaucracies in the UK have undergone major changes throughout the Twentieth Century, including the recent influence of new managerialism (Clarke & Newman,1997), which will be explored in the next chapter. Welfare organisations like the Employment Service or the Benefits Agency present good examples of the contemporary intersection between bureaucracy and professionalism, being staffed by hybrid bureau-professionals. These career civil servants can be described as bureaucrats in as much as they are administrators who apply predefined rules within a hierarchical organisation. They are also part professional by virtue of their specialist training, acquired expertise, and ability to use discretion. A tension would therefore seem to exist for bureau-professionals in their work with users since the bureaucratic model is based on standardisation and rule-bound activities, whilst professionalism emphasises decision making based on expert judgement.

In the section above, several features of street-level bureaucracy have been identified and explored. Before elaborating upon the key themes from the street-level bureaucracy literature, it is necessary to recognise that although this approach has been generally accepted within understandings of the policy process, there are several reasons for making an effort to renew interest. There does not seem to be any major

objection to Lipsky's (1980) version of events, although there has been some criticism that the book sensationalised the issues (Hasenfeld, 1985). Rather, the prevalent feeling seems to be that processes of implementation do not really matter. By the early 1990s street-level bureaucracy had come to be regarded as a neglected perspective (Hudson, 1993). Policy makers and academic analysts seem to continue to operate on the basis that policies are implemented more or less as intended, or if modification does occur it is neither significant in scale nor important in consequence. The problem is that without empirical research we cannot know whether or not these assumptions are true. In order to examine the implementation of UK unemployment policy in the late 1990s, this thesis draws on a range of street-level bureaucracy literature covering a variety of services in several countries. In particular, the front-line practices of discretion, categorisation and rationing emerging will be highlighted and investigated.

### **Discretion**

A key theme to emerge from Lipsky's analysis, and to be explored in this thesis, is that of discretion. Lipsky sees discretion as a by-product of the need for human judgement in the delivery of welfare services. The following section explores this issue in greater depth, by first concentrating on formal discretion then moving on to examine informal discretion and the social processes by which both are exercised.

#### *Formal Discretion*

The starting point for discussions of formal discretion in human services has often been Davis' definition:

A public officer has discretion wherever the effective limits on his (sic) power leave him free to make a choice among possible courses of action and inaction (1969: 4).

However, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which a 'non-discretionary' decision could be made (Smith, 1981: 47), so in some senses wherever there are decisions there is discretion. Once the ubiquity of discretion is acknowledged (Handler, 1992), it becomes difficult to accept Davis' initial proposition that a sharp divide exists between rules and discretion. It is also apparent that discretion comes in different forms. Jowell perceives this as a continuum between high and low degrees of discretionary freedom (1973: 179), whereas Dworkin distinguishes between strong discretion (where the official has power to set the standard) and weak forms of discretion (in cases where standards are pre-defined by a higher authority) (1977: 31). Either way, the key point is that discretion is a relative concept (Sainsbury, 1992).

A further difficulty in differentiating between rule-bound activities and discretionary decisions is that discretion actually exists *within* the formal rule structure. Harlow & Rawlings have shown that 'embedded discretion' is present in legislation and guidance documents where implementing officials are required to form opinions about standards, for instance in

relation to what is 'reasonable' or 'exceptional' (1984: 298). The workers who put the rules into action must therefore make independent subjective judgements as well as interpreting rules (Hill, 1997: 184).

This has led to concerns, which came to a head in the 1970s in the UK, over the extent of discretion that should be afforded to social welfare officials. If 'discretion like the hole in the doughnut, does not exist except as an area left open by a surrounding area of restriction' (Dworkin, 1977: 31), then there has been considerable debate over how big the hole should be (Adler & Asquith, 1981, Thomas, 1974). Davis (1969) himself advocates the minimisation of discretionary powers in favour of more directive structures and checks in order to guarantee fairness and systematic treatment. Conversely, the limits of complex and formulaic rule structures have been criticised by writers such as Titmuss (1971) who have argued that individual needs cannot be met through a strict predefined system of impersonal rules, not least of all because considerable questions can be raised over the legitimacy of the official rules. It has been argued that to secure administrative justice it is necessary to guarantee fairness, equity and accuracy, in both the process and the outcomes of social security decisions (Sainsbury, 1992, Mashaw, 1983). This would include the official being prompt, impartial and accountable, and the person subject to the decision being involved in the process. Of course, ensuring procedural fairness can only deliver 'just' outcomes in the terms that have been predefined; substantive justice is a separate issue.

### *Informal Discretion*

Prottas (1979) identifies an existing excess of complex rules, which leaves front-line workers unable to follow all of them equally or simultaneously (a situation made worse by unclear or conflicting organisational objectives and severe funding restrictions). Competing demands and limited time leads workers to develop 'zones of relative indifference' and to respond in different ways to 'core' and 'lesser' organisational rules (1979: 100). This includes inventing and creating discretion where there was none, within the prescriptive system that they work. Increasing the number of rules and confining their application cannot, therefore, eliminate the propensity for front-line workers to apply discretion. So within welfare systems there are areas that are discretionary in a formal sense (for instance the Social Fund), and there are policies and practices that are not officially recognised as involving discretionary decision making, but nevertheless involve the informal application of discretion (Sainsbury, 1992). Discretion exists where officials make choices, but because officials are social actors they can choose to reinterpret or disregard some of the rules (in some cases this can even mean breaking the law, see Skolnick, 1966). The rules, whether they allow discretion or not, are open to manipulation. Hill argues that 'the extent to which rule following allows discretion merges imperceptibly into the witting or unwitting disregard of rules' (1997: 182).

### *Rule Breaking*

Rule breaking emerges from the street-level bureaucracy literature (Lipsky, 1980, Prottas, 1979) mainly as a rational response to the constraints and pressures of a particular working environment. There are certain aspects of the organisation of service delivery that increase the necessity or likelihood that front-line staff will become involved in rule-breaking activities. Blau (1963) and Cohen (1965), for instance, identify some situations in which officials modified or adjusted rules and even fabricated records as a response to the pressure to meet performance targets. In contravening the official procedure or rule of law workers undermine the formal goals of the organisation. However, another effect might simply be to enforce the objectives more efficiently or effectively. Rule breaking behaviour can therefore still remain consistent with the overall objectives of the organisation or policy.

There is, however, an alternative explanation for rule-breaking behaviour. Borrowing from one aspect of the sociology of work literature (cf. Beynon, 1975, Burawoy, 1979, Roy, 1960), it has been argued that organisational rule-breaking can constitute an active form of worker resistance<sup>2</sup>.

Some of the ways lower-level workers can withhold co-operation within their organisations include such personal strategies as not working (excessive absenteeism, quitting), aggression toward the organisation (stealing, cheating,

deliberate wasting), and negative attitudes with implications for work (alienation, apathy). Workers may take advantage of collective resources to act non-co-operatively by forming trade unions or by exercising rights under collective bargaining agreements or civil service regulations (Lipsky, 1980: 17).

This is because those lower down the organisational hierarchy have interests that conflict with their supervisors, managers and power elites<sup>3</sup>. When translated into the context of social policy implementation, staff resistance might even be seen as a political act of resistance against the dominant ideology that moulds the policy agenda and dictates the conditions of delivery. Young (1981) elaborates on this point, arguing that implementation can only be understood in terms of front-line workers' own definitions of the situation.

Given their subordinate position within the policy system, these definitions will often fail to match those of the policy-makers; not only will they have divergent appreciations of problems but they will often attribute problematic status to rather different phenomena (1981: 44).

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that rule following (e.g. 'working to rule') can actually constitute a form of resistance (Grint, 1998: 104).

<sup>3</sup> Marxists would, of course, view this as an endemic feature of the capitalist labour process (see Braverman, 1974).

Young carries on to argue that policy outcomes will only match those intended to the extent that the policy makers and front-line workers 'inhabit a common assumptive world' (1981: 46). Given the inherently unequal power relations present within organisational and policy hierarchies (which can be viewed in relation to wider social divisions such as class, gender, 'race' and ethnicity), this would seem unlikely. Viewed in this light, it seems inevitable that front-line workers will be proactive in developing semi-autonomous practices of rule-breaking and policy modification. Questions are therefore raised about the frequency, patterns, extent and impact of these work habits, particularly since the subject of the work is people rather than inanimate objects (e.g. sheets of metal, Beynon, 1975). As Lipsky puts it: 'in street-level bureaucracies the objects of critical decisions – *people* – actually change as a result of the decisions' (1980: 9, similar themes have been explored in the sociological literature about emotional labour, c.f. Hochschild, 1983).

Hvinden (1994) shows some of the more positive effects of occasional 'rule-bending' on both users and staff. In his comparative study of welfare services in Scotland and Norway, he found that more 'deserving' claimants, for instance older and frailer people, were more likely than young able-bodied people to benefit from rule-bending at the margins of policy delivery (e.g. travel expenses). Among those likely to receive preferential treatment were people known to the staff who were thought to be honest and trustworthy (1994: 122). Hvinden argues that:

Rule-bending offered the staff an opportunity to demonstrate responsiveness and allowed them the possibility of being reasonable and flexible, within a scheme that most of the time put strong restrictions on their autonomy. Probably the main function of rule-bending was its positive effect on staff's occupational self-respect and sense of pride; they reduced the feeling of being just cogs in a large bureaucratic machinery (1994: 123).

### **Categorisation**

Of central concern to this study is the application of discretion through face-to-face interactions with users. In this section the focus is on the ways that staff judgements lead to different people being categorised in different ways, which in turn creates variation in policy outcomes. The arguments presented in this thesis also draw on some of the insights from the symbolic interactionist tradition in sociology (see Charnon, 1995, Prus, 1996). The value of this perspective for understanding policy in practice is that it acknowledges the intersubjectivity of the social world. As an interpretative approach, symbolic interactionism recognises the importance of different perspectives and relations. Interaction is viewed as a joint process that involves accomplishment and negotiation. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach has been influential in this study, viewing the social world as a stage within which individuals are social actors who present themselves in certain ways for particular

purposes. The following sections consider some of social processes involved in policy implementation.

### *People-processing*

When users first approach public service bureaucracies they submit themselves to 'becoming a client' (Lipsky, 1980: 105, Prottas, 1978: 294). As part and parcel of laying claim to the service or benefit, users must provide information about themselves that is then reduced down to a set of qualifications for the purpose of 'slotting' them into one of a range of standardised categories (Prottas, 1979: 291). This is necessary because in order to deal with people's differing needs *en masse*, they must be treated as 'types' rather than as individuals. Complex people are therefore transformed from people into clients, as such they are processed as 'artificial entities' (Prottas, 1979: 3). In this way front-line staff engage in 'people-processing' activities (Prottas, 1979). In sorting clients into categories staff are involved in constant judgements and decision making. This decision making takes place in relation to the predefined eligibility rules, but is also influenced by subjective factors, for instance if someone is perceived to be morally 'deserving' or 'worthy' (Lipsky, 1980: 23, also see Cooper, 1985, Howe, 1990). This process of categorisation has 'profound implications for both the client and the organisation' (Prottas, 1979: 5) because it amounts to a widespread 'unsanctioned exercise of discretion' (ibid. 124). Staff therefore resolve the dilemmas of their work by 'do[ing] for some what they are unable to do for all' (Lipsky, 1980: 151).

Crucially, these routines, by which policy is altered, are developed through interaction with users (Lipsky, 1980: 84). Workers develop routines primarily in response to 'occupational and personal biases, including the prejudices that blatantly and subtly permeate the society' (Lipsky, 1980: 85). They develop their own rules about how to treat 'an X' or 'a Y'. So in some ways this reformulation of policy is presented as inevitable and uncontrollable. In this way staff continue to organise their activities around rules, some made by the organisation and some they have developed by themselves or in collaboration with their co-workers (see Kingfisher 1996 for a more detailed analysis of co-workers).

A similar process is that of 'triaging' (Lipsky, 1980), which is the classification of people into groups according to how easily they can be helped and how likely it will be that they will benefit from the service provided. This in turn leads to those users with the best chances of success, as defined in bureaucratic terms, to be 'creamed off'. Lipsky notes that although this process forms a basic part of the way that street-level bureaucrats cope with their work, it is a destructive practice of discretionary judgement that is subject to routine abuse (1980: 106). Ultimately, some users are favoured over others, whose disadvantage is then compounded (Handler, 1992).

### *People-changing*

Related to these concerns are the processes by which front-line workers seek to alter the behaviour, activities, beliefs or attitudes of their users. Such 'people-changing' (Hasenfeld & Weaver, 1996) is a more active version of 'people-processing' and can be said to constitute an accomplishment of policy through the face-to-face interaction of staff and users. Miller (1991) and Anderson (1999) have developed analyses of various strategies used by employment officers in dealing with users in their USA studies. Both focus on the 'rhetorical activities' of persuasion (described by Anderson, 1999, as 'witcraft') used to manage disputes and enforce preferred courses of action (e.g. convincing users to participate in particular training courses or dissuading them from pursuing certain job opportunities). As part of his analysis, Anderson (1999) also examines how the conflicting interests of employers and unemployed people are balanced by the employment agency staff who have to serve both in their everyday work. One particular difficulty that Anderson identifies is the low quality of job opportunities within a deregulated labour market, which made employment officers' jobs even tougher. Work like Miller's and Anderson's brings us closer to viewing policy as filtered through street-level bureaucracy in terms of 'interactional accomplishment' (Anderson, 1999: 236). Although both authors focus on the rhetorical practices of staff, rather than users, there is an important recognition that putting policy into practice depends on a two-way negotiation between social actors who are situated within hierarchies and are bound by power relations.

Despite workers having 'a tremendous advantage in the personal element of control in interactions' (Prottas, 1979: 30), much 'facework' with users, involves efforts to establish rapport as 'a more emotionally satisfying tenor for their encounters' (Anderson, 1999: 228). Street-level bureaucrats seem to have a preference for avoiding conflict and made efforts 'to optimise maintenance of situational meanings and identities.' (Anderson, 1999: 228), including enabling users to 'save face' (Goffman, 1963). It was the resistant users who became subject to more extreme forms of coercion (Anderson, 1999: 229, see Miller & Holstein, 1995 for an in-depth analysis of disputes within a welfare organisation).

### **Rationing**

One use to which categorisation is put is to ration access, benefits and sanctions within welfare organisations. Rationing, like discretion, has formal and informal variants. Formally, limits are imposed on the distribution of welfare benefits and services through the administrative arrangements that dictate who is eligible to what in which circumstances and for how long. It almost goes without saying that the particular character of the system, the priorities that are set and the funding that is made available, are influenced by the moral and ideological beliefs of those social actors who design policy (Levin, 1997).

Stigma (c.f. Goffman, 1963) can be a powerful rationing factor, even at the pre-application stage (Stevenson, 1973). Users might be deterred from applying for public services because of the formal rationing that is imposed

by central and local level policy makers<sup>4</sup>. From the Poor Law onwards, policy designers have been aware of the possible financial savings that can be made by creating a system that deters potential applicants because making a claim involves psychological costs (Fraser, 1984, Dean, 1991). Stigma has remained a constant feature of social security and social welfare services (Jones & Novak, 1999). Negative stereotypes of benefit claimants have been perpetuated through government statements and media controversy (e.g. benefit 'scroungers' and 'cheats'). The prevalence of such 'moral panics' (Cohen, 1972) cannot fail to effectively bar some people from claiming the benefits and services that they are legally entitled to (Oyen, 1980).

However, a second layer of rationing takes place through the implementation of policy at street-level. In part, front-line workers apply the rationing that is dictated by the formal rules of the organisation. But because their work involves judgement and discretion, front-line staff also act of their own accord to ration informally the services they provide. Lipsky (1980) takes this latter form of rationing as his focus, pointing out that street-level bureaucrats' actions are often officially unsanctioned, unintended and unanticipated (although it could be argued that organisations are aware of front-line rationing and endorse it by creating the circumstances that make it necessary and overlook the distributional biases that result from, Hill, 1997).

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<sup>4</sup> Fimister & Hill, 1993, provide some examples of the ways in which local rationing has

At street-level, as well as at the policy design stage, social actors make decisions and act to limit access to services, levy costs and dispense rewards. One of the main reasons that Lipsky believes front-line workers to be policy makers is that they have 'considerable discretion in determining the nature, amount, and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies' (1980: 13) and they are able to operate relatively autonomously from the authority of their organisation. A street-level bureaucrat is therefore 'almost always a judge as well as a server' (Lipsky, 1980: 74). Several resources are open to manipulation. Lipsky identifies five main types of costs: monetary, psychological, time, queuing and information. These costs can be experienced by users as 'real' or 'felt' (Prottas, 1979).

Although welfare services are usually free to those most in need, penalties can be imposed on potential beneficiaries through associated financial costs. For instance, Gibson et al. (1985) found that even expecting people to 'come and get' a publicly funded service, biased distribution against those experiencing poverty because of the monetary cost of travelling to the office. Even relatively small charges can discourage people from making use of services, particularly if they are on the margins of poverty (for instance people who have incomes that are slightly higher than the eligible level who have to pay NHS prescription charges).

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been imposed by central government through budget cuts as a deliberate strategy to achieve retraction of service provision in an era of welfare state retrenchment in the UK.

The structuring of psychological costs as deterrents has been identified above. Front-line staff can exacerbate the psychological and emotional costs of seeking services further.

If the entire contact with a public agency has elements of a public degradation ceremony, the street-level bureaucrat is in a position to mitigate or exaggerate the impact of that ritual. Although the context of the interaction with the street-level bureaucrat can leave little doubt in the client's mind of his or her status, the human element cannot be ignored. To be held in 'structural contempt' is unpleasant; to also be treated contemptuously by another person is something much worse (Prottas, 1979: 129).

The fear of humiliation might mean that people who need the service are demotivated to apply for it. The face-to-face interaction can realise these fears and cause emotional costs of embarrassment or 'loss of face' (Goffman, 1963) to users once they have entered the bureaucratic process. Lipsky argues that such costs can be imposed both in lack of respect (e.g. being forced to wait), in being asked degrading personal questions (e.g. about sexual behaviour) and the assumed level of fraud and dishonesty. Prottas agrees, arguing that front-line workers can change costs for different users 'by varying stance, attitude, and tone' (1979: 10). This can result in withdrawals of demands and the creation of more agreeable demands.

Time is an important resource 'that may be extracted from users as a cost of service' (Lipsky, 1980: 89). Symbolically, forcing users to wait before they can receive the service conveys a sense of dependence and powerlessness. Street-level bureaucrats can therefore punish users by delaying responses or causing inconvenience (even the requirement to complete multiple long forms can impose a time cost before people become users of the service), and can similarly reward users by processing their case more quickly than usual (ibid. 89-90). A common form of time rationing is to expect users to wait in a queue. This makes an imposition on the user, implying that he or she has 'nothing else to do with their time' (ibid. 95) and can be stigmatising.

Finally, information can be controlled and rationed. It can be used to confuse or create barriers for some prospective users (for instance through procedural complexity, Hall, 1974), or be given to privilege others and help them to get the most out of the system. Useful information can be denied to some users, whilst others gain the benefit of the official's expert knowledge. The esoteric nature of the great volumes of specialist legislation and guidance makes 'the rules' inaccessible to most staff and almost entirely incomprehensible to the great majority of people who have cause to use the particular service (Oyen, 1980: 49).

### *Gatekeepers*

Certain workers play an important gatekeeping role<sup>5</sup>. Prottas (1979) views all street-level bureaucrats as gatekeepers, but it is of note that those furthest down the hierarchy and most junior, often have the key positions such as receptionist. Without in-depth professional training these workers might be even more likely to apply categorisations and stereotypes. Those individuals who represent organisations as the first point of contact can ration services in ways that are discriminatory (for instance Deutscher found the main informal methods of rationing conducted by a housing intake officer were 'race', family formation and personal presentation, 1968: 44). As Hall (1974) suggests:

Frequently, as a result, services are received not by those in greatest need (by any definition) but by the most vocal, the most persistent, the most articulate, those better able to understand the workings of the bureaucracy, the better educated and so on (1974: 17-18).

### **Users and the Implementation of Policy**

Traditional perspectives on policy making and implementation (outlined earlier in this chapter) view users as passive recipients of policy that is made by powerful central politicians and civil servants and implemented by peripheral lower-level workers. Within 'stagist' accounts of the policy process (e.g. Easton, 1965), policy making and implementation are seen

as distinct and hierarchical. Policy receiving is a separate sphere that is largely removed from the policy process, except for the political demands made by pressure groups that might act as an input to the cycle of policy making. Studies of street-level bureaucracy (elaborated on above) have sought to redress this imbalance by bringing the processes of implementation to centre stage, recognising that policy making is not confined to the design phase. In doing so, the interaction between staff and users has received greater attention. Although it is the role of front-line workers as policy makers that has been the focus, inroads have also been made to better understand the role of users in the implementation of policy and in the policy process more generally.

People who use services have moved from being regarded as docile welfare subjects, to being seen as active players in the accomplishment of policy at street-level. It is these processes that this thesis takes as its focus, for two main reasons. Firstly, the intention is to understand the meanings that face-to-face interaction with front-line staff holds for users and to analyse users' perspectives of the services they receive (these services and policy itself having been modified by staff during the implementation process). The second associated aim is to unpack the dynamics of the staff-user relationship in order to examine users' participation in policy making at the point of contact with a welfare organisation. The following sections explore issues that arise from

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<sup>5</sup> This concept has been particularly well-developed in the housing literature (e.g. Deutscher, 1968, Lidstone, 1994)

existing literature on users within the street-level bureaucracy framework and users' involvement in policy making.

### **Users and street-level bureaucracy**

Lipsky's (1980) key point in relation to the users of street-level bureaucracies was that they are non-voluntary. Users depend on the service provided and must comply with the demands made by officials in order to receive what they need. The poorer the user, the more dependent he or she will be on the service, particularly if it is providing income maintenance or other essential goods or services. The costs of exiting the interaction are therefore very high for users, leaving them dependent on sustaining the relationship with staff (Lipsky, 1980, Handler, 1992, Kingfisher, 1996). Users can only impose certain 'low-level' costs upon the workers they deal with (Lipsky, 1980: 57). Beyond forgoing the emotional satisfaction of helping grateful people, officials have traditionally had little to lose by failing to satisfy users (Lipsky, 1980). This impacts heavily upon the character of the interaction between staff and users.

The staff-user relationship is a power relationship (cf. Lukes, 1974). However, staff also depend on users to a certain extent. Staff are dependent upon users in the sense that user compliance is a necessary part of the implementation process. Theoretically, if users did not turn up and at least submit themselves to the bureaucratic processes necessary to receive welfare, then those agencies would not survive and the people who are employed in them would have to look for work elsewhere. In

practical terms, it is users' compliance that staff depend upon for the smooth functioning of their work. Prottas argues, therefore, that 'the relationship between the street-level bureaucrat and the user is one of mutual dependency, but the client's dependency is more obvious and perhaps more painful (1979: 10). Hasenfeld makes a logical progression, asserting that 'the client's dependency on the official is directly proportional to the client's need for the services controlled by the official and is inversely proportional to the availability of services elsewhere' (1985: 625). Therefore, 'clients' consent is continuously being managed by public agencies' (Lipsky, 1980: 57).

### **Users and the Accomplishment of Policy**

The street-level bureaucracy literature, therefore, alludes to the ways in which policy is a social process accomplished through interaction between staff and users (see above). This staff-user relationship must also be seen in the context of wider social, economic and political inequalities of wealth, power and status. Officials have an authority that 'renders the relationship between the decision maker and the person who is subject to the decision a hierarchical one and one which is imbued with power' (Adler & Asquith, 1981: 26). Wider social forces and patterns of inequality impact upon the interaction between users and staff and influence both the way that policy is accomplished and the effects that it has on those at the receiving end:

Both the powerful and the powerless carry into the relationship their respective characters and self-conceptions, their root values, nurtured through immediate as well as past social relationships. Who they are and where they come from – class, 'race', childhood, education, employment, relations with others, the everyday structures of their lives, their very different social locations – crucially affect their languages, social myths, beliefs, and symbols – how they view themselves, their world, and others – which produce vastly different meanings and patterns in their encounters (Handler, 1992: 343).

Handler (1992) usefully demonstrates how power can be enacted through the staff-user interactions of public service organisations. He argues that users' and officials' interests are fundamentally opposed (because of their socio-economic background, their access to resources, personal capabilities and skills and because of the functions of the organisation). In order to deliver policy the exercise of a degree of power is therefore required. In practice, power is made manifest through user acquiescence as well as through conflict. Drawing on Lukes (1974), Bachrach & Baratz (1962) and Gaventa (1980), Handler argues that certain courses of user action are precluded by wider forces that contribute to a 'manipulated consensus' (1992: 336). This creates a social situation in which those using the service are disinclined to resist for several possible reasons - because there is no opportunity to lodge a grievance, because non-

compliance has been delegitimised by the dominant group, because they feel powerless and believe that they have no choice but to go along with what is being required of them, or because they have been defeated in previous attempts to redefine a similar situation. Staff gain user co-operation through the 'mobilisation of bias' (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962) which 'systematically benefit[s] certain groups at the expense of others' (Handler, 1992: 336).

As 'boundary workers' (Prottas, 1979, Kingfisher, 1996), street-level bureaucrats mediate the relationship between citizens and the state (Lipsky, 1980: 4). The decisions they make can have a great impact on people's lives, especially for those users who experience poverty (Lipsky, 1980: 6). The modification that policy undergoes as part of street-level implementation, therefore, has several consequences for users. The processes of categorisation and rationing bias the distribution of services and benefits in ways that advantage some users and disadvantage others. For instance, having to wait for services can impose 'status degradation' upon users (Hasenfeld & Steinmetz, 1981), making them feel humiliated, dehumanised or subject to control.

Street-level bureaucrats 'dominate interactions within a setting that symbolises, reinforces and limits their relationship with clients' (Lipsky, 1980: 117). They have the power to cause users inconvenience, neglect and personal abuse without incurring retaliation from users. Users will always be blamed for refusing to continue interacting with street-level

bureaucracies (1980: 56). Lipsky argues that the only costs that users can impose are non-compliance and anger, which can be sanctioned by workers. The only limited strategies that Lipsky identifies are for users to act in ways that will ingratiate them with the worker. Lipsky argues that users are also isolated from one another and therefore have little knowledge about other people in the same situation. This predisposes them to think of themselves as being responsible for the situation they are in and makes them less likely to look for explanations rooted in the wider social structure (1980: 118).

Contact with welfare bureaucracies can therefore be a very significant experience for individuals. Prottas argues that 'for the applicant the interview with the worker is a rare occurrence and frequently an emotional one' (1979: 20). There is also evidence that users react differently when they are confronted with the experience and processes of becoming a user and that generally they have a weaker range of tactics than staff, with which to respond (Hill, 1997). In his study of unemployed benefit claimants in Northern Ireland, Howe (1990) identified two different responses to bureaucratic processing. One group of users were 'reluctant' to claim benefit and were compliant in an attempt to prove that they were deserving, choosing to avoid disrupting the routine of being processed by not asking questions that they wanted answered and not claiming for benefits they were entitled to. Howe describes the second type of user as 'assertive' because they did not accept a deligitimised user status. Whilst maintaining respect for authority and being generally

compliant with the bureaucratic process, these users attempted to assert their rights to gain access to what they were entitled to. A clear picture emerges from Howe's ethnographic study of users as active social actors, some having greater access to power resources than others, making them more or less able 'to negotiate more favourable results with officials (Hasenfeld, 1985: 625). In this thesis, I intend to further this approach by considering the ways in which users are active in their interaction with front-line staff. Users, like workers, can break rules and employ strategies in interaction.

### **Users and policy making**

Having established that users are involved in the implementation process through the accomplishment and negotiation of policy, it is important now to consider two further areas of literature that have explored users' roles in the policy process. The first distinct body of writing examines service users' involvement in policy making, whilst the second section is concerned with the concept of 'co-production'.

#### *User participation*

One of the main ways that users' contributions to the policy process have been noticed is through the pressure exerted by user groups or campaigning organisations who operate of their own accord or on behalf of those affected by social policy. The roots of user participation in public policy development can be found in community development initiatives in land use planning in the 1960s, when a legal requirement was made for

the public to participate in planning (Beresford & Croft, 1992). In the UK, interest in user participation in public policy has boomed, encouraged by those with political power who have emphasised individual choice and consumer-style rights (for instance through a series of Citizens' Charters) and fuelled by the emergence and proliferation of user movements making demands for change in policy and practice in the fields of health, welfare and social care (Beresford & Turner, 1997, Beresford, 2002).

Beresford (2002) identifies two distinct models of user involvement: consumerist and democratic. He argues that the consumerist model has developed in relation to the mixed economy of welfare and new managerialism advanced by the New Right and sustained under New Labour. Consumerist methods of participation retain the role of providers in controlling the policy agenda and delivery arrangements (including decisions about whether or not to seek user involvement and what to do with the results of it). Techniques for user involvement are akin to market testing of welfare products. The democratic model presents an alternative way of viewing user participation. It is this form of user involvement that is campaigned for by user movements of various sorts, including disabled people and users of social care services (Campbell, 1996, Oliver, 1996). The democratic model advocates political action explicitly targeted at bringing about change by influencing those who design and deliver policy. The concern is 'with people having more say in agencies, organisations and institutions which impact upon them and being able to exert more control over their own lives' as 'part of broader political and social philosophies which prioritise people's inclusion, autonomy, and

independence, and the achievement of their human and civil rights' (Beresford, 2002: 97). The ultimate goal of democratic user involvement is the development of user-led and user-controlled services.

The user participation literature is important for this thesis because it provides very strong evidence that service users are actively engaged in the policy process. Conflict exists between those who receive services and those who design and deliver them, because social policies do not always meet the needs and wants of those they are designed for. These conflicts and tensions are played out by some actors within the formal political arena (calls for user-led services being the best example of this), but most importantly for this study, they are also made manifest in the face-to-face interaction between service users and staff, who represent the state to the citizens who confront them. One particular issue for this study is the way that policies are contested, resisted and accomplished in the sites where policy happens.

### *Co-producing Policy*

Co-production is a similar concept to user participation in that it recognises the potential for service recipients to be more actively involved in setting policy agendas and delivering services. The notion of 'co-production' has been developed by authors in the USA (Curtis et al., 1991, Pammer, 1992, Parks et al., 1981, Sharp, 1980, Warren, 1987, Whitaker, 1980, Wirth, 1991) and applied more recently to social service delivery in Europe (e.g. Hupe, 1993). The term 'co-production' was originally coined by Whitaker (1980) to mean an alternative model of service delivery, within which

citizens and government workers should have a 'conjoint responsibility' (Sharp, 1980: 105) for creating and delivering public services. These authors contrast their preferred co-production model with the dominant method of public service administration, which sees officials as having the sole responsibility to provide services that are then consumed by the public. Whitaker, and those who have followed a similar train of thought, present co-production as a solution to some of the problems of policy implementation. Within their prescription is the recommendation that citizens should actively contribute towards service delivery.

The problem with this conception of co-production is that it glosses over the dynamics of official-user relationships and downplays the different purposes to which public policy might be put. The proposed version of citizen participation is based on the good will of those at the receiving end of services, who would be required to extend their compliance even further to make efforts to contribute to an unspecified 'public good' (Curtis et al., 1991: 645). Government officials and users are assumed to have shared goals that can be better achieved through joint working. In this way, the vision of a policy solution is divorced from the realities of implementation and the power dynamics of the official-user relationship. The value of the argument is that it takes a step towards recognising that services are not merely produced separately by government officials and delivered to users as a 'finished product' (Whitaker, 1980: 240).

I propose to explore the concept of 'co-production' later in this thesis in a different and less ambitious way, without the connotations of a preferred delivery model. The intention is to identify instances where users negotiate actively with staff to secure different policy outcomes to those that were intended by the written version of policy. In this way the term can be used to encompass a social process of negotiation that is related to the notion of accomplishment (explored above). Kingfisher (1998: 127) has written of 'co-production' in a similar sense, although she considers the co-production of policy as a social process that happens jointly between co-workers and does not include the influence of the users themselves.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the processes of policy making and policy implementation have been outlined, arguing that policy making takes place beyond the realm of policy design. The policy process involves a wide range of social actors. At every stage in the process policy is negotiated and accomplished through interaction. At street-level, front-line workers are active in reinterpreting and modifying policy as they implement it. Policy is made as it is implemented and is therefore filtered through the work habits of front-line staff. The bureau-professionals of contemporary welfare organisations exercise discretion (formally and informally) in their decisions about users. These street-level bureaucrats follow organisational rules, but also break them and invent their own 'routines and simplifications' for making their jobs more manageable. One application of discretion is in categorising users as they are processed.

This categorisation is also put into practice in a more directive sense to change user attitudes and behaviour or persuade users to take particular courses of action. Categorisation can be used to ration services, both in a formal and in an informal sense.

These processes are significant because they have important consequences for users, operating to structure the opportunities, benefits and sanctions available to individuals. Exploring the social processes by which policy is accomplished and negotiated between street-level staff and users can illuminate the policy process. It is important to acknowledge the ways in which users' perspectives can be incorporated into the analysis of implementation, rather than viewing policy delivery as a unilateral activity firmly within the domain of the civil servant. In particular, users can be identified as active agents who contribute to policy making and policy implementation through their compliance, acquiescence and, albeit limited, expressions of resistance.

In this thesis, I will apply and develop these ideas to better understand both staff and user perspectives of the implementation of unemployment policy in a UK Jobcentre, giving equal weight to both viewpoints. In a case study of one local office, the contemporary staff-user relationship will be explored. This will facilitate an analysis the role of front-line staff in the implementation of policy, to consider the interaction between staff and users in the accomplishment of policy, to understand the meanings that receiving policy has for users, to explore the implications of the

implementation process for users and to acknowledge their role in the accomplishment of policy.

The following chapter outlines the policy context in which this research was conducted. This context is very different from the conditions in which the notion of street-level bureaucracy was invented and developed, which was primarily 1970s USA. The intention is to explore the accomplishment of policy at street-level in the context of new managerialism in the late 1990s in the UK.

## **Chapter Three**

### **The Policy Context:**

#### **UK unemployment policy and the role of the Jobcentre**

##### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an account of the policy context within which staff-user interaction is played out (post-fieldwork policy developments will be considered in the concluding chapter). The historical development of the formal functions of the Jobcentre will be mapped out, plotting the changes in past and present roles. Trends in benefits for the unemployed will then be examined, showing the move towards more active labour market policies. A number of major changes will be highlighted in order to demonstrate the provenance of the present character of the staff-user relationship. Changes and developments in the institutional organisation of employment services and the administration and delivery of services to the unemployed have taken place in varying economic conditions and have been influenced by social, political and ideological forces (c.f. Whiteside, 1995: 68). This has impacted upon the way that front-line staff do their jobs and the way that users receive benefit and assistance in finding work.

## **The History and Development of the Jobcentre – Past and Present Roles**

The history of the Jobcentre can be traced back to the various private, charitable and quasi-public labour bureaux that operated in the late Nineteenth Century. It was around this time that unemployment was specifically named as such and began to attract government intervention (Burnett, 1994). In the early Twentieth Century permissive legislation allowed local authorities to set up labour exchanges and unemployment registers. These existing agencies were then brought under central government control in 1909 when the Labour Exchanges Act was passed, which also empowered the Board of Trade to develop a National Exchange system (Showler, 1976: 21). In the very early stages, the exchanges operated without any role in the provision of public relief, concentrating firmly on vacancy placements. From the outset there was disagreement and uncertainty over the objectives of the exchanges, particularly in relation to whether registration of the unemployed should be voluntary or compulsory. The eventual outcome was that the exchanges would be staffed by civil servants, rather than industrialists, and would go hand-in-hand with the unemployment insurance scheme, when it was enacted in 1911. The dual role of policing benefits (through the application of work tests) and enabling the unemployed to find work was therefore cemented in with the bricks. However, it was envisaged that exchanges would deal first and foremost with employment and 'work people' (Price, 2001: 2), rather than unemployment and the unemployed. The intended purpose was to facilitate the flow of labour, serving

employers as much as those looking for work. In the original scheme there was no compulsion for the unemployed to register with exchanges (Thane, 1982: 93).

By the time war broke out in 1914, there were 423 exchanges in the UK, dealing with more than two million workers a year (Thane, 1982: 93). In 1916, the Ministry of Labour replaced the Labour Department of the Board of Trade and labour exchanges were renamed as employment exchanges (Showler, 1976: 22). This came in response to wartime labour shortages and served to increase and direct the labour supply of men and women. The depression of the inter-war years and the different policy objectives pursued by the Conservative and Labour governments of the time increased the workload for exchange staff and had a detrimental effect on the capacity for job placing (Showler, 1976: 23, Garside, 1990). The system was criticised in the 1930s for failing to provide sufficient vacancies and for an over-reliance on temporary staff (criticisms again levelled at Jobcentres in the late 1990s (c.f. Finn et al., 1998). The Royal Commission on Unemployment Insurance (1931-2) recommended that there should be a separation of the job matching and benefit administration roles conducted by officials within the exchanges. This recommendation was not implemented at the time, the minds of policy-makers instead being focused firmly on the crisis of the insurance funds, which were on the verge of collapse because they had been over-stretched by both the high number and long duration of claims that had been unanticipated when the scheme was designed (Showler, 1976,

Whiteside, 1991, Fraser, 1984). At this time, exchanges became associated primarily with the administration of relief as 'the place to sign on for dole payments rather than a place to find work' (Aldrich et al., 2000: 92) – a reputation that proved hard to shake off in the following decades.

The very high levels of unemployment were only brought under control when World War II was underway. The exchanges were once again requisitioned for the purposes of military mobilisation and to increase the supply of labour at home to bolster the war effort. Emergency powers in 1939 and 1940 greatly increased the jurisdiction (and the workload) of exchange staff, who were involved not only in the administration of military labour, but also the regulation of civilian employment and recruitment. This all came without the expected resources, resulting in problems of understaffing and the physical deterioration of buildings (Aldrich et al., 2000: 93). Compulsory registration was extended to those in employment, including some groups of women. Many women were expected to contribute to Auxiliary Services or engage in national service and schemes were established to encourage those with disabilities to participate in training with a view to reintegration into the labour market (Price, 2000). Once again, there were calls for a public system of job matching to operate unencumbered by benefit administration activities.

The Control of Engagements Order 1945 allowed exchange services to continue to be focused on the control of labour for the national interest in peacetime (Showler, 1976: 24). For a short period after the war,

exchange staff could transfer military staff into civilian jobs, a task made easier by the compulsory notification of vacancies (which continued until 1956) and the requirement for employers to recruit only through exchange offices. The Employment and Training Act 1948 then superseded the Labour Exchanges Act 1909, although there was no significant shift in what employment exchanges were intended to do beyond the extension of the training function. Discussions of post-war reconstruction had included proposals to split assistance offices and national insurance offices. The outcome was that formal responsibility for unemployment insurance and assistance was passed on to the Ministry of National Insurance, but in practice the exchanges maintained their dual role (Price, 2000). The reach of government was reinforced further with the commitment to full employment and an adherence to the principles of Keynesian demand management. The Public Employment Service (PES) was afforded a lead role in providing information about vacancies.

By the 1960s, however, the job matching function of the PES was starting on a downward track and only around 15 per cent of the registered unemployed found jobs through the exchanges (Finn & Taylor, 1990: 9). Funding cuts affected the specialist services first – Professional and Executive Register offices were reduced, the Technical and Scientific Register was closed and the Nursing Appointments Service ceased to be a separate service (Showler, 1976: 26). This contraction of vacancy services pushed the PES harder in the direction of providing

predominantly for the unemployed, making the service more residual and less well respected by those looking for work and employers.

In 1966, there were several developments. The Adult Occupational Guidance Service was set up to provide careers advice to adults in a similar way to the Youth Employment Service for young people, which was already well established. Some exchange offices were moved from back street offices into town centre sites. Area managers were introduced and new posts were created to develop links with local employers. Exchange staff were given more in-depth training about the local labour market and the PES was expanded further. These measures were intended to enhance the vacancy function of the exchanges over benefit administration, but failed to transform the service (Showler, 1976: 27-28).

In fact the OECD review of UK manpower (sic), published in 1970, was highly critical of the UK employment service, judging exchanges to be too devoted to benefit administration at the expense of vacancy placement (techniques for which were thought to be underdeveloped, dealing disproportionately with vacancies at the unskilled end of the market) (Showler, 1976: 30). In the light of this, the PES underwent a fundamental restructuring to become the Employment Services Agency, a relatively autonomous organisation, which was to operate alongside the Training Services Agencies under the auspices of the new national Manpower Services Commission (Department of Employment, 1972a and b).

This time a radical modernisation programme was embarked upon, a fundamental part of which was the splitting of the administration of unemployment benefit from the main employment service, which was intended to break with the dole queue image of the past (DfE, 1972). The PES became a more specialist service dealing with a wider range of vacancies for job seekers in and out of work, returning to the original aim of the exchange system (ESA/MSA, 1974). Organisationally, this meant employment exchanges were divided into Jobcentres, designed to provide advice, information and guidance, and Unemployment Benefit Offices (UBOs), to deal with benefit claims - a task made less labour intensive with the introduction of postal payments and the use of computerised payments. State-of-the-art Jobcentres (the first opened in Reading in 1973) were to be situated in prime sites with self-service vacancy displays, whereas UBOs retained their back street image. The two functions of enabling people to find work and policing benefit claims therefore became strictly demarcated, especially since the staff for UBOs and Jobcentres were recruited and trained separately. The new Jobcentres were also to be governed using fresh management methods (Showler, 1976: 38). To this end a set of performance objectives and targets were set in 1973, designed to provide incentives to increase the number of vacancies, placings and training applications (Price, 2000: 165). General services were to be supplemented by more specialist services for people with disabilities, young people, older workers, the long-term unemployed and professional and executive workers (Professional and Executive

Recruitment services became a separate agency for which employers had to pay fees, the idea being that it would eventually become self-sufficient). The whole programme sought to deal with labour market restructuring in anticipation of future demand, rather than just targeting the unemployed (Whiteside, 1995).

Just as Jobcentres began to become established in the mid 1970s, international economic events combined with the problems of a declining manufacturing base to produce a potent mix (Lowe, 1999). The reaction produced unemployment that was set to grow on an unprecedented scale. Despite these challenging conditions, the competitive new Jobcentres still managed to secure a much larger proportion of the vacancy market – so much so that the Federation of Personnel Agencies began to see Jobcentres as a threat (Price, 2000). By the late 1970s, Jobcentres were hailed as a great success, although the gains made by the most disadvantaged users have been questioned (Showler, 1976: 34).

During the 1970s, full employment was abandoned as a policy objective, and was increasingly replaced by the goal of controlling inflation as monetarism became accepted as the new economic orthodoxy (Whiteside, 1995: 52). Unemployment doubled in 1979 and tipped over the three million mark by 1985. The strained relationship between the objectives of ensuring a supply of labour to employers and providing assistance to the unemployed surfaced again. The MSC reported that:

. . . for many job seekers, especially the least skilled, the individual help that can be given is strictly limited so long as unemployment remains high. In many circumstances it is more productive for the Jobcentre to devote effort to securing more vacancies than to increasing advisory work (MSC, 1979: 29, cited in Finn & Taylor, 1990: 10).

There were difficulties, however, because contrary to its original aim the MSC came to deal with unemployment crises in a temporary manner, rather than providing a general solution to labour market problems. The MSC reverted to a residual role and the Jobcentres fell foul of the same fate as the labour exchanges had before them. Their influence on placement was lost and Jobcentres came to be the source of mainly low paid jobs that employers could not otherwise fill (Whiteside, 1995: 66). The Conservatives paraded training schemes as the solution, their other main strategy for dealing with mass unemployment being to 'massage the unemployment count' (Finn, 2001: 74).

In 1987, policy was reversed as the Employment Service was formed to amalgamate the activities of the Jobcentre and the former Unemployment Benefit Service (Fletcher, 1997). Staff were once again expected to combine assisting people to find work with policing benefit claims (Fletcher, 1997, Finn & Taylor, 1990). Costly prime sites for Jobcentre offices were no longer felt necessary. In 1988 the MSC was abolished, the Professional and Executive Recruitment Service was fully privatised

and the delivery of training provision was also transferred out of state control through Training and Enterprise Councils in England and Wales and Local Enterprise Companies in Scotland. Following a large expansion of private employment services in the 1980s, it was decided to freeze the ES share of the vacancy market. The role of the public employment service has remained complementary to other forms of job placement, rather than competitive with them, ever since.

The Employment Service was given Executive Agency status in 1990. As one of the largest semi-autonomous 'Next Steps' agencies (see HMSO, 1989), the ES led the way in applying business principles to public service (Horton & Jones, 1996) and 'disrupting traditional civil service practices and values' (Foster & Hoggett, 1999: 20). These traditional principles and practices of civil service bureaucratic administration had been highly praised, particularly during the post-war period, for efficiency, rationality, fairness and impartiality (see previous chapter). Much had changed internally within the civil service, including a 'white blouse revolution' (Anderson, 1989, Savage & Witz, 1992), involving the feminisation of low grade, poorly paid, routine clerical work. More generally, the value of bureaucracy as a mode of service delivery had been undermined by a range of critiques from across the political spectrum including neo-Marxists, feminists, anti-racists, the poverty lobby and most influential of all – the neo-liberals. Bureaucracy was reinterpreted by the Conservative governments (1979-1997) as inefficient, wasteful and outdated. The 'crisis of welfare' was therefore also 'a crisis of the organisational regime'

because centralised state bureaucracy was 'an institutional articulation of social democracy' (Clarke & Newman, 1997: 17). Within the new social, economic, political and ideological settlement, the vogue was for managers and business values (of the particular sort advocated in the excellence literature, see e.g. Peters, 1987, 1993), whose status and legitimacy was lifted above both bureaucrats and professionals (Butcher, 1995, Clarke & Newman, 1997, Flynn, 1993). According to Clarke & Newman (1997), the 'managerial state' was born during the 1980s and 1990s.

New managerialism (Clarke & Newman, 1997) has impacted upon the Employment Service in a range of ways, in terms of both rhetoric and reality (see Keen & Scase, 1998, for comparison with local government). During the late 1980s and 1990s the ES came under continuing pressure to reduce its operating costs and obtain better 'value for money', consequently a tier of management was removed (Fletcher, 1997). Market testing, contracting out and cost reviews were among the techniques introduced to help secure efficiency savings. It has been argued that these reforms have created a blurring between public and private spheres (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994), in which power has been dispersed - meaning the 'simultaneous shrinking of the state and the enlargement of its reach into civil society (through its engagement of non-state agents)' (Clarke & Newman, 1997: 29). When applied to the Employment Service this has meant 'the delivery of employment and training services [are] being dismantled' (Finn, 2001: 77). There is a

danger that low priority user groups, particularly the hardest to place, will become subject to service provision that is distanced from the accountability of democratically elected government. According to Tonge:

The long-term unemployed may represent 'problem' clients. The state's willingness to 'hive-off' responsibility for training the unemployed to the private sector has amounted to a quasi-privatisation (Tonge, 1999: 226).

New managerialism also extended the role of annual performance targets, which became more specific, being set at national, local and even section level (Finn & Taylor, 1990). Pollitt argues that such incentive based management techniques represent a shift towards 'a neo-Taylorist management process' (1993: 56), the workers being 'a new generation of front-line employment advisers who have the task of turning abstract incentives and opportunities into real day-to-day choices' (Finn, 2001: 77). Horton & Jones argue that for staff this has meant increases in 'insecurity of employment, redundancy, job intensification and worsening terms and conditions' (1996: 34, also see Heery & Salmon, 2000, Foster & Hoggett, 1999, Gagnon, 1996, du Gay & Salaman, 1992, McIntosh & Broderick, 1996). There is greater reliance on casual workers, employed on very short temporary contracts, with little training, low status and poor pay. Such developments can threaten the core values of service delivery. Those officials who have most face-to-face contact with users are no longer guaranteed the staples that previous generations of bureau-

professionals took for granted, for instance in-depth training, expertise, salary and security of contract. It is possible to infer that under such working conditions, front-line employees as well as managers might be less committed to the public service ideal (c.f. Keen & Scase, 1998, McIntosh & Broderick, 1996). Hill argues that these sorts of adjustments in the structure of the delivery of services can transform the policies themselves since 'the rules of the game may change the outcome of the game' (1997: 136).

These outcomes are felt by those who use public services. It is not only the rules of the game that are repositioned, but also the relationship between user and official, and consequently between citizen and state. New managerialism realigns these relationships and reconstructs the public, citizens and users as consumers (Clarke & Newman, 1997). Clarke & Newman identify three contrasting representations of citizens within new managerialist discourse:

While the citizen as taxpayer (and ratepayer) was being subjected to excessive levels of taxation to pay for the welfare state, and the citizen as consumer was being denied effective choice in service provision, the other citizen – the one dependent of welfare services and benefits – was being demonised as a 'scrounger', using public handouts to avoid responsibility (1997: 14).

Business principles are said to offer customers more choice and the unemployed are provided with a Jobseeker's Allowance Charter to guarantee certain levels of service delivery. But the newly modelled pseudo-customer is not and cannot be a customer in the purest sense. Customers of unemployment benefits are not voluntary (Lipsky, 1980, see previous chapter) because they depend on the essential services and benefits provided by the state (either directly or in a contracted out form) to meet their basic needs. In the case of the long-term unemployed, social assistance is paid by the state as a matter of last resort. There are therefore very few alternatives, if any exist at all. In such circumstances the only choice is to take or leave whatever is offered. Furthermore, reforms have not been customer led or customer focused, explicit cost-cutting has instead formed the rationalisation. If 'users' are represented in the formal policy arena as 'customers' then the logical progression would be for needs to become translated into preferences and rights dissolved down into a residue of choices. Powerful discourses of managerialism push consumerism forward to stand in direct conflict with notions of entitlement (either earned, in the case of insurance-based unemployment benefit or needed, in the case of assistance-based income maintenance). In this study, these developments will be examined critically to determine the impact of the new language of the customer on the implementation of policy (through the management imperative for front-line staff to deliver customer service) and the way that users think about the service they receive.

### *Current role of the Jobcentre<sup>1</sup>*

The tension between enabling people (whether unemployed or employed) to find work and policing benefits has persisted throughout the Twentieth Century. In 1998, the Employment Service Annual Performance Agreement stated that the aim of the ES was:

To contribute to high levels of employment and growth, and to individuals leading rewarding working lives, by helping all people without a job to find work and employers to fill their vacancies (Employment Service, 1998: 1).

This aim was to be fulfilled through six objectives and their respective targets:

- To help people into work by providing appropriate advice, guidance, training and support either directly or in partnership with others.
- To concentrate efforts on helping people improve their employability and move from welfare to work particularly if they have already spent long periods without a job.
- To involve people with disabilities in the world of work by helping them to find and retain jobs and

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<sup>1</sup> Current at the time when the fieldwork was conducted in 1998. See Chapter Nine for more recent policy developments, including the replacement of Jobcentres by new Jobcentre Plus offices.

encouraging employers to open more opportunities to them.

- To set out clearly the rights and responsibilities of people who claim Jobseeker's Allowance and ensure that throughout the period of their claim these rights and responsibilities are fulfilled.
- To provide a courteous and professional customer service to all jobseekers.
- To deliver these services cost effectively.

(Employment Service, 1998: 2-3)

The formally stated goals of the Employment Service therefore emphasise the function of assisting people to find work, with benefit administration appearing as secondary. It is evident, however, that this unhappy marriage has continued to be problematic, not least of all because of the increasingly disciplinary spirit that unemployment policies have adopted in recent years. The following section outlines the trends in benefits for the unemployed and identifies potential pressures that this might create for those delivering policy at street-level.

### **Trends in Benefits for the Unemployed – Towards Active Labour Market Policies**

Developments in benefit administration have run parallel to changes in the role of the public employment service. The present system can be most meaningfully related to the system of income maintenance established as

part of the post-war settlement, although it is acknowledged that the reforms had much in common with their peacetime predecessors. The National Insurance Act 1946 was the centrepiece of the new social security system. It created a flat-rate benefit for the short-term unemployed, based on the contributory principle of individual earned entitlement. Although Beveridge intended benefit levels to cover basic necessities, the value of payments was never derived from calculations of the minimum costs of living (Brown, 1990: 30). Unemployment Benefit has therefore never provided even for the most basic level of subsistence, having been considered as one of the most austere of the post-war reforms (Tomlinson, 1998: 74). The National Assistance Act 1948 created a complementary safety net for those who had exhausted their National Insurance (NI) contributions or had insufficient to qualify. However, the door to social assistance has always been guarded by a fierce means test. It was only those fortunate enough to have accrued a full quota of NI contributions who could go down the Unemployment Benefit route, even then the means test could only be avoided if there was no need to claim for dependants' allowances. The resulting magnitude of means-testing rendered the formal distinction between insurance and assistance benefits largely academic (Brown, 1990).

Questions over entitlement criteria and the rates of benefit have continued since the scheme was established. The only major modification between 1946 and the 1980s was the introduction of the earnings-related supplement and earnings-related contributions in 1966, which increased

the value of benefits for some workers (Ogus & Wikeley, 1995: 67). In the 1970s, there were no major changes to entitlements to unemployment related benefits, but an 'alphabet soup of programmes' was generated (Sinfield, 1981: 98). The prevailing neo-liberal ideology of the Conservative era (1979-1997) brought these issues into sharper focus and along with economic factors (for instance the conditions to cut public expenditure imposed by the IMF after bailing Britain out in the 1970s) created a powerful force for change (Glennerster, 2000). Reviews were conducted of both assistance and insurance based benefits and pressure to reform the system built with the rocketing levels of unemployment in the 1980s.

Access to benefits for the unemployed was tightened and the 'availability for work' rule was imposed more rigorously. In 1982 (under the Social Security Act 1980) earnings-related additions to unemployment benefit were abolished, meaning that benefits were paid at a flat rate, while contributions were graduated. The value of benefits was also reduced because unemployment benefit was made taxable (Robertson, 1986). This, combined with the legacy for year-on-year devaluation of benefits because of price-indexing, led to a slow decline in the value of benefits in relation to standards of living (Clasen, 1994, Hills, 1997:45).

Young people as a group were particularly disadvantaged by changes to social security in the 1980s. Virtually all 16 and 17 year olds were disqualified from claiming benefits. They were barred from claiming

Income Support unless they could prove that they were experiencing 'severe hardship'. In effect 16 and 17 year olds were also prohibited from the Unemployment Benefit scheme because of the increase in the number of NI contributions required (previously one year's worth of contributions earned benefit entitlement but this was increased to two years of contributions by the 1988 legislation). Adults between the ages of 18 and 24 were also discriminated against, having their rates of Income Support reduced to a lower rate. The publicly provided security net was therefore pulled out from under the feet of the young, causing serious and long-lasting effects (Jones & Novak, 1999).

In the late 1980s, the Stricter Benefit Regime was enforced to create further savings (Blackmore, 2001). Staff were directed to use the existing framework of legislation in a more disciplinary way and new measures were introduced to police Unemployment Benefit claimants. In 1989, the requirement for claimants to prove that they were 'actively seeking work' added to this pressure. Access to benefits was therefore becoming tighter and more conditional upon availability to work and job seeking activity, whilst the value of benefits continued its gradual decline (see above). For ES staff:

these developments reinforced the perception that the primary role of the ES was to reinforce and police the jobseeking activities of the unemployed and to encourage

and increasingly require them to take the low paid jobs being generated in a deregulated labour market (Finn, 1998: 109).

### *Active Labour Market Policies*

The first birth pangs of workfare developed alongside these changes in benefit administration. In 1986 Restart interviews were introduced, meaning that unemployed people had to attend special interviews every six months to reassess their benefit claim, retest their eligibility and be referred to participate in a range of compulsory programmes. These same trends continued into the 1990s, when UK governments began to make more of a concerted effort to pursue the types of active labour market policies that secured international acclaim long ago (c.f. Clasen, 2000, Lødemel & Trickey, 2001, Sarfati & Bonoli, 2002).

The UK has borrowed most heavily from the USA form of 'work first' workfare programmes, but has also learned a great deal from Australia (Theodore & Peck, 1999). European member states have more recently turned to different forms of active labour market policy as the solution to unemployment. This has been no accident. Active labour market policies have been enthusiastically promoted and defined by supra-national bodies like the European Union, OECD and World Bank (Clasen et al., 2001: 43), despite the over-simplistic assumption that they provide an alternative to 'passive' income maintenance<sup>2</sup> (Sinfield, 2001).

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<sup>2</sup> There has been an international clamour to present 'active' labour market policies, but these remain wrapped up together in an ill-defined bunch, the language of their presentation justifying their existence and value. In their shadow, 'passive' policies are

Two main developments along this line have occurred in the UK since the mid 1990s. The first step, in 1996, was the change from Unemployment Benefit, an insurance based benefit payable for one year (after which users could apply for social assistance in the form of Income Support), to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). JSA is peculiar in that it has two forms. Contributions-Based Jobseeker's Allowance is the equivalent of the old Unemployment Benefit but is only available for a maximum of 26 weeks. Income-Based Jobseeker's Allowance is a means-tested benefit available for an unlimited period, replacing Income Support for the unemployed. By 1995, more than three quarters of unemployed claimants were already having to claim means-tested benefits in addition to their insurance-based Unemployment Benefit (Erskine, 1997). The conversion to Jobseeker's Allowance ensured that means-testing was rolled out further and that the insurance principle continued to be undermined. In this respect the UK is distinct from other northern European countries, where much higher proportions of unemployed people receive insurance-based benefit (Kvist, 2001: 205). Benefit rates were brought in line with the old Income Support levels, meaning that young people aged 18-24 with full contributions records lost out and 16 and 17 year olds were formally excluded from claiming benefit as unemployed (although Severe Hardship payments continued).

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rendered useless, or at least undesirable. Sinfield (2001) argues that the lack of systematic analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of each type of policy allows this false distinction to continue unchecked. By ignoring the wealth of evidence that

The introduction of JSA also brought with it significant changes in the way in which benefit for the unemployed was administered. For the first time, users were required to sign a contract, a Jobseeker's Agreement, stating the precise steps to be taken to secure employment. ES staff were afforded greater discretionary power to compel Jobseeker's Allowance claimants to take specific action to enhance their job search activity by issuing Jobseeker Directions, for instance to dictate how unemployed people should dress for interviews, how they should style their hair or how they should behave in their dealings with prospective employers. Fortnightly re-registering for benefit, more informally known as 'signing on', became more 'active' and requirements were introduced for users to log their efforts to find work on a 'Looking for Work' form, to be presented for inspection at every Jobcentre interview. Claiming benefit therefore became more closely linked to actively seeking work conditions, which were enforced with tougher benefit sanctions. Benefit administration became more disciplinary. Some view this as perverse extension of the policing role aimed at punishing the poor (Novak, 1997, Jones & Novak, 1999). For Jobcentre staff it created even greater tensions in balancing policing and enabling roles (Fletcher, 1997).

Jobseeker's Allowance was followed in 1998 by the New Deal, Britain's welfare-to-work scheme. This time it was New Labour who were at the helm of active labour market policies. Despite their supposed 'post-

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points to the negative experience and poverty in unemployment, policies continue to be

ideological' Third Way position, the direction of policy change followed the co-ordinates set by the previous Conservative governments. In power New Labour embraced the Jobseeker's Allowance regime that they had made such vitriolic condemnation of in opposition. The comparatively well-funded and much hyped New Deal programme was less innovative than it first seemed (Tonge, 1999).

With the introduction of the New Deal, it was young unemployed people who once again bore the brunt of the reforms. 18-24 year olds who had been unemployed for six months or more were first to be compelled to participate in the programme, which was financed from the revenue of a windfall tax on the privatised utilities. These users are required to attend a series of Gateway interviews, during a period of up to four months. Young people must then accept one of four options: a job (for which an employer's subsidy may be available), training, a work placement in the voluntary sector or an Environmental Taskforce placement. However, it was realised quite early on that not all regions would be able to offer all four options and that young people might be required to attend options other than their preferred one (DfEE, 1997). Despite this, the refusal to co-operate is to result in the application of a special New Deal sanction, meaning that benefit is withdrawn entirely for between two and four weeks. In the Chancellor's words: 'there is no fifth option' (Gordon Brown, quoted on BBC News, 1998).

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designed in ways that further disadvantage those who are subject to them.

It is this extension of compulsion that has increased the existing tension between enabling and policing clients. The new Personal Advisers (PAs) must balance the contradiction of providing user-centred interviews, aimed at providing positive advice, guidance, support and solutions that are tailored to the individual unemployed person's needs, whilst simultaneously threatening the toughest benefit sanctions to date. After discussing a young person's employment aspirations, PAs can still offer little more than possible access to the lower end of the flexible labour market (Tonge, 1999).

The New Deal also exists in various mutated forms for other user groups (see Millar, 2000 for further detail), which is significant because it represents a broadening of scope in active labour market policies, much beyond anything conceived of by the previous Conservative governments. Since June 1998, it has been compulsory for claimants who are aged 25 and over and have been unemployed for more than two years to participate in the New Deal. Less is offered to this group, who are usually denied the Gateway period of advisory interviews. There are only two options to 'choose' from: a job (which may be subsidised for 6 months) or up to 52 weeks of full-time education and training whilst claiming JSA. The New Deal offers very little that is new to this group, the only concession for which is that the over 25s are not subject to the tougher New Deal sanctions, although the threat of existing JSA sanctions still applies. This means that those over the age of 25 will not have benefit withdrawn for refusing to participate in a training option. They will,

however, still incur a benefit sanction of two to four weeks for reasons such as being dismissed from a training option for misconduct. In addition to these compulsory New Deal programmes, a variety of voluntary New Deal schemes are also in operation for lone parents, people with disabilities, partners of the unemployed and Jobseeker's Allowance claimants over the age of 50 (the most recent New Deal programme, introduced in April 2000, c.f. Millar, 2000). These have involved smaller numbers of participants and have varied in their success (measured in terms of 'sustained' employment of 13 weeks).

The delivery of the New Deals has also involved greater reliance on private and voluntary service providers, eroding the direct training function of the ES, and raising important issues over accountability and quality assurance. It has been noted that:

A new political consensus seems to be emerging in the UK around the once-controversial principles of compulsion, privatisation and localisation in welfare-to-work programming (Theodore & Peck, 1999: 504).

## **Conclusion**

During the Twentieth Century, several changes have taken place in the organisational arrangements of employment services and the benefit eligibility requirements for unemployed people. These changes have been shaped by wider social, economic and political events and influences.

Several tensions have been identified in the formal role of the Jobcentre, and the labour exchanges that preceded them. Firstly, there has been a persistent conflict between the roles of benefit administration and vacancy matching. At various times these functions have been conjoined, split and spliced together again (as in the current pattern of provision). When enacted in the staff-user relationship, this tension becomes centred around whether staff should be primarily concerned with policing benefit claims or assisting and enabling users (whether registered unemployed, non-registered unemployed or already in employment) to find work (Fletcher, 1997).

A secondary tension is evident within the realm of job matching. Here, the key dilemma for officials is in whether they should match people to jobs in the interests of the employer or in the interests of the user. The problem is that if the Jobcentre provides a matching service on employers' terms then the best qualified, most skilled users with the longest and most recent experience should be referred to employers, therefore disadvantaging those users who most need assistance from the service that is meant to be specifically designed to help them. On the other hand, if a job matching service places users who are least desirable to employers, the risk is that employers will go elsewhere to fill their vacancies. Since the state has accepted a responsibility (to a greater or lesser extent throughout the Twentieth Century) for ensuring that unemployed people are brought back into the wage relationship, front-line staff therefore occupy a unique space where they are expected to act simultaneously on

the behalf of employers and the unemployed. The inherent tensions between capital and labour are played out in the public employment offices where staff also represent the state to the citizen.

These tensions are increased by the trends that have been identified in unemployment policy. The emphasis on active labour market policies (i.e. Jobseeker's Allowance and the New Deal programmes) focuses attention on getting the long-term unemployed into work and raising the 'employability' of those furthest from the labour market. Users are expected to prove their engagement in actively seeking work, the conditions for which have become tighter, on threat of sanctions, which have become harsher. This means that high levels of compulsion, paired with a lightly regulated labour market and a growth in part-time precarious and low-skilled jobs, creates the situation in which unemployed people are forced to take work that they would not otherwise consider, and is unlikely to offer a living wage (Forde & Slater, 2001). The failure to secure an ongoing supply of high quality vacancies has left Jobcentres haunted by the dole queue image of the past (Aldrich et al., 2000).

The character of the staff-user relationship has also been affected by the rise of new managerialism (Clarke & Newman, 1997). Major changes have occurred since the Employment Service became a 'Next Steps' agency in 1990. The daily work of front-line staff has been altered by the increasing emphasis on cost-cutting, contracting out and incentive management through the development of performance targets, which

have become much more detailed and specific. A greater reliance on casual staff has changed the public face of the Jobcentre. Users have also become reinterpreted as customers and there have been attempts to make services more customer-orientated. However, these pseudo-customers are deprived of meaningful choice since they depend on the service for income maintenance and there are strict penalties for users who do not comply with the procedures and processing that take place within the Jobcentre.

In this thesis, I aim to explore the ways in which these tensions are managed by front-line Jobcentre staff, played out within face-to-face interaction and experienced and negotiated by users. The following chapter describes the methods and methodology that were adopted for the ethnographic research that this thesis is based on.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

The findings presented in the following chapters are based on an ethnographic case study (see Yin, 1994) of one Jobcentre office. During a total observation period of six months a range of qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The interaction between Jobcentre users and front-line staff was directly observed during 74 visits. Interviews of varying length and depth were conducted with 48 members of staff. 35 unemployed people participated in semi-structured interviews. Information was also collected about the vacancies advertised in the office and documentary analysis was conducted on staff guidance materials. In this chapter, these methods will be described in detail and the rationale for choosing this approach will be set out. The methodological discussion will centre on the advantages and disadvantages of these methods and the practical and ethical issues raised during the research process.

### *An interpretivist approach to social policy research*

The primary concern in designing the research methods was to access the understandings that social actors held of the processes involved in accomplishing policy. This objective necessitated an in-depth qualitative approach. From an interpretivist standpoint (cf. Atkinson et al., 1988: 234-5), the intention was to understand the different meanings and interpretations that social actors had of the implementation of unemployment policy and the Jobcentre as a particular social context. In this respect, symbolic interactionism provided a useful conceptual framework for understanding the ways in which people construed this part of their world and related to social interaction with others. Central to this approach was the recognition that reality is socially defined and constructed (Charnon, 1995: 37, Berger & Luckman, 1967). The research process itself exists in the symbolic order and is based on interactions between social actors (Silverman, 1989: 102). The descriptive, in-depth and reflexive study of social processes and interaction at a micro level aims to understand how members construct symbolic order meanings in their everyday lives.

Observations and in-depth interviewing were the most appropriate methods for accessing in-depth knowledge about the meanings of unemployment policy for those working in and using the Jobcentre. The advantages of such qualitative methods are that they allow for the refinement and elaboration of images and concepts to interpret cultural

significance and advance theory (Ragin, 1994: 83). The whole 'self' of the researcher is the research instrument. Qualitative researchers:

emphasise the immersion of the researcher in a research setting and the effort to uncover the meaning and significance of social phenomena for people in those settings (Ragin, 1994: 91).

This does not mean, however, that the researcher can 'step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves' (McCracken, 1988: 9) because each individual has a different frame of reference for understanding the world. There is no one 'true self' of another person that it is possible to find. The self is a changing entity that individuals do not usually fully understand, or have the capability to express so that another individual can understand. Researchers can only hope to interact in a social setting where they are aware that there are differences in the way that people think and the way that people perceive what is around them.

The main advantages of an ethnographic approach are that the data are very rich and detailed (McCall & Simmons, 1969: 2). The researcher's intimate involvement in the social setting means that the data collected can be closely bound to theory. Learning about the participants' situation from their viewpoint and in their language gives access to the concepts

that are most meaningful to them in their everyday life (Burgess, 1984: 79). Direct observation in particular, provides the opportunity to view the different versions of events that are available (Burgess, 1984).

Sensitive information, both in the form of personal experiences that are difficult to talk about and in the sense of insider accounts of things being done that should not be, are better dealt with through an in-depth approach. Because the researcher is very close to the context, he or she is able to avoid misleading or meaningless questions, and can ease themselves into the situation and avoid delicate situations that other research methods cannot guard against. The fieldworker has the opportunity to absorb a lot of what seems irrelevant at the time, but later turn out to be extremely valuable, and is more likely than those using other methods to get a the situation as the informant sees it (McCall & Simmons, 1969: 23).

### *An Inductive Approach*

I have attempted to adopt an inductive approach to the research process, which aims to be as free as possible from pre-conceived ideas and judgements which can strait jacket research (Ragin, 1994, Denzin, 1970). This means beginning with sensitising concepts that provide the springboard to start research, which can then turn in any direction, allowing the research problem to be reformulated as the research goes along. Valentine best describes this starting point as 'remaining open but

without the dishonest and unworkable assumption of a blank mind' (1986: 127). The research process adopted bears a resemblance to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1968, Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A grounded theory approach has not been adopted as such, with its specific formulae for data collection and coding. I have instead been influenced by their general inductive approach: 'One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990: 23).

## **Data Collection**

The ethnographic approach to investigation one case study Jobcentre office comprised of a mix of observation, interviewing, documentary analysis and the collection of information about displayed vacancies. These methods were used to gain an in-depth understanding of the processes and meanings of the activities within the Jobcentre. The fieldwork was carried out in an office in Central Scotland during a six month period (74 visits in total). The fieldwork was split into two phases. Phase one consisted of one half-day visit per week (1<sup>st</sup> May to 24<sup>th</sup> August 1998). Phase two extended these half-day visits to five days a week, Monday to Friday (4<sup>th</sup> September to 4<sup>th</sup> December 1998). The visits ranged in length from 30 minutes to eight hours. Fieldwork visits usually lasted for approximately four hours.

## **Access**

Access was formally negotiated very early on in the project. A cold call letter was sent to one office, where a senior member of staff responded by arranging an initial meeting. Written approval was received in December 1997, soon after the meeting. The agreement was for a six month period of observation, in-depth interviews with staff and users and access to Employment Service documentation. Unfortunately, during the period of fieldwork the Employment Officer who had been the main gatekeeper in agreeing this access was transferred to another Jobcentre and the manager who had endorsed the approval was promoted to another office. The replacement manager was more hostile towards the research in general and denied specific access that had been granted originally for formal, semi-structured, staff interviews, documentary analysis of staff guidance and training materials. Near the end of the fieldwork, the new manager also requested that I sign the Official Secrets Act 1989. This had not been required earlier and represented a significant shift in the terms of agreement. Restrictions brought about under the name of official secrets have affected researchers in the past and seem destined to become more common in the future as a result of the new managerialist extension of service delivery through new non-governmental agencies (Cook, 1996: 55). I have, out of respect for ethical principles, been careful to avoid putting any Jobcentre worker in a compromising position regarding official secrets. Neither have I knowingly contravened the Official Secrets Act 1989.

These difficulties and changes to the initial agreement bear testament to the ongoing nature of access negotiations. They are not agreed once and for all but re-negotiated as time goes by. In addition to the formal access agreements with the management, access was also negotiated with each of the staff members individually, along with gaining consent from each head of section and all of the unemployed people who were being interviewed by staff or by me as part of the research.

## **Observation**

It was essential to the research design that the interaction between Employment Service staff and Jobcentre users be observed first hand. The fieldwork involved direct observation of life in the case study office. The staff in this office were organised in different sections. There were reception staff on ground and upper floors, who were the first point of contact for new users. Upstairs, a team of Employment Officers dealt with Fresh Claims interviews. Downstairs there were teams of staff in the following sections: Vacancies and Matching, Signing and Response to Displayed Vacancies and New Deal. The management team was made up of two Corporate Services staff and the office manager.

Official interviews between staff and users were observed and detailed notes were taken. Permission to tape record these had been denied from the outset. The transcripts were, nevertheless, very detailed. The researcher's fieldwork diary included notes of other types of interaction (staff to staff and user to user) as well as reflections on these ideas, notes,

questions and emerging themes were recorded at the time or later. These formed the basis of very detailed transcripts.

This section reflects on the observation approach and locates the method of direct observation within the wider ethnographic tradition. The participant observation literature is full of a lot of assumed agreement about what participant observation means, which has not been accompanied by precise definition. Those who have attempted explanation of the term usually characterise it as a combination of techniques that includes some degree of observation of, and involvement in, a particular social setting (cf. McCall & Simmons, 1969). Ethnography, anthropology, participant observation and fieldwork are all terms that are often used interchangeably (cf. Schwartzman, 1993, Spradley, 1980; Fetterman, 1989). The common ground between these four terms is that they are used to describe ways that cultures, or particular aspects of cultures can be understood and described. Actually *doing* participant observation, ethnography or anthropology seem to be quite similar. For instance, Barley's (1986) anthropological study of symbols in Dowayoland used much the same principles and techniques as Miller's (1989) ethnography of a Work Incentive Programme, or Taraborrelli's (1993) participant observation study of carers.

For clarity it is useful to attempt to disentangle the terms at least to some degree. Ethnography is the term used for a method that can involve participant observation, but doesn't necessarily, for instance ethnographic

studies can be based on in-depth interviewing and not on observation or participation in a social setting. Ethnography is used by anthropologists and sociologists to describe the method of learning about another culture or sub-culture in-depth, and first-hand (Burgess, 1984). Ethnography is considered to be the art (or the science, depending on viewpoint) of describing a particular culture (Fetterman, 1989).

Although the branches of anthropology and sociology are intertwined around ethnography, the roots of the disciplines can be separated out. Anthropological studies were traditionally in the mould of Malinowski's (1922) work, which considered a whole society in a far off land, relying heavily on descriptive material about a very different, more exotic, 'other'. More recently anthropological studies have shifted the focus to aspects of Western society, beginning particularly in the USA. Schwartzman (1993) considers this in terms of ethnographies of organisations and highlights the unrecognised role of ethnography in the Hawthorne studies of the 1920s. Ethnographic studies within sociology, on the other hand, are traceable back to the work of the Chicago School (also closely related to social psychology), which tended to function in a wider sphere, using data to generate theory (cf. Blumer, 1969, Becker et al., 1961, Hughes, 1971).

Participant observation is the collective name for methods used to learn about a culture or one small aspect of a particular culture or sub-culture. Participant observation involves a long-term immersion in the culture,

using techniques of observation and participation in a culture as well as in-depth interviewing and documentary analysis (McCall & Simmons, 1969). These techniques are governed by principles of 'Verstehen' (Weber, 1970), or subjective interpretation. Participant observation is also referred to as 'field observation', 'qualitative observation' and 'direct observation' (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). Jorgensen (1989) considers participant observation as a methodology consisting of principles, strategies, procedures, methods and techniques. Participant observation is used in order to understand the perspective of the ordinary participants in that setting.

The research methods for this project are best located within this literature as a focused ethnographic approach, rather than 'an ethnography' in the more traditional, particularly anthropological, sense. This combines in-depth interviewing with shorter informal interviews and a sustained period of observation, focusing on the interaction between staff and users throughout, in order to learn from people, rather than just studying them (Spradley, 1980:3).

### *Field Roles*

Within participant observation there are different roles that a researcher might adopt. Gold (1958) details four roles of field observations that vary in the degree of personal involvement that the researcher has in the social setting: complete participant (covert), participant-as-observer (very similar to complete participant but researcher and informants are aware that they

are involved in a field relationship), observer-as-participant (one-visit interviews and brief formal observation) and complete observer (not involved in social interaction with informants at all). My role in the Jobcentre can be described as a 'direct observer', which would be situated somewhere between observer-as-participant and participant-as-observer. This role is more closely aligned with Spradley's (1980) 'moderate' participant, combining being an 'insider' and an 'outsider' with the likelihood of becoming more involved the longer the time spent in the field. I was never a participant in the sense of being either involved in the work that the staff did or being governed by the rules that the registered unemployed were. The office setting prevented complete participation since I was not a worker as others have been (Anderson, 1999, Miller, 1991, Kingfisher, 1996). This means that the account provided has come from an outsider's perspective. This has the advantages of affording the opportunity for observation and reflection unencumbered by work related activities and concerns. Worker's accounts are very good at describing a worker's view of the situation (cf. Anderson, 1999, Miller, 1991) but may lose out on a more balanced view that considers the users' views as well. Not being a full participant also reduced the risks of over rapport (Silverman, 1989).

### *Field Relations*

Olesen & Whittaker (1970) consider how far the researcher is accepted by people in the research setting and how quickly rapport is established. They recognise that the 'phases through which role-making passes in the

course of interaction in fieldwork are stages of definitions by investigator and actors around the research roles and also around life roles' (1970: 381). Life roles relating to age, sex, social class influence the research relationships and acceptance by individuals (Olesen & Wittaker, 1970, Burgess, 1984). Each phase represents a distinctive segment of the role making process and each is relevant for 'the establishment of mutual awareness, consensus on role meanings, and management of the ongoing interaction, as well as for data gathered' (Olesen & Whittaker, 1970: 383). Mutual awareness, however, may in fact just be assumption of shared meaning or the shared acceptance of unspecified assumptions.

Olesen & Whittaker's (1970) description of four phases in the process of acceptance role making is useful in understanding the processes that I went through when I entered the research setting. Firstly, 'surface encounter' describes the brief period of initial contact with new people, where contact is made with the researcher in terms of research and life roles. Olesen & Whittaker (1970) argue that because people do not generally have a deep understanding of research purposes and roles they are likely to rely on the researcher's life roles as guidance for interaction. The sooner the informant can learn and relate to the researcher's life roles the sooner they will move on to the next stage. The second stage is 'proffering and inviting', during which there is mutual exchange between the researcher and informants. This involves 'offering definitions of one's self and the other while simultaneously asking for definitions of one's self and the other from the other party' (1970: 384). Informants often 'coach'

and 'sponsor' researchers during this phase. Thirdly, the 'selecting and modifying' stage involves 'reciprocal selection of meaningful insight and viable portions of the researcher roles and life roles of participant and observer' (ibid. 385). The final role is one of 'stabilising and sustaining'. These phases occurred simultaneously and overlapped during my research, being continually modified.

Even in the final days of fieldwork, I was still meeting new people and negotiating access and establishing roles. Janes (1961) found that it was not differences between his social class and those of the people he was studying that determined the extent to which rapport was achieved, as he had expected, but it was the stage in 'community role'. Janes (1961) plots the development of field roles according to time spent in the field, beginning with newcomer and advancing on through provisional acceptance, categorical acceptance, personal acceptance (the stage where rapport is reached) and finally, imminent migrant. The goal of each phase, for Janes, was to achieve rapport.

Burgess (1984) contributes to this discussion by arguing that several roles are adopted throughout an investigation, rather than one role being adopted once and for all. Similarly roles are renegotiated throughout the research with different informants. Burgess (1984) considers the different roles according to the different people in the research setting, i.e. some people accepting a researcher more quickly and to a greater extent than

others. Some of the research participants in the Jobcentre were willing to sit and talk for hours about their work, while others seemed reluctant to talk at all. I had more in common with certain individuals than others in terms of life roles, interests and attitudes.

The researcher's attributes and attitudes also have an influence on which data is collected and how it is interpreted. Participant observation is not about objectively trying to study a group of people, it is about subjectively studying a social setting of which the researcher is part. The life roles and ascribed characteristics of the researcher, therefore, have a great influence on the individual researcher's experience of the field. The kind of person that the interviewer is, however, can often be more important to interviewees than the value of the research itself (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1997: 83). The individual character of the researcher can make it possible in some circumstances to transcend differences in life roles to establish rapport. The researcher has to exercise control over the relationships that are established for research purposes (Burgess, 1984: 92). Establishing the essentials of trust and rapport will depend to a great extent on the manner in which the researcher interacts with the people in the research setting. Certain attitudes are required from the researcher. The minimum essentials would seem to be a non-judgemental attitude towards any information offered by individuals, awareness of how other person might be feeling, sensitivity to their needs and when they want to talk or would prefer not to, as well as a sense of humour. Hornsby-Smith sums it up as the need for 'social sensitivity and charm' (1993: 54) and Scott considers

the embodiment of such characteristics in a 'personable young woman' (1992: 169). I managed to establish rapport with most of the participants by employing an attitude of politeness and good humour. Relations with staff and users in the field were generally quite positive. People did not seem to mind me observing them and workers did not seem to view me as a threat to them.

The site of much of the negotiation of acceptance and gaining of rapport and trust with staff was the tea rooms for smokers and non-smokers. The process of being accepted into the research setting does not happen automatically, but was something that had to be actively pursued. I deliberately spent time in the tea rooms chatting with staff members about things that often had nothing to do with the research.

A defining moment in gaining trust came when one staff member gave me one of the swipe cards that enabled access to the restricted back stairs instead of the public stairs. As well as demonstrating the trust that I had gained, using the card gave me increased use of the office and staff space because I could come and go as I pleased without being dependent on a staff member to let me in or out. A particular advantage was that I could then get into the office in the morning before the public were allowed in and have privileged access to the backstage activity (c.f. Goffman, 1959).

Although many official interviews between staff and users were observed, every interview that took place during the fieldwork period did not have an

equal chance of being observed. Certain staff members, particularly those in positions of power, restricted access for observations. When I first asked the head of the New Claims section if I could observe some interviews that afternoon she replied:

SM 2:           There's nothing suitable till a quarter to four.

She was not willing for me to sit in on any of the interviews that were happening in the two hour period before then. Similarly, an adviser who had been allowing me to sit in on the Review interviews he was conducting that morning explained that he had not come to get me for his previous appointment because:

SM 25:           I didn't think it was appropriate for you to sit in because I was going to have a go at her.

It is difficult to discern to what extent and in which ways staff modified their behaviour because they were being observed and having their actions and words noted. It is inevitable that researchers will influence the situation they are studying, even a silent observer changes the way people interact and those being observed tend to present their culture either in an overly favourable light, only transmitting the things they think that the researcher thinks are important or hide things deliberately (Silverman, 1989: 45). For several observations one Fresh Claims adviser had been conducting interviews 'by the book'. One day he commented:

SM 10: I cannae be bothered doing these [interviews] properly anymore.

After this he reverted to his usual practice of modifying official policy, for instance he stopped turning the computer screen around so that users could see what he was doing.

### *Impression Management*

One difficulty of 'passing' in a social situation is that there is usually a great deal of assumption in conversations, because people cannot explain everything they mean all of the time. In the research situation it is these very assumptions that are the subject of interest. The skill required is to be able to get at the information whilst still 'passing'. It is for this reason, among others, that participant observers often take on the role of 'interested incompetent' (Rock, 1977: 199) or 'marginal native' (Freilich, 1970), that lies somewhere between 'martian' and 'convert' (Lofland, 1971) and feels like being a 'poor stupid sociologist' (Olesen & Whittaker, 1970: 389). This role provides for the social and intellectual distance necessary to promote analytical thought (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1997: 115). Another advantage is that it makes informants feel obliged to explain things that seem obvious to them (Fielding, 1993). My role as 'student' was valuable in these terms, also allowing me to be seen as less of a threat.

I dressed smartly in order to fit into the office environment, which definitely had an impact on being accepted by staff members, but also influenced how users saw me. The fact that I did not wear an outdoor coat or jacket in the office instantly marked me out from the Jobcentre users, especially since the majority of the fieldwork took place in the winter. Socialising with staff and interacting with them as they worked facilitated an ease of relationship that made me seem more like a member of staff than a user. Frequent writing activity added to this impression and it was evident that at least some of the users and interviewees had thought that I worked there.

It was in the back stage (Goffman, 1959) of the tea rooms that I became aware of myself as a social actor learning to cope in a new setting. It was not until half way through the research, however, that I became aware of one of the rules of the large non-smokers' tea room that I had flaunted. In the beginning, I always sat with the worker who had been the main gatekeeper during the access negotiations. As a smoker he always sat in the smaller tea room with the other smokers. I eventually ran out of excuses to keep going to the smoking tea room, especially since everyone there knew I didn't smoke. I started to frequent the larger tea room for non-smokers. Most of the staff members used this room and I did not know any of them very well to begin with. My strategy was to take tea breaks and lunch with the staff member that I had last been talking to. It had not occurred to me to differentiate between male and female workers until I came to the uncomfortable realisation that I was the only woman who ever sat at a table with the men. This may have had implications for

how well I was accepted by the female workers who seemed to value their group identity. On the other hand it probably gave access to conversations that I wouldn't have been privy to if I had always sat with the women.

### *Balance of power*

It has been demonstrated that a researcher's life roles and personal attributes have important implications for establishing rapport. In addition to this they also raise issues about the balance of power between the researcher and the participants or interviewees. Feminist writing on research methods has contributed a great deal to these understandings. Although my research does not adopt a feminist standpoint the issues raised are useful, and important considerations for any research.

The basis for these feminist arguments is that women can share a 'special' relationship because they are oppressed by the dominant culture on the grounds of gender. This assumes, however that women can be treated as one homogenous group and becomes problematic when other factors like ethnicity, class and age are more apparent as status markers. Ramazanoglu argues that 'women are not all equally oppressed in the same ways' (1989: 433). Douglas (1992) argues particularly in the case of ethnicity that black women experience racism as of paramount importance, over gender awareness. It is also important to note that what are labelled as feminist research *methods* are not restricted to use by

women. In Labour, Life and Poverty (1949), Zweig was a male researcher who adopted an involved stance towards interviewing working class men, many of his interviewees commenting on having discussed matters with him that they had not broached with anyone else (just as Finch's (1984) and Oakley's (1981) respective interviewees did).

How the interviewer and the interviewee present themselves will depend on the position of power they have. The most common situation is that the interviewer is in the role of legitimised power, while the interviewee is relatively powerless. Scott observes that 'traditional research both objectifies and renders invisible its subjects, especially women' (1992: 59). In my research, I felt that the Jobcentre workers were actually in a greater position of power than I was as a researcher, because I was constantly dependent on them allowing me to do the research, through daily access negotiations. Amongst the staff interviewed, there were more and less powerful men and women. Most of the junior workers, who had low grade, low pay, low status and were often on short temporary contracts, were men. It was at the point of writing about the study that I became more powerful than the staff members.

The interviews with unemployed people had a different balance of power because the participants had less power and social standing. Contrary to feminist arguments it was the Jobcentre users, who were often male, that I considered to have least power. The women who were interviewed happened to be more assertive and had previously been employed in

more professional jobs than most of the male interviewees. This is a consequence of the rules for claiming unemployment benefits. Women who have caring responsibilities are less likely to register as unemployed as are women whose partners work (not least of all because they are probably aware that they are unlikely to receive benefit because of their partner's earnings). There are likely to be disproportionate numbers of professional, as opposed to unskilled or semi-skilled, women claiming Jobseeker's Allowance.

I made every effort to treat all of the research participants with equal respect. I was not aware of any discernable difference in establishing rapport along gender lines. In fact, almost all of the most active research participants happened to be men. The class and ethnicity backgrounds of both staff and users were relatively similar to my own. All the participants were white (in an area with approximately 0.002% ethnic minority population in the 1991 Census).

### **Staff interviews**

Informal interviews were carried out during observation visits with 48 members of staff. These ranged in frequency, length, depth and content. There were two distinct groups of workers in the Jobcentre, those employed by the Jobcentre and those employed by the Benefits Agency. The Benefits Agency staff did not have any formal interaction with users, although they did answer occasional queries by telephone or in person.

The majority of the informal interviews were therefore conducted with Employment Service staff. Four informal interviews were carried out with Benefits Agency staff.

Staff interviews varied greatly. Some focused on descriptions of how the Jobcentre operated, while others were devoted to views about work and attitudes towards users. Some of the informal interviews were comments made before and after I observed the interaction between workers and users or while I was waiting with a particular worker for their next appointment. The longest of these informal interviews lasted for an hour and a half.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with four staff members at their desks. An interview schedule was used to guide these (see Appendix One). Although access had been granted to interview more staff members on this basis, it was subsequently denied. Staff interviews were noted and later transcribed in the same way as observational data.

### *Staff Characteristics*

#### *Sex*

Two thirds of the staff were female and a third were male. The Fresh Claims section had almost equal numbers of men and women. The Vacancies and Matching Section had seven women and three men. In the Fortnightly Interventions and Response to Displayed Vacancies Section there was a disproportionate number of women (ten to four). The New

Deal Section had a similar ratio with five women to one man. Corporate Services was equally split and the manager was a woman.

### *Age*

There was a wide range in staff ages (see Appendix Three). The youngest was 21 years old and the eldest 58. Six of the staff were aged 25 or under. A further seven were under the age of 30. This means that roughly a third of the staff were under 30 years old.

Each section of the Jobcentre had a different age profile. The Fresh Claims section had six staff members who were aged 30 or under. Most of these people were employed to take claims for Jobseeker's Allowance and held management grades. The youngest (at 21 years old) was a temporary receptionist. Fortnightly Interventions and Response to Displayed Vacancies also had six people aged 30 or under. Here, however, was the largest concentration of younger workers of lower grades on temporary contracts (which were extended to permanent contracts while I was there). All of those aged 30 or under in this section were on or near the bottom of the pay scale. The Vacancies and Matching section only had two workers aged 30 or under, one of which was a lower graded temporary worker. The New Deal section had two under 30s, who were lower graded temporary workers. The Corporate Services section had only one worker under 30, who was on a permanent contract but was a lower grade.

### *Grade*

The Employment Service pay band system began with Pay Band 9 (PB9). The next grade up was PB8. These workers carried out administrative and reception tasks, provided information about jobs and dealt with reregistering for benefit. The grades after that were Management Pay Bands (MPB 7 and above, with MPB3 being the highest grade in this Jobcentre, held by the manager). Appendix Three shows the distribution of different grades in the different sections of the office.

To summarise, the section with the greatest proportion of junior grades (and younger, more inexperienced workers) was the Fortnightly Interventions and Response to Displayed Vacancies Section. This was the section where staff had most frequent contact with the greatest number of unemployed people because it is these staff that conduct Fortnightly Reviews (signing on) and deal with enquiries about job vacancies. It was, therefore, these staff that are most likely to shape user's perceptions about the Jobcentre.

It was also clear that the work done by those holding management grades was distinctive. Staff of MPB7 grade were all Employment Officers who interviewed people at Fresh Claims stage. New Deal staff were MPB6 grade, the highest apart from the office manager.

## **Interviews with unemployed Jobcentre users**

35 Jobcentre users were interviewed, all of whom were unemployed. The interviews were semi-structured, based on an interview schedule (see Appendix Two), which evolved as questions were rephrased and reordered. The interviews with unemployed people were tape-recorded and notes were made of reflections and observations about how the interviewee had behaved or about dominant themes that emerged from discussion. The interviews were conducted during a concentrated period (10<sup>th</sup> November to 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1998) near the end of the fieldwork. because I wanted to ask them about positive and negative aspects of the interaction they had with staff and their views of the service generally. If I had done this too early on in the process then I ran the risk of either cutting off lines of communication with the staff or being put in a position of taking sides in a dispute or discussion. I could imagine the scenario, for instance, of observing an official staff interview with a user that I had interviewed and the user saying 'I told her all about it and she agrees with me'.

These interviews took place in a small interview room on the ground floor of the Jobcentre. The advantages of interviewing users in the Jobcentre office included good sound quality and convenience for the interviewer, allowing a large number of interviews to be conducted without significant gaps or time delays. Personal safety was also better secured in a public office environment, especially since the interview room was fitted with a

panic alarm. The most significant disadvantage was the difficulty of convincing interviewees of my autonomy from the Jobcentre and assuring them that what they said would not be fed back to the staff there. Interviewees may have felt inhibited by the office environment. Other potential interview sites were considered but time did not allow for travelling to conduct interviews in people's own homes. Another option would have been to interview users in a public place. This was rejected on the grounds that it may have made some of the interviewees, particularly those who were less confident or found it difficult to articulate their thoughts and feelings, more self-conscious, especially considering the use of a conspicuous tape recorder. The sound quality of such taped interviews may also have been compromised. However, interviewees participated in the interviews actively and seemed to feel able to express their views openly.

The Jobcentre interview room did not necessarily assure personal safety, especially since two of the interviewees seemed to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Staff members made various comments about the users I interviewed including fears for my safety and checks that I did know where the panic button was under the desk. After interviewing one particular user, who was perceived by workers as difficult, seven staff members asked me if I was all right. Similar concerns were raised after interviewing another unemployed man:

SM 22: He's mental like.

SM 9: He's got a bit of a drink problem actually. . . . I wasnae too sure about you taking him into a room.

Potential interviewees were approached at various points in the Jobcentre office directly after they had formally interacted with staff in a variety of circumstances to ensure a range of experiences:

- Review points after signing on;
- Review points after interviews for e.g. 13 weeks, six months, a year and 18 months;
- Response to Displayed Vacancies after enquiring about job vacancies,
- Fresh Claims after making a claim; and
- New Deal after a New Deal interview.

Quotas were followed to ensure that the sample was loosely representative of Jobcentre users in the local area. There were quotas for:

- Sex
- Age
- Postal claimants
- People participating in the New Deal
- Long-term unemployed; and
- Jobcentre users not registered unemployed.

These quotas were not mutually exclusive. They were fulfilled in all but the last category. All of those who agreed to be interviewed happened to be registered as unemployed, despite approaching people at the Response to Displayed Vacancies point, which was the place where Jobcentre users who were not registered as unemployed were most likely to be. Not everyone who was approached agreed to being interviewed, but some of their responses are equally telling of their views about the Jobcentre:

UP36: I only use it to get my stamp paid. It's a waste of time.  
There's no jobs or anything.

### *Sex*

26% of the unemployed interviewees were female and the remaining 74% were male. This followed proportionally the sex distribution of Jobseeker's Allowance claimants at the time of the research, according to data from the Employment Information Unit (© Office for National Statistics, 1998).

### *Age*

A wide age range was ensured. Of the 35 unemployed people interviewed 12 were under the age of 25 (the youngest of this group being 19 and the eldest 24). A further 12 were aged between 25 and 39 and the remaining 11 were aged 40 and over (five of these being aged 50 or over).

### *Postal Claimants*

The Jobcentre where the research was carried out covered an area that included rural villages. Compared to other Jobcentres there was a greater proportion of Jobseeker's Allowance claimants registering to receive benefit by post. 14% of interviewees were therefore from rural areas, signing on by post. 86% of these came to the office to register for their benefit. Only one of the interviewees signing on by post was long-term unemployed.

### *New Deal*

Because the arrangements for those participating in the New Deal were so different from those for other registered unemployed people, I also ensured that a few people on the New Deal were interviewed. This too was done on a quota basis, according to the proportion of New Deal participants registered at the office. For this study that amounted to two unemployed people, who were also long-term unemployed and therefore also counted towards that quota.

### *Duration of Unemployment*

13 of those interviewed were long-term unemployed according to the Employment Service definition of being registered unemployed for six months or more. Five had been unemployed for two years or more. The longest time that any of the interviewees had been unemployed for at the time of interview was six years. Some interviewees were unemployed for the first time, while others had been unemployed several times in the past.

During the interviews, it became apparent that the clear-cut administrative categorisation between the short and long-term unemployed was not entirely representative of the experience that some interviewees had of unemployment. Some users had been unemployed for longer than they had been registered unemployed. There were others who had been unemployed longer than they had claimed benefit, for instance one man had been unemployed for three months but had only been claiming benefit for four weeks. A confusion also existed between time spent out of work and claiming disability benefit and time spent actually registered as unemployed. The two periods were distinct administratively but merged together for users who experienced it as a continuous period of joblessness.

UP 13: Well I've been unemployed for quite a long time. Well, no, sometimes it's wi' illness cause of my leg.

Others were short-term unemployed at the time of interview but had previously been counted as long-term, e.g. one interviewee had only been unemployed for one month at the time of interview but had been unemployed for a year in the past. There were also those that had been in employment only for short periods between periods of unemployment. Unemployment was a recurring problem for them, but this revolving door, from unemployment to insecure employment and back again, was not reflected in the official statistics or in the quota sampling method.

There are also complications when considering the differentiation between employed and unemployed because two of the people interviewed were working for less than 15 hours while claiming Jobseeker's Allowance. If the International Labour Organisation definition had been used instead of the claimant count as the measure of unemployment, these people would be counted as employed.

All of the long-term unemployed interviewees happened to be men. Four of the long-term unemployed interviewees were under the age of 25, five were aged between 25 and 40 and four were aged over 40. Five of the respondents had been unemployed for one and a half months or less. One had only been unemployed for one day.

Of the short-term unemployed, 16 had been unemployed for less than three months. This included people who had been unemployed for a very short time, only a day or a week. Six had been unemployed for more than three months but less than six.

### *Usual Occupation*

Interviewees were asked about their experiences of unemployment. This usually included discussion of their usual occupation, the type of work they had done before and the type of work they were looking for. This information is difficult to quantify for a variety of reasons. Some people did not discuss in detail, or were vague about, the exact type of work they had

done in the past or were looking for. Some people had ideas about the type of industry or sector where they would like to work but didn't provide an actual job title.

From interviewees' descriptions of the work they had done and the work they were looking for it was also sometimes difficult to discern at which level they had been working. An example of this was a 50 year old man who described his occupation as 'construction work' but had a degree qualification. There were also people who were looking for work in a new field or who had gained qualifications e.g. a degree but were looking for work as a waiter. A simple description of interviewees' usual occupation therefore masks a complex area.

The interviewees had various past work experiences, ranging from one 19 year old man who had never worked since leaving school without qualifications, to one 59 year old woman who had been based in one bank all of her working life. Interviewees had a range of occupations, which will be related to the construction of their Jobseeker's Agreement in Chapter Eight. Four of the interviewees stated their usual occupation as unskilled, 10 as semi-skilled, 10 as skilled and 11 were professionals. There was also great variation in the levels of qualifications held by the unemployed interviewees. Some had degree qualifications while others had no qualifications at all.

## **Documentary analysis**

The original research design allowed for documentary analysis of internal training and guidance documents. This could have enabled systematic analysis of the correlation between the official guidance and street-level practice and might have provided greater insight into the formal constraints on the work done by front-line staff. Although this was agreed in writing before the research began, I was not allowed access to these materials when I requested them. I did, however, manage to collect and analyse publicly available documents from the Jobcentre and copies of the forms most widely used. In addition to this staff members occasionally gave me material that I could use freely. One document that provided valuable insight was a copy of the staff guidance for Signing On interviews (see Appendix Four and the discussion in Chapter Five). I was also allowed to look at some things that I could not keep, copy or discuss.

## **Vacancies**

The details of vacancies displayed on the boards were recorded every day during the second phase of field work. This provided a profile of the jobs that the Jobcentre dealt with during a three month period, which could in turn be related to the local labour market. For each vacancy the job title, hours, type of contract (temporary or permanent), rate of pay, whether the job involved shift work or stated that flexibility was required (with regard to the hours of work) and the reference number were recorded.

The information was collected for every card displayed including those for the armed forces, training, jobs in other areas and hand-written notices. The vacancy reference number was then cross-referenced with the hand-written records kept by the Vacancies Section that provided information about how many vacancies each card on the board represented at the time it was accepted as a notified vacancy. The job reference numbers were then checked against the printout from the Labour Market System, showing which vacancies were 'live' each day. This provided a method of triangulation that made it possible to tell which of the vacancies had been displayed and which had not, as well as a more reliable independent calculation of the number of notified vacancies in that office. The Greater Manchester Low Pay Unit (2000) have noted that the vacancy cards advertised on some Jobcentre boards do not tally with the official notified vacancy count. My access was privileged in that it allowed me to cross-reference the vacancy references, to include 'unofficial' hand-written vacancies within the manual count and to better understand the 'behind the scenes' staff activity that produced the official count. An unforeseen advantage of recording this information was that it also gave me something constructive to do and be seen doing at the times when it wasn't suitable for me to either conduct interviews or observe interactions between staff and users.

## **Analysis**

The data collected from observation, staff interviews and interviews with unemployed people was all fully transcribed. The next stage in the

analysis process was to import these files into a software package for coding. Using a computer for this purpose was warranted by the large volume of data collected (a total of 925 pages of transcription) and the complexity of the ethnographic field notes.

Despite earlier criticisms that the use of computers can force or distort the research (Richards & Richards, 1992 and 1998) it is now widely accepted that specialist software can legitimately aid the analysis process. I chose to use QSR NUD\*IST Version 4, because, having seen other researchers use it, I was convinced that it would be a valuable data management tool. The main advantage of using a computer to aid analysis was speed of coding and the use comprehensive search facilities (cf. Coffey et al., 1996) which allowed for a more systematic consideration of the emerging themes.

The coding process was complicated by the fact that there were two types of data. The first type of transcript was the field notes, which consisted of a mix of observations of interactions between staff and users, informal interviews with staff and observations of staff interaction with other staff members or employers, as well as my own notes about e.g. the surroundings and reflections on the interactions. The second type of data was the transcripts of the taped interviews with unemployed people. The two types of data were therefore quite differently structured and focused. Despite this, there were salient themes from both types of data that corresponded to each other and therefore justified the decision to analyse

them together in the same NUD\*IST project, rather than separately. Each transcript was coded within the NUD\*IST project to facilitate data management and analysis.

## **Rigor**

### *Validity and Reliability*

Reliability and validity are concerns belonging to the positivist tradition, which do not rest easily within an interpretative perspective (cf. Kelle & Laurie, 1995). The application of rigor to these 'softer' data has been the subject of much debate and concern (Kelle & Laurie, 1995), culminating in warnings against the perils of 'dangerously impressionistic' results from within the qualitative tradition itself (Silverman, 1989: 11).

Accounts of validity and reliability from qualitative researchers (e.g. Silverman, 1993, Lincoln & Guba, 1985) tend to present these as necessities for legitimacy and credibility in the established scientifically based research community, rather than as essential to the actual methods. This need to prove the value of qualitative methods has led to the adoption of concepts based on the assumptions of quantitative research. Agar (1986) is among those unwilling to accept these logico-deductive standards because:

Ethnography is neither subjective nor objective. It is interpretive, mediating two worlds [audience and group studied] through a third [ethnographer] (Agar, 1986: 19).

The debate about validity and reliability of qualitative methods therefore centres around beliefs about the 'truth' of a social setting. Qualitative researchers like Friedrichs & Ludtke (1975), who have been influenced by positivism, see the fundamental problem of participant observation as subjectivity, which they consider to be a source of error. Silverman, however, argues that researchers should be more concerned with understanding their world in its own terms rather than adjudicating between participant's competing and undercutting versions (1993: 105), which reduces the researcher to what Garfinkel (1967) calls an 'ironist'. Symbolic interactionism is concerned with how encounters are accomplished rather than debunking an 'untrue' account. In fact deviant cases can enhance the reliability and inclusiveness of a theory (Silverman, 1989: 21). There is also the difficulty that 'most respondents have difficulty giving a full account of what they believe and what they do. Long ago their beliefs became assumptions and their actions became habits' (McCracken, 1988: 23).

Qualitative researchers advocate various techniques. Lincoln & Guba (1985) offer four steps towards 'trustworthiness' (1985: 290), while Kirk & Miller (1986) recommend six different validity and reliability checks. I find

Hammersley's 'subtle form of realism' the most useful solution to these dilemmas:

1. Validity is identified with confidence in our knowledge but not certainty.
2. Reality is assumed to be independent of the claims that researchers make about it.
3. Reality is always viewed through particular perspectives; hence our accounts *represent* reality they do *not* reproduce it (1992: 50-1).

### *Triangulation*

Data and method triangulation are often encouraged (Denzin, 1970: 186). Triangulation involves sampling between and within cases and using different methods to 'get a better fix' on the subject of study (Ragin, 1994: 100). Interviewing staff members as well as unemployed people, along with observation could be considered as a form of triangulation by those such as Denzin (1970) who advocate such a process. This approach, like attempts to minimise observer bias, are positivist based, assuming that there is one version of reality that research reaches as a true totality by assessing the validity of participants responses (Silverman, 1989: 105). Fielding & Fielding (1986), however, note that 'theoretical triangulation does not necessarily reduce bias, nor does methodological triangulation necessarily increase validity' (1986: 33). Fielding & Fielding argue that it is

desirable for theories and methods to be combined in order to increase the breadth and depth of the analysis but not, as Denzin (1970) argues, to find one 'truth'.

Multiple sources of data can be valuable in understanding the phenomenon but since interpretivism admits to no one reality, but rather various versions of it filtered through and created by different social actors, the technique cannot be useful for finding 'the truth'. Since my intention was to compare different perspectives of the same phenomena triangulation was not used.

I do believe, however, that conducting fieldwork that uses a range of methods over an extended period of time in a setting with a lot of participants limits the scope for a false picture to be deliberately shown (McCall & Simmons, 1969: 2). Indeed, Goffman (1989) advocates interacting with people in groups of two or more in order to avoid seeing a deliberately distorted version of the way things 'usually' are. Denzin (1970) considers it more reliable to have more than one researcher, to ensure 'investigator triangulation'. Contrary to this, I count it as a benefit for rigor, that there was one researcher, providing continuity of observation, technique and interpretation.

### *Safeguards*

Continuity has been ensured through systematic note taking of observations and recordings of interviews. Questions were designed and reflected upon with reliability and validity in mind. The semi-structured interviews with unemployed people and the four conducted with staff members used the same, or very similar, questions (depending on the context) in an order prescribed by the interview schedules. In practice some issues followed on from each other and disrupted this order but this is considered to be positive, especially since it meant that the interviewees were able to have input into the structure of the interview which benefited the natural flow of the conversation.

The use of QSR NUD\*IST allowed for more rigor in the analysis process than coding by hand would have (cf. Richards & Richards, 1992). Coding could be carried out more systematically because checks could easily be made to see how other data was coded. Nodes could be examined and the coded text was traceable back to the original transcript and therefore the context in which remarks were made, thus providing an internal audit trail. Searches could be carried out quickly and easily for certain words or phrases, therefore providing evidence of how frequently and in which contexts they were used. It was not possible to conduct 'inter-rater reliability' as Silverman (1993: 148) advocates. This involves different analysts coding the transcripts to ensure that the categories chosen were correct. Coding was applied in a standardised manner to every transcript.

Fielding & Fielding identify two main problems with the way in which qualitative research is presented:

A tendency to select field data to fit an ideal conception (preconception) of the phenomenon, and a tendency to select field data which are conspicuous because they are exotic, at the expense of less dramatic (but possibly indicative) data (1986: 32).

This study has attempted to avoid one of the pitfalls that ethnographic street-level bureaucracy studies have been criticised for – that is that they sensationalise relatively infrequent events or consequences at the expense of adequately contextualising or explaining the mundane features of the interaction (Hasenfeld, 1985: 623).

To avoid these faults transparency has been aimed for in the reportage of how the research was done and of the findings. Field notes were carefully written to produce a 'faithful account' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of the observations and the evidence used to substantiate theoretical points has been clearly noted where it was typical and where it represented an extreme example. I have avoided making spurious connections.

## **Ethical Concerns**

As a member of the British Sociological Association, I have followed the BSA guidelines for ethical practice. Guidance has also been taken from Spradley's (1980) discussion of ethics in observation research. The main principles that were honoured were those of informed consent and anonymity and confidentiality, each posing its own problems and dilemmas. Another consideration is that the research involved gaining information, and ultimately writing about, people who have a less powerful social position by virtue of being unemployed. This is a concern because they may not want to be portrayed in certain lights or have labels applied which they may be reluctant to identify with (Corden, 1996). Care has therefore been taken to ensure that the views of those involved in the research have been represented in writing about it. Research participants' interests, both staff and users, have been put first in order to protect their welfare, dignity and privacy, as Spradley (1980) advises.

### *Informed consent*

When I first approached the Jobcentre, I outlined in a letter the details of how the research would be conducted and what purposes it would be put. This was circulated to all staff members so that they would be aware of why I was there. Before conducting informal interviews with staff, or observing official interviews that they were involved in I made sure that they were aware of why I was there and what I was doing. I always asked for their consent.

Once staff had given informed consent (this usually involved a supervisor and the individual staff member allowing access for each instance) for me to observe their interviews with users, the users themselves had to be approached. I was keen that each user should have as full an explanation as possible of the research in order to give consent. In reality the appointments were so tightly spaced that a long explanation would have infringed on the time scales that were worked to and changed the flow of the interaction that took place. Participant observation aims to learn about the setting while causing as little disruption as possible (Burgess, 1984).

One example of this was one day when I observed people signing on. These interactions usually only lasted one or two minutes and there was always a queue of people waiting. I was given permission by the section supervisor to observe these interactions only on the condition that I was not to interfere with them or distract staff. It was not possible, therefore, to ask these unemployed people for their consent. This was justified because the interactions were so short the data gathered did not unduly intrude on their personal lives and no information was gathered about them personally.

In longer official interviews the workers who were conducting them introduced me, to minimise my impact on the interaction. The workers always asked the user for consent, but not always in the way I wanted them to. Some staff members gave a full account of my presence but there were occasions when I was introduced as 'someone sitting in', 'an

observer' or in the worst cases as 'a colleague'. Explanations of how the data would be used were also scant in these instances. No user ever objected to me observing their official interview, but this was not surprising if they aligned me with staff and felt powerless and denied choice (see Chapter Six).

In the interviews with unemployed people a full explanation of what the research was about, where I was from, and how the information would be used, was always given. I gave each person a letter that contained this information as well as my contact details. I always checked again that they were happy to proceed with the interview.

#### *Anonymity and confidentiality*

All names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the anonymity of the research participants. Pseudonyms have been used and each research participant has been assigned a code for quotes. SM1 means Staff Member one, and UP1 means Unemployed Interviewee one. The location of the Jobcentre studied has not been divulged and details or features that could make it identifiable have been altered. The privacy of all those who were involved in the research has been respected and personal details have been kept confidential. Transcripts and documents containing names (staff lists for instance) were kept in a secure place. Information that was deemed to be sensitive, or comments that interviewees wanted to be off the record, were not recorded in field notes and have not been discussed.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has described the ethnographic approach that has been adopted to understand the meanings that interaction between Jobcentre staff and users held for them. An interpretative stance, informed particularly by symbolic interactionism, has guided the choice of qualitative methods, namely a mixture of observation and in-depth interviewing with staff and users, along with analysis of documents and notified vacancies. This chapter has also considered the methodological issues surrounding such an approach and the practicalities that the research involved. The next four chapters will present the results that these methods have yielded.

## Chapter Five

### Re-creating Unemployment Policy

#### Introduction

This chapter considers the role played by front-line staff in the implementation process. The question is: can Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy be applied to explain the practices of front-line Employment Officers in the changed context of new managerialism in the late 1990s? Rather than viewing Employment Officers as impartial implementation 'tools' or empty vessels through which official policy can flow, it situates them as actors within a social context and acknowledges that they are active in interpreting and responding to the official policy that they provide as a service. Front-line Jobcentre staff also play a role as the mediators between citizens and the state. The interaction that they have with clients therefore has implications not only for the way in which the service operates, but for the ways in which clients view the state.

This chapter provides three examples of the in which Employment Officers re-create official policy. The first example demonstrates how front-line staff develop routines to deal with the pressures presented by fortnightly signing on interviews. The second highlights the way staff behaviour was modified in response to performance targets for job placements and the third illustrates how staff reacted to a new policy, the New Deal for 18-24

year olds. For each example the official policy will be outlined, followed by a description of front-line practice, then an explanation of the pressures that led to discrepancies between the two.

## **Example One - 'Signing On'**

### **Official Policy**

'Signing on' interviews are routine interactions that demonstrate the way in which street-level workers re-create the service that they provide. Clients who have registered for Jobseeker's Allowance must attend the Jobcentre at regular intervals, usually every fortnight, to sign a declaration that they still satisfy the conditions for claiming benefit. These interviews constitute the most frequent interaction that users have with staff and are therefore crucial to the way in which unemployed people view the Jobcentre. 'Active signing' was introduced as part of the Jobseeker's Allowance regulations in 1996 (CPAG, 1996: 7). This meant that signing on interviews were made longer and included an assessment of the client's record of what he or she had done to find work in the previous fortnight.

Signing on interviews were formally referred to as 'Fortnightly Interventions'. They are designed to last for at least five minutes (seven minutes for long-term unemployed people) as prescribed by the Jobseeker's Allowance legislation and guidance (CPAG, 1996). The official guidelines (see Appendix Four) for signing on detail nine stages that the interviewer is meant to progress through (Employment Service, 1998b). In brief the stages are:

1. Greeting.
2. Aim/Purpose – an explanation of the purpose of the interview.
3. Access Client Record – a check to make sure user's details are correct and there is no outstanding action.
4. Review Client Jobseeker's Agreement.
5. Evaluate Client Jobsearch Activity – a check what the client has done and follow up on previous submissions, including taking action for 'Refusal of Employment'.
6. Conduct Labour Market System Jobsearch – a computer check for suitable vacancies or a comment if nothing suitable was found.
7. Close Jobsearch Review.
8. Payment Activity – initiating benefit through the computer system.
9. Close intervention.

A system of penalties was in place to enforce client compliance with the regulations. Users were officially meant to be referred to adjudication, with the possible outcome of a benefit sanction if, for instance, they did not attend their interview at the appointed time.

### **Front-Line Practice**

The first way in which Jobcentre staff deviated from the official policy was in the terminology they used for these interactions. Rather than using the official term for 'Fortnightly Interventions' staff (as well as users) referred to the interviews as 'signing on'. This resistance to the use of new terminology was evident from staff at the signing points.

SM 20: We're called an 'interventionist'. I don't know who dreamt that one up!

The signing on interviews were typically much shorter than the prescribed length, usually lasting around two or three minutes. These interactions were brief and perfunctory for both parties and it was not unusual for the pleasantries of polite conversation to be dispensed with entirely. The following example is of a client signing on.

SM 14: Can I help you?

Male Client: I've come to sign on.

SM 14: (Did something on the computer.) Right. Are you wantin' to sign there? (Gave him form to sign.)

Male Client: (Signed it then stood up immediately and left.)

Several of the stages of the interview, such as such as stage two (explaining the purpose of the interview, see above), were missed completely. Other stages were pared down. Stage one, for instance ('Greeting: hello; good morning/afternoon; apologies if kept waiting; good eye contact; smile; ice breaker', Employment Service, 1998b), became: 'Can I help you?' There was no apology, because being kept waiting was

seen as a routine part of signing on, no smile and no 'icebreaker'. Staff acknowledged the discrepancy between official guidelines and actual practice:

SM 8: You're really not interested in having a long conversation with them, while the queue is up to the door.

SM 17: Some just come in and throw their cards at you. They don't say anything and they don't even look at you. You speak to the side of their face because they're looking away.

SM 8: They're like they cannae be bothered. I think 'well I cannae be bothered either then. Will I just not bother processing your money?'

The 'active signing' prescribed by the Jobseeker's Allowance regulations was administered in a remarkably inactive way by front-line staff. There was a tendency for staff to focus on the necessary parts of benefit administration rather than making efforts to help find people work. Job searches were not conducted during the interview unless users specifically requested it, which was rare. Policy was similarly recreated in other sections of the Jobcentre since job searches were neglected during a range of interviews. At times staff conducted job searches in advance of the signing on procedure, which involved making judgements about which users to check for and which not to. If the job search was not conducted

with users present then they did not know whether it had been done at all. In short, despite the emphasis placed on enabling users to find work in the formal goals of the Jobcentre and in the official guidance, signing on was much more about administering benefit than helping people to find work.

### **Pressure**

The gap between official policy and implementation by Employment Officers is partly attributable to the pressures under which staff work. There were complaints from staff of being under 'a lot of pressure' (SM 15) and 'always battling against time and the next person is in' (SM 13). There were time limitations to the interviews, which were tighter when there was not a full complement of staff in the office.

SM 38:       It's very high pressure. . . . There's all sorts that's supposed to get done that doesn't get done.

SM 18:       You've not got enough time to go through everything. You just go through the form and by the time you've done that the next person is waiting.

Time constraints limited the interaction between staff and users to question and answer sessions, with users expected to provide very personal information on cue. The main purpose was to complete forms and windows in the computer screen. In fact, many of the interactions in the Jobcentre were shaped by the structure of claims forms and the

architecture of the computer programmes used by Employment Officers. It is significant that the part of the work that was most likely to be neglected was the part that was not form-based. Paperwork added to the time pressures and was given as a reason why staff had to stay late in the evening or come in early in the morning to catch up with their work.

Signing on interviews were influenced by the established patterns of interaction with limited time available due to the pressure of other people waiting in the queue. There was usually a constant stream of people waiting in front of the desks, making both staff and users keenly aware of the need to finish the interview as quickly as possible. More than 22 people had to sign at each desk in each hour of signing. Even if they came in equal time slots, which they did not, this equated to less than three minutes for each interview. One of the Employment Officers at the Signing Points noted:

SM 22: We need more time. There's not enough time to do it properly. They just come in and sign and then they're away again. We're meant to spend time with them and do a job search but you never get time to do it.

As a response to these pressures staff redefined what it was that they were aiming to achieve during the interview. These goals were more modest than the official purpose and focused on certain aspects of the service delivery while other aspects were either ignored or reduced in

scope. One of the primary activities that front-line workers were engaged in was therefore the rationing of services. This took place in terms of limiting time, limiting what was done during interviews (especially neglecting the job search part of the work) and facilitating access to jobs. This bears out findings from earlier research, for instance Cooper's (1985) study of a Supplementary Benefits Office found that more than 90 per cent of staff said they had insufficient time to complete tasks, a third rating this as a serious problem. Hvinden (1994) also provided evidence of welfare service staff concentrating on processing cases rather than assisting people.

At signing times those who came late to sign on or who did not demonstrate that they were actively seeking work were, according to the Jobseeker's Allowance regulations, supposed to be referred to adjudication. One reason why this rarely happened was the paperwork required for this procedure. One Front-line worker explained:

SM 33: There's seven pieces of documentation that you need. You need a copy of the vacancy, their Jobseeker's Agreement. You need statements from the client. You can't just say 'I spoke to them and they wouldn't take it'. You have to have everything in writing. Also it has to be a job that's offering over 24 hours a week for it to be a 'refusal of employment'. So we tell them that and that it'll have to be referred to adjudication and that that might mean that their benefit gets

affected. So they're going to get angry or storm out. We would have to tag it for the next time and try to get something in writing, otherwise you're not going to have a chance to get it. That's why not a lot of us are doing it. It's a hassle.

The above examples demonstrate that unemployment policy in practice is as much about what front-line staff do not do as it is about what they do. Blackmore (2001) has criticised policy analysts for being alarmist about the consequences of tighter regulations under the Stricter Benefit Regime, which were implemented in the mid 1990s. At street-level, he argues, those guidelines were not introduced to the extent that was feared and therefore did not disadvantage users as much as had been expected (Finn et al., 1998). What is perhaps more concerning is that the procedures that were designed to protect users' basic rights and those designed to enable them to find work were not necessarily implemented either.

## **Example Two - Job Matching**

### **Official Policy**

The official goal of the Jobcentre was to enable people to find work and recent active labour market policies have been aimed at facilitating labour market entry in a more directive way, linking claiming benefits more closely with actively seeking work conditions. Matching users to job vacancies was therefore intended to be a central part of staff activity and has been specifically prioritised in recent years. Job matching was meant to be carried out as part of the routine interviews with users e.g. Fresh Claims,

Signing On, Reviews and Response to Displayed Vacancies. It has been officially estimated that Jobcentres in the UK administer a third of all vacancies. The system operated by employers telephoning in vacancies which were then inputted by the Jobcentre staff to the LMS computer system then printed off as cards to be displayed on the vacancy boards. There was a formal system of validation to ensure that all vacancies were properly administered through the computer system.

### **Front-Line Practice**

However, it has already been indicated that staff did not always match users to jobs during routine interviews because of the lack of time and an emphasis on form-based work. Matching users to jobs implies a process of sifting, screening and 'creaming' the best applicants in the interest of the employer (Anderson, 1999). Lipsky (1980) uses the term 'triaging' to describe a form of categorising people into groups according to how easily they can be helped and how likely it will be that they will benefit from the service provided. This happened in various ways in the different sections of the Jobcentre.

The office mainly advertised vacancies that had been notified to them directly, rather than from other offices. This was because they did not want other vacancies 'to compete with our own' (SM 24). Employers were also discouraged from advertising vacancies by other means, in local newspapers or through agencies. The office held a few copies of the local newspaper. This was the only source of vacancies other than those

advertised on the boards that was available to users. There was not a range of newspapers or recruitment magazines to consult and there was no Internet access. This meant that Jobcentre staff were restricting the applications to those that they could control, thus preventing some people from applying for certain jobs.

### *Rationing Vacancies*

Lipsky identifies a series of ways in which access to public services can be rationed by street-level bureaucrats, including time-limiting services, withholding information and queuing (1980: 87-99). These forms of rationing were evident in the Jobcentre. The starting point for this discussion of vacancy rationing is to acknowledge that not anyone can apply for any vacancy advertised in the Jobcentre.

Staff rationed vacancies through restricting access to information about particular opportunities. Indeed some job or training vacancies were only open to specific user groups, e.g. New Deal or Training for Work, for which users had to have been registered unemployed or be in a certain age group to qualify. The information on Jobcentre vacancy cards (see Appendix Five) was much less detailed than other methods of vacancy advertisement, for instance a standard newspaper advertisement. The vacancy cards only displayed the job title, rate of pay, hours of work, duration of contract and a very brief description of the main duties. Users were not given direct access to other basic details of the post, the closing

date for instance. Significantly the employer's name, company and the exact location of the job were almost always withheld.

Analysis of the job vacancies available during the three month period (8<sup>th</sup> September 1998 – 4<sup>th</sup> December 1998) showed that even the very basic information was not always complete on the vacancy cards. The terms of employment were not always specified: 13% of local vacancies, 29% of jobs in other areas and 13% of jobs abroad did not state whether they were for full-time or part-time work. 2% of local jobs, 2% of jobs in other areas and 4% of jobs abroad did not state whether they were permanent or temporary positions.

The rate of pay was not stated for 19% of local vacancies, 39% of jobs in other areas and 17% of overseas jobs. The most common alternatives to stating a specific rate of pay were to advertise as 'depends on age or experience', 'TBA' or 'negotiable'. It is questionable, however, how much scope there might be for a part-time cleaner or kitchen porter to negotiate his or her wages with an employer. Other alternatives to stating the rate of pay were to promise 'good', 'excellent', 'competitive' or trade rates. There was a likelihood for certain sales vacancies to be marked as 'commission only' or 'commission plus bonus/expenses'. These descriptions of the rate of pay were insufficient to allow users to make an informed decision about how much time the job would take and how much money they would earn from it. This meant that users could not know whether the job would mean they would have to apply for a different type

of benefit or if they would be able to afford their daily living costs without any reliance on benefits, or if they would be in a worse position financially if they had that job.

Withholding this type of vital information places the unemployed person at a disadvantage and in a position of weakness in relation to both the Jobcentre staff who control such information and the employers who provide the vacancies. The employer's position of power is reinforced and legitimated by Jobcentre staff who ration access to vacancies. Users had to wait, sometimes for long periods of time even to obtain basic information about vacancies they might be interested in. Unemployed people were dependent on staff members to divulge further information about vacancies which is held on the computer system. In some cases no exact rate of pay or hours of work were held on the LMS either, but in most cases the Employment Officer was privy to much more information about the vacancy than the unemployed person who was interested in it. Staff might judge an individual to be unsuitable for a vacancy and withhold information about it from them. Enquiring about vacancies advertised on the boards can also be a risky venture for unemployed people, who may be required or pressurised by staff to apply for it. It is possible that a refusal to apply for such a vacancy once further details have been secured could be treated as a 'Refusal of Employment', which can mean a benefit sanction for the unemployed person.

Age restrictions were clearly stated on 4.2% of local vacancies. These restrictions almost always discriminated against younger workers e.g. 'aged 18 plus' or 'aged 25 plus'. A minority of cards for overseas vacancies stated that applicants must be 'aged 30 plus'. It was very rare for such age restrictions to have an obvious logical reasoning behind them, one exception being a vacancy for bar staff which advertised for staff to be 'aged 18 plus'. Other restrictions were that applicants should be experienced or time-served (particular for trade jobs). 1.4% of vacancies (a proportion which may have increased since the time when this research was conducted) were restricted to New Deal users, a further 0.7% were marked 'C', meaning that they would be considered for New Deal but were also open to other users. This is a reflection of the operation of the New Deal scheme, within which staff pursued particular vacancies for their users, exclusively as New Deal vacancies. This has an implication for the labour market because jobs were being restricted from other potential applicants. This means that concentrated efforts to widen opportunities for the New Deal user group might actually constrain job opportunities for other people who are not registered on the New Deal, regardless of whether they are as disadvantaged as those on the New Deal. 0.6% of vacancies were for 'self-employed' positions (usually sales agents positions) and four jobs were restricted to female applicants.

Another restriction was the number of jobs that could be enquired about at any one time. There were slips available for users to note the job reference number and take the enquiry to a member of staff, either at the

Response to Displayed Vacancies (RDV) section or, if they were registered unemployed, to their signing point. Both of these sections of the office were very busy and usually had a queue of people waiting. These slips only had enough space for four job reference numbers but people usually enquired about more than four vacancies.

There was a tension for staff in serving the interests of unemployed people at the same time as the interests of employers. Similar to Anderson's (1999) findings from his ethnographic study of a State Employment Office, Jobcentre staff had to consider their reputation with employers and this affected how they treated users. To manage this dilemma staff targeted users to be submitted for vacancies. One adviser described why he would not submit a man who had been unemployed for 10 years for a vacancy.

SM 10:        You wouldn't be fair to the employer subbing someone like that for a job. I mean we're providing a service to the employer as much as to the unemployed person.

In this case the member of staff was re-creating policy to provide more of a service to the employer than to the unemployed user. Staff action could therefore actually contribute to certain types of users remaining inactive in the labour market. In this way the front-line staff could actually make decisions on the employer's behalf or for what they perceived to be the employer's interest. This constitutes a challenge to the aim of enabling

people to find work and also blurs the lines between the role of the employer and the role of the Jobcentre.

### *Submissions Limits*

Jobcentre staff therefore played an important role as gatekeepers for vacancies. In this way they structured access to the labour market. Users gained access to further information about jobs and to the means of application (e.g. the employer's details or an application form) through interaction with staff. This process was not necessarily a successful one and Employment Officers could grant or deny access to jobs or training vacancies in a number of ways, for different reasons.

Vacancies had very different meanings for staff and users. For staff they were a routine part of their daily activities, while for users they represented the hope of providing them with the job that would reinstate them with the status of a worker and release them from the stigmatised role of being unemployed (see Chapter Six). Restrictions on applying for vacancies that prevented them applying for job or training opportunities therefore led to disappointment.

One source of frustration for users was when they enquired about a job advertised on the boards, only to find that it had already been closed. Vacancies were usually closed either when they reached the closing date, or as in the case below, when the submissions limit was reached. The

following example shows the implications of this form of rationing. Here a male user has brought a vacancy slip to the desk for further information.

SM 13: I hate to tell you this but the vacancy has been suspended.  
Sorry.

User: Oh. I see.

SM 13: It's just been suspended ten minutes ago.

User: I see.

SM 13: I'm awful sorry about that.

User: That was the one that was most suited to my qualifications.

SM 13: As I say it's been suspended.

User: There's not a much on my particular line. I recently graduated as a mature student and the kind of work I'm looking for is environmental protection, air quality control, that kind of thing.

SM 13: The only thing is that you'll not get an awful lot of that in this area.

User: I would go anywhere in Scotland.

In this example the user was clearly very keen to find work in his area of expertise. The staff member recognised that vacancies to suit him were few and far between but he was not able to apply for the job because it had been suspended only ten minutes previously. This highlights the consequences of the submissions limits, which are set by employers and enforced by Jobcentre staff. If the vacancy had been advertised in a newspaper, for instance, then the employer would have received as many applications as came in, but because this employer had chosen to advertise through the Jobcentre an extra layer of rationing was added to the application process with a limit being set. This user, who may have stood a good chance of actually getting the job, was not allowed to apply for it.

### *Matching Section*

In the particular office where this research was conducted a group of Employment Officers worked in the Matching Section. Unlike other parts of the office, staff in this section were concerned primarily with job matching, rather than benefit administration during interactions with users. This section functioned more along the lines of a private sector job agency than a public service. Vacancies, and the good relations with employers necessary to secure them, were particularly valued because they were considered to be 'good business' (SM 24) for the Jobcentre. This

framework of understanding fits within a new managerialist model (c.f. Clarke & Newman, 1997).

Matching staff therefore served the interests of the employer first and foremost, rather than the interests of the majority of users. For example, for certain vacancies information was strictly controlled through an informal system so that only a few users of a 'high calibre' (SM 34) were given information about the vacancy, which was not advertised on the vacancy boards. These vacancies bypassed the formal system of notification (to other offices and even to other staff within the same office) until certain users had been submitted for the position. The timing of information being entered into the computer system was crucial here. It could imply that staff in other sections of the Jobcentre, and staff at other Jobcentres, were prevented from submitting users to these undisclosed vacancies. Such 'creaming' of users was considered to be desirable because it 'cuts down on unnecessary candidates' (SM 34). Staff were aware that they were acting against official policy because 'we shouldn't restrict applicants, but we want to do what the employer wants' (SM 34).

The Matching staff held hand-written lists of users who they would put forward for certain vacancies. These vacancies were often for trades people, with employers being keen to have someone ready to start work as soon as possible.

SM 34: It's an occupation whereby, particularly construction, joiners, brickies, something like that. They phone up and they want someone to start immediately, yesterday. And that would go straight to Matching before going to the computer or the vacancy going up, because they might have people waiting. . . . So that's usually hand written and given over to Matching. It's not printed up. Once they start getting subs we put them on. Because of validation we shouldn't put them on retrospectively so as soon as they start coming in I put them up on the system.

There was an unofficial dealing in vacancies, particularly for construction work, which were not advertised and were only inputted into the computer once they had been filled. Although these were only a small minority of the total vacancies advertised through the Jobcentre it is significant that the system operated at all.

The Matching staff held hand-written lists of users that they would put forward for certain vacancies.

SM 24: If a labouring vacancy is put up on the board 10, 000 guys might apply, but you can think 'right I've got 10 in mind'. An employer can request non-display so we can pick and choose.

How vacancies were manipulated off the computer system is an important way of understanding how they were rationed and controlled by staff. It is impossible to tell how many vacancies were filled in this way because the formal validation system only tracks vacancies after they have been filled, rather than evaluating the processes by which they are filled. It is possible, however, to identify a significant discrepancy between the number of vacancies advertised on cards on the display boards and the official vacancy count. This problem has also been highlighted by the Greater Manchester Low Pay Unit (2000). My methodology allowed more privileged access behind the scenes, to understand the process by which the official count is arrived at.

An in-depth analysis of the administration of notified vacancies within the Jobcentre office showed that the practice of 'plussing up' accounted for at least part of this discrepancy between the number of cards on view to the public and the official count. 'Plussing up' was a routine staff practice for dealing with requests from employers to advertise multiple vacancies. For instance, if an employer telephoned in a vacancy for 10 shop assistants, then the vacancy would be entered into the computer system as one vacancy rather than 10. Then, when more people were found to fill the jobs, the vacancy was 'plussed up' in the computer. The advantage of this practice was that the chances of filling all of the vacancies were increased.

SM 24: Usually we only put one on for each vacancy because it's a sin to cancel vacancies. There was one guy phoned up and

said '30 sales people and it's commission only' and I said (sarcastically) 'aye right'. They might only get one. So I put that in and then the computer asks if I want to close it or put another one in and so we call it a 'plus up' and you can put another one in then.

Each vacancy card displayed, therefore, did not represent only one vacancy in all cases. Simply counting the number of cards does not give a reliable estimate of the number of vacancies available through a certain Jobcentre office. Employment Officers can decide not to advertise the requested number of vacancies because they do not think that the employer is likely to get 10 suitable applicants through the Jobcentre, or because he or she knows that the vacancy is being advertised elsewhere (e.g. in a newspaper or through a private employment agency). This means that the successful applicants would not be likely to all have been referred by the Jobcentre. Jobcentre staff can only meet their targets by filling notified vacancies with Jobcentre users. They gain nothing if an 'outsider' gets the job. It is the fear of having to cancel a vacancy that leads Employment Officers to enter vacancies onto the computer system for a smaller number of people than the employer actually wants. If a larger number of suitable applicants apply, or staff discover that more than one person who was referred through the Jobcentre was employed, they can then go into the computer system and 'plus up' the vacancy – increasing the number of vacancies which the reference number (or card) represents.

It was possible to calculate the extent of ‘plussing up’ during the months of October and November 1998. For this research the number of vacancies was calculated by collecting information about the vacancy cards that were displayed on the vacancy boards. This information was cross-referenced with the Labour Market System print out of ‘live’ vacancy reference numbers for each day and the hand-written record of how many vacancies each card represented at the time it was notified to the Jobcentre. The table below shows the number of vacancies counted during the fieldwork in comparison with the official number of notified vacancies (provided by the Employment Information Unit).

**Table One: Extent of ‘Plus-ups’ in One Jobcentre Office, October and November 1998**

	<b>Official Count of Notified Vacancies</b>	<b>Manual Count of Notified Vacancies</b>	<b>Number of Vacancies Attributed to ‘Plussing-up’</b>
<b>October 1998</b>	360	346	14
<b>November 1998</b>	521	306	215

In October 1998, ‘plus-ups’ only accounted for 14 vacancies but in November 1998 there were 215 ‘plus-up’ vacancies. The high number of vacancies attributed to ‘plus-ups’ in November coincided with a high number of vacancies that were not displayed. In October, there were 25 vacancies which were not displayed, while in November there were 49 unadvertised vacancies which were not displayed. There seems to be a

link, therefore, between the number of vacancies not displayed on the boards and the proportion of 'plus-ups'. This may be attributable to Jobcentre staff having greater control over the vacancies which were not displayed.

### **Pressure**

This rationing of vacancies occurred for several reasons. Demand for information about vacancies outstripped the supply of staff time to give it, which resulted in restrictions of access to the service. Part of the lack of information was also due to restrictions imposed by employers, which highlights the conflict in roles between serving those looking for work and serving employers. Both in the interest of employers and as a response to the pressures they were under, staff rationed vacancies through restricting access to information about particular opportunities. A further constraint on staff job matching activity (along with time restrictions and emphasis on form-based work) was the mismatch between the types of vacancies that users wanted and the types of vacancies on offer. Chapter Six provides a detailed analysis of the types of work that people registered unemployed at this particular office were seeking, compared with the types of job vacancy on offer. This shows that in many cases, e.g. those looking for professional vacancies, staff did not make efforts to match people to vacancies because they knew that the vacancies held by the Jobcentre were not of the kind required by the user.

Clearly, staff members also acted in these ways because of the pressure resulting from performance targets for job placements, which seemed to have a greater influence on staff behaviour than official guidance documents. Blau (1963) views such performance records as a bureaucratic mechanism to control workers. 'Bureaucratic emphasis on statistical records of operations, designed as a means to improve performance, induced officials to view making a good showing on the record as an end-in-itself' (Blau, 1963: 294). This observation of a state employment agency in the 1950s appears to be just as appropriate in describing the activities of Jobcentre workers in the UK in the late 1990s. The incentive of the job placement targets changed behaviour, but not necessarily in ways that improve service delivery. In fact the greater the emphasis on specific targets, the more effort staff will make to meet that target, which consequently means that they will neglect other parts of the service because of the limitations of time.

As Lipsky (1980) argues, evaluation of street-level bureaucracies is very difficult because of the level of discretionary decision making. Numerical targets are inappropriate in measuring performance because 'the behaviour of workers comes to reflect the incentives and sanctions implicit in those measurements' (Lipsky, 1980: 51). Lipsky argues that 'surrogate measures then become reified and guide future performance' (1980: 52). Staff make efforts to meet targets but these efforts are not necessarily of the kind intended by those who design the targets.

Each Jobcentre office has placement targets for getting people into work. These are broken down into targets for each section of the Jobcentre, introducing competition between different offices and different sections. What is more, placement targets in the Jobcentre lead staff not to be interested in just getting people into work, but getting certain people into certain jobs. One staff member noted:

SM 19: We're primarily here for the registered unemployed. We do keep the employed on file. Preference goes to the registered unemployed. If there's no one suitable then Matching will put an employed person forward.

Matching staff recognise the power they have in controlling access to certain vacancies.

SM 24: I suppose you could say it's discriminating. We can decide who gets jobs. If we only offer it to unemployed people we can keep the numbers of employed people getting jobs down. There's no brownie points for them. Just now we have 23% employed placings. That's too high.

Performance targets made disregarding the rules more acceptable, even to senior members of staff. In the example above it was not only employed people who were disadvantaged, but also those who were unemployed but not registered as such, who were therefore doubly

disadvantaged because of their ineligibility for benefit and because they were unlikely to be prioritised for job matching.

Targets led to competition between staff in different sections, which in turn led to resentment when some workers were receiving greater rewards than others. Some members of staff objected to the Matching Section gaining a high proportion of placings. There was evidence that the specific new managerialist practices of targets and competition created a change in the staff culture that encouraged staff to work against each other, rather than with each other in a way which would seem more conducive to helping people to find work. The individualisation of the 'competitive order' that Clarke & Newman (1997: 72) identify was therefore apparent in the Jobcentre.

### *Caseloads*

Targets could operate in a way that prevented staff from doing their day to day user work and even in ways which were contrary to the general goal of the Jobcentre, i.e. to get people into work. The Employment Service targets put an extra weighting onto placing long-term unemployed people into work. In the Jobcentre where this research was conducted one of the strategies for meeting this target was the issue of 'caseload' lists of 10 users who had been unemployed for two years or more (caseload matching). Staff were required to make extra efforts to find work for these users, calling them in for an interview to discuss what kind of work they were looking for. All front-line staff were given this task, including the

receptionists. This meant that staff who were already working under significant time pressures had to neglect other users who had been unemployed for shorter periods of time or who did not happen to be on their caseload. One of the signing staff was frustrated by this counterproductive situation. Asked whether targets influenced her work she replied:

SM 44: They're meant to. Now with all the (caseload) matching you're meant to get them done, but you can't because you have to help someone. It's like taking away what you're here for. We're here to help the public and it's taking you away from it. And that's not what it's about. Like if a punter comes in you can't blame them if they don't want to come back if somebody's not giving them the time because somebody's working on their targets. If you want to give out the right image you have to have a caring attitude all the time.

This relates to Lipsky's (1980) observation that people are transformed into 'clients' by being reduced to a set of qualifications or categories in order for them to be processed by the bureaucratic organisation. Ultimately, this means discriminating against some users in favour of others, because time and resource constraints mean that users cannot all be given the maximum service.

The goal of assisting people to find work conflicts with serving employers' needs in filling vacancies. This has serious consequences for unemployed people who are not put forward for jobs. Even the smallest technicality of vacancy placement, advertising of jobs and matching can influence a user's chance of a job. Staff found it very difficult to meet targets, which they considered to be set too high, and the target system was not necessarily in the interests of employers either. The vacancies that were advertised in the Jobcentre were those that had been vetted by staff in that particular office. The staff in a particular office could only fill their targets if an unemployed person got a job that was notified to them. There was therefore no incentive for offices to display vacancies from another office. In other words, if an employer requested his or her vacancy to be advertised in every Jobcentre in the UK, for example, this would not necessarily happen. The staff in the Jobcentre that the employer contacted directly might choose not to refer it to other offices, or other offices might choose not to display it.

### **Example Three - The New Deal**

#### **Official Policy**

As an active labour market policy, the New Deal presents a particularly interesting example of policy in practice. In the UK the compulsory New Deal for 18-24 year olds (who have been unemployed and claiming Jobseeker's Allowance for six months or more), was the flagship of the government's welfare-to-work policy announced in 1997. There was a significant commitment from politicians to the New Deal, which had

dedicated resources, funded by a windfall tax on the privatised utilities. Support for the scheme came from the voluntary sector and private employers as well as the Employment Service itself. The New Deal was billed as a new and distinct initiative and was targeted at a specific user group. Many of the conditions necessary for a good fit between policy design and implementation (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984) were therefore in place.

The official guidance for the delivery of the New Deal stated that young people 'will receive an initial interview with their Employment Service personal adviser, who will explain the New Deal and remain their point of contact throughout' (Employment Service, 1997: 8). The ethos behind the New Deal was to provide personal, user-centred advice and support to enable young people to find work. 'Personal Advisers' were trained and became involved in more 'people-changing' (a term coined by Hasenfeld & Weaver (1996) to describe modifying users' behaviour). In contrast to many forms of policy implementation (c.f. Hill, 1997), the introduction of the New Deal represented more than incremental change.

### **Front-Line Practice**

When the New Deal was introduced desks were arranged in one corner of the office with a separate waiting area, the walls were painted a different colour and new signs and furniture were used. At first the staff had small caseloads and were able to spend an hour or more on the first in-depth interview with the young user, as they were officially meant to. The

personal service that was first introduced was viewed by staff as being productive in establishing relationships with users. One Personal Adviser described one way in which advisers were able to help young people when the New Deal was first implemented.

SM 26: If they were going to have to go to the Careers Office we would say 'Oh do you know where you're going? I'll show you where it is'. And also Fiona and I both took them out for interviews. And that worked quite well because if you take them up and they would interview them and take them on the next day. It was great. We never got involved in that before so we were able to go the extra distance, so that we can actually help people.

One of the founding principles of the New Deal scheme, which was praised by staff and policy analysts alike, was the personal service that it would provide. Initially it allowed staff to build a rapport with users and discuss their backgrounds, problems and aspirations in great detail. However, within a very short time of the scheme running, this principle was eroded. As more and more young people were referred to the scheme it was not possible for the in-depth personal service to continue. Personal Advisers were not able to accompany young people to visits or job interviews. The initial interviews for people joining the New Deal became group sessions (with approximately 20 people) instead of one-to-one interviews. Group interviews did not provide the opportunity for personal

advice and some of the young people who attended group interviews did not participate in the discussion at all. The service provided by New Deal staff was therefore re-created by staff soon after its introduction.

Another example of the application of new policy within the New Deal was for signing on. Here the intended in-depth personal service was again found to be lacking since the signing on interviews were conducted according to a pattern which had previously been established in other areas of the office (the man signing on in the example earlier in this chapter was a New Deal participant). This part of the service did not change therefore, with staff being able to retain their existing well established work practices and routines.

### **Pressure**

As the numbers of users participating in the New Deal increased staff time became more scarce. As a result more limitations were imposed on the length of time which was allocated to each user. Policy was therefore re-created with users receiving a service that was less personal than had been intended. This erosion of 'client-centredness' was also evident in the frequency of contacts Personal Advisers had with their New Deal users:

SM 26: Young people are latching on to advisers and we do want to encourage that because if you're wanting to be the punter's pal then you need to see them. But it means that some of them are turning up all the time when you're trying to see

other people. You cannae really say 'You know how we said at the start that you can come in and see us any time? Well I didnae really mean that.' We should be able to case-manage our own diary but with the caseload building quite quickly it's difficult to do that.

What is more, the typical staff reaction to change was to retain existing work practices whenever possible. This was justified in part by the constant state of flux that staff found themselves in. They were confronted with two main types of change which made it difficult to keep up to date with what was going on. Firstly, changes in official policy or particular practices encouraged by the management in the particular office. The second source of frequent change was staff turnover, with workers on short-term contracts often coming and going and considerable internal change when staff were moved between sections and transferred to different offices. This meant that staff could feel quite insecure in their working environment and were often having to learn new ways of working.

Staff resisted change to daily routines that they had developed over time (sometimes for 20 years or more). As the reluctant use of the term 'Fortnightly Intervention' illustrated (above), changes can take time to be implemented at ground level and some changes will never be implemented at all. Hence, new policy is not made and then simply imposed upon front-line staff, rather it must be accepted and absorbed into daily usage through a series of adjustments. Nor is new policy completely

new. It is placed on top of the old practices, which are themselves re-created forms of old policies.

### *Staff resistance*

Rather than being passive and impartial implementers, staff played an active role in assessing the viability of new policies. Employment Officers had views and beliefs about a wide range of policies and initiatives and these interpretations affected the ways in which they administered policies. Jobcentre workers could therefore actively resist new policy initiatives for a number of reasons and in a variety of ways.

One source of frustration was the insufficient link between a particular policy or scheme and the nature of a problem as perceived by staff who experienced it in their daily work. In the case of the New Deal, Personal Advisers soon found that there were young people who they could not personally advise because their problems were beyond the scope of the new policy and the Employment Service more generally. In other words, some of the young New Deal users experienced barriers to employment which their Personal Advisers felt they could not help them with.

SM 21: A lot of clients are decent people but a lot of them as well are people with social problems and we're not trained to deal with that. We could do more harm than good if we tried to dabble in it. We've got a lot of sad people.

SM 34: At the end of the day we're not trained to deal with some of the cases that come in. So if we get training on how to deal with difficult situations but we're not trained properly. I mean they're unemployed and along with that they've got other problems. They've got housing problems, or . . . They could be single parents. There's alcoholism. There's debt. Gambling. We're not trained to deal with them psychologically. We're lay people. This is a Jobcentre, a public office. We've not got the time or the medical or psychological expertise to deal with them.

Staff, whilst representing 'the government' did not necessarily accept the legitimacy of the core aims and objectives of the policy they are required to implement. They could therefore be working at odds with official policy and were at times very critical of 'the government' or the 'politicians' who had designed these policies. The fast pace of policy change was not as much of an issue as the concomitant philosophical underpinnings. Official unemployment policies have always been politicised and are designed with particular outcomes in mind. One reason for resistance to new policies was that staff had previously had to adapt to a policy with the opposite types of aims, objectives and associated values. For instance:

SM 32: Now everything here is targets, targets, targets (put her head in her hands and shook her head despairingly). With SBR you had to refer if there was the slightest doubt at all. The

flavour of the month now is New Deal with different priorities.  
It's a difficult job.

SM 1: Stricter Benefit Regime came in. Thankfully it's been done away with now. I mean legally it's still there. We just don't implement it. We no longer have targets for SBR. We should be doing it but because there's no targets we don't do it. It's a good thing because it used to be used against people who're the easiest to get a decision out of, rather than against the ones who it really should have been used on. Pressure to achieve targets meant that it wasn't used right.

Resistance to a new policy was likely to be more marked if it would require Jobcentre workers to relate to users in a different way. This is because the implementation process is a social process and staff are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with the latest beliefs and understandings about the people they interact with daily. Staff seemed to rely first and foremost on their own values and beliefs to guide how they treated the users they interacted with.

In the case of the introduction of the New Deal, many of the staff welcomed the opportunity to spend more time with users, to be more flexible and to help users to find the types of training and ultimately the job that they wanted. The more flexible and user-centred approach struck a

chord with Employment Officers who had long been disenchanted with the restrictiveness of the assistance they could offer to enable users to find work (e.g. users having to wait until they are six months unemployed before they qualify to attend training courses).

The staff reaction to the implementation of the New Deal was a mixed one. Some members of staff considered the New Deal to provide 'more scope to help people' (SM 23), while some workers agreed with the users who viewed it as a new variation of an old scheme - the same thing with a different name. One adviser commented: 'New Deal? Big deal!' (SM 10). There were mixed reactions from staff about the New Deal: while some welcomed the scheme, others were less enamoured with what it had to offer users.

SM 25:       The options are crap. Like that guy Fiona had in. He said 'is that just working for my Bru money?' Well it is.

SM 32:       I think probably that the New Deal's unfair. The fact that New Deal people can get all that help when other people can't. If they phone up or they contact you if they're five months they cannae get it.

In this case the member of staff agreed with users who said that it was real jobs that were needed. Another inconsistency that was pointed out as favouring some users over others was the difference in the options

available for the over 25 age group, especially since '25 plus is probably the user group that need it most' (SM 21). The official policy itself favours some users over others.

There was also a great deal of confusion because staff working in the New Deal section were unsure about how the scheme was meant to operate and those in other sections of the office had very limited knowledge of what it was, particularly since they had received no training about it. After they had received training (which was not necessarily before they started working in the New Deal section), the Personal Advisers had a much greater knowledge of the New Deal system than the management and therefore could not look to them for guidance. This means that new policies, even high profile ones like the New Deal, might only be understood by those who have to use it in their everyday work.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy can be applied to the experiences of UK Jobcentre staff and users in the late 1990s. Front-line workers were engaged in processes of policy modification as they implemented unemployment policy. 'Official policy' was only one of a number of forces that influenced how staff organised their work and interacted with users. Jobcentre staff experienced various pressures in their everyday work. They responded to these pressures by redefining what it was they were aiming to achieve during their interactions with users and in this way they re-created unemployment policy. The first

example showed how staff involved in signing on responded to the pressure of time by conducting interviews in a much shorter time than the official policy dictated, and by focussing on completing documents (in paper and electronic format), which were necessary for routine benefit processing. Neither of the formal roles of policing and enabling (identified by Fletcher, 1997) were fully implemented. This adds to Blackmore's (2001) observation that the implementation of the policing role (in the example of the Stricter Benefit Regime) was not put into operation as fully as intended. There is now evidence that both policing and enabling roles were subject to reinterpretation, since job matching tended to be the part of the work that was neglected throughout the full range of Jobseeker's Allowance interviews. It was the routine practice of form-filling that held greatest weight in determining what would actually be done to and for clients.

The second example demonstrated how these same pressures of time and user demand, along with the added pressure of employer's requirements, led staff to ration job vacancies. The role played by performance targets in influencing staff behaviour was also highlighted, particularly in relation to controlling access to vacancies. The Matching Section staff were predominantly serving the needs of employers rather than the majority of users. When the overall goal of placing people into work was broken down into specific targets the aim became to get certain people into certain jobs, which favoured those unemployed people who were closest to the low paid, unskilled and semi-skilled labour market that

the Jobcentre served. This process disadvantaged people who were perceived to be unattractive to employers, for instance, the long-term unemployed or those without recent or relevant experience. In this way, the boundaries between role of employers and role of the state employment service are blurred. Staff mediated between the state and the unemployed citizen and also reconciled the interests of employers and unemployed people. The system of vacancy targets cut across this arrangement of preferences to engineer staff incentives, meaning that the non-registered unemployed could also be perceived as unprofitable targets for staff intervention.

The third example highlighted the way in which staff reacted to change. The initial New Deal interviews were personal in-depth interviews when the scheme was first introduced, but as demand for the service grew it meant having to shift to group interviews. Staff retained existing work patterns when possible, since signing on was done in the New Deal section in the same way as it was at signing points. The work done by front-line staff was therefore structured more by the pressures of time, the forms, the computer system and performance targets than it was by statements of official policy or guidance. Front-line workers therefore re-created policy in their everyday work, through interactions with users. Active labour market policies were re-created by front-line staff to be much less active, in some cases even having the opposite effect of ensuring that certain types of user remained inactive in the labour market.

This analysis demonstrates a point of significant departure between the stated purpose of the UK Employment Service (see p62) and the implemented form, which is unrecognised by official evaluations of the service and has, until now, remained largely hidden from academic interrogation (important exceptions being Blackmore, 2001, Finn et al. 2001). In the written aim and six objectives (see p62-63), the emphasis is clearly on job matching. However, this chapter has shown that Employment Officer's efforts are dominated by the tasks of benefit processing, thereby repositioning the basic principle of service provision.

This chapter has, therefore, provided an analysis of how front-line workers behave in the contemporary new managerialist context. It was clear that new managerialism had impacted upon the bureaucratic work environment in a number of ways. The pressures brought to bear upon individual front-line workers have increased, become more individualised and more carefully engineered. The quantification of performance that Lipsky described has been extended and devolved. Evidence has been provided to substantiate Clarke & Newman's (1997) observation that new managerialist practices increase incentives and individualise performance in ways that create competitive relations between workers within the same organisation. For Jobcentre staff this presents a marked shift in culture of the organisation and has important consequences for users since it increases differentiation and guides preferential or priority treatment in particular directions. Services are not provided universally for all Jobcentre users, but are particularised to favour those who will gain staff

merit in the incentive structure. It is also acknowledged that staff were not entirely satisfied with this influence on their relations with co-workers and users. It seemed that the combination of cost-cutting, which kept staffing levels under strict control, and tight incentive management limited the scope for Employment Officers to provide the high quality customer service promised by new managerialist discourse.

Lipsky argues that front-line staff develop discretionary practices as a way of dealing with the tension between serving organisation-orientated goals and client-orientated goals. In the case of the Jobcentre this dilemma is heightened by conflicting organisational goals of job matching and benefit administration. Front-line staff in the case study office managed a whole set of tensions by prioritising certain objectives over others, responding to the most immediate and necessary client demands and fulfilling the requirements of targets. Contrary to Lipsky's explanation, however, Employment Officers exercised discretion for reasons that were not entirely predetermined by the structure of their work environment. They exercised independent and collective ethical and normative commitments in the face of dehumanising policy. As active actors with expertise derived from dealing directly with unemployed people, staff assessed the problems and evaluated policy solutions through their own eyes. Therefore, when front-line staff brought policy into being their framework of understanding and primary considerations were very different from those that inform top-level policy design.

The next chapter examines the meanings that Jobcentre services held for users, comparing the discourse of customer service with how unemployed people actually experience the Jobcentre.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Receiving Unemployment Policy: Users, customers or citizens?**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter staff-user relations are examined from the user's point of view in order to understand the position of users in the implementation process. Chapter Five has demonstrated how staff react to official discourse and formal policy. This chapter examines how users respond to the policy that exists ostensibly to assist them. The aim is to understand the meanings that receiving unemployment policy holds for users. This will then provide the basis for understanding the dynamics of staff-user relationships and for understanding how policy comes into being as a social process (in Chapters Seven and Eight).

It has been argued that during the 1980s and the 1990s users of state services underwent a redefinition, emerging as customers in the new mixed economy of welfare (Clarke & Newman, 1997). The way that this has influenced the Employment Service has been outlined in Chapter Three and the application of these principles in front-line practice has been elucidated in Chapter Five. In this chapter, the intention is to demonstrate how users themselves relate to the process of receiving unemployment

benefits and services from the Jobcentre and how this compares with the official discourse of 'customer service'. This provides an aperture through which the features of the staff-user and citizen-state relationships can be viewed. It will be argued that these relationships are distinct from market-based relationships and that the language of customer service does not adequately capture the experience of claiming Jobseeker's Allowance. The evidence shows that a discrepancy exists between the formal conception of users as customers and their own experiences of the service. Users are not customers because they do not have choice, they do not have control and they do not have purchasing power.

There are several qualifications to be made. Firstly, customer service does not exist in a pure form in the marketplace and relations between customers and for-profit organisations (particularly monopoly providers) are imperfect and contested. Neither did the finance and provision of social security and welfare services to the unemployed take place in an entirely public domain (as separate from private, occupational, familial or voluntary spheres) prior to the evolution of the managerial state. It would be overly simplistic to compare unemployed users' views of the service they receive to an idealised version of customer service, because front-line workers in non-state-related agencies also modify policy and filter organisational goals, rules, procedures and management directives through their work practices. Nevertheless, it is important to examine both the implementation of the managerialist principles of customer service and

staff-user relations from the user's perspective, in order to begin to understand the dynamics of staff-user relationships.

The focus within this chapter is on Jobcentre users, but it is important to note that the Jobcentre has two sets of customers. On the one hand, users can be constituted as customers of Jobseeker's Allowance and of the job vacancy service (the basis of their relationship being different in each case and the use of the particular term 'customer' being open to debate). On the other hand, the employers who use the Jobcentre to advertise their vacancies are also customers of the Jobcentre. These two sets of customers compete unwittingly for staff time and for influence over staff behaviour because they have conflicting wants and needs (see Chapter Three). Chapter Five has also illustrated how front-line staff manage the tension between serving users and serving employers by favouring the needs of employers over the needs of the long-term unemployed. The vacancy service can be seen as more of a service for employers than unemployed people, although Employment Officers did act to temper employers demands (for instance vacancies were not accepted if they discriminated against sex or 'race', however age restrictions were relatively commonplace).

### **Lack of Choice**

Market-based customer relations imply choice. However, Lipsky's (1980) principal observation regarding the users of street-level bureaucracies was that they were non-voluntary. This affects the nature and dynamics of

staff-user relations and has several implications for the applicability of the label 'customer' to Jobseeker's Allowance claimants. The following section explores how the notion of choice relates to the experience of becoming and remaining a registered unemployed Jobcentre user.

### *Becoming a client*

Lipsky (1980) argues that when people make contact with public service organisations they undergo a process of transformation, from being citizens to 'becoming clients'. Such analysis is based on understanding staff-user relations from the point of view of the street-level bureaucrat whose main initial concern is with 'people-processing' (Prottas, 1979, see Chapter Seven for further details of the categorisation process). From the user's perspective, however, the process of becoming a user involves several other transformations in their life roles. For unemployed people, becoming a client, particularly for the first time, can involve the transition from dependence on wage labour (even if it was low-paid, temporary or part-time) to dependence on state provision. The loss of paid employment (or the failure of an attempt at self-employment) might also be accompanied by changes in other life roles as sense of self and use of time is re-negotiated with partners, family, friends and significant others. Adjustments can be made in the level and type of involvement in unpaid labour and domestic and caring activities. The significance of leaving paid work can extend beyond the loss of earned income and the social relations (whether positive or negative) associated with a job. Being out of

work can change how people think of themselves how they relate to other people.

Those who have been employed have changed from having a legitimate role as a worker and a wage earner, which was likely to have been central to their identity (Morgan, 1992), to that of being unemployed. This can be associated with a particularly keen sense of 'loss of face' (Goffman, 1963) for men if they feel their masculine role of breadwinner has been undermined. There is evidence to suggest that even young men entering the labour market for the first time in the 1990s feel an obligation or expectation to provide for current or future dependants (Lloyd, 1999). Those who have never worked play an even more stigmatised unemployed role. Having to go to the Jobcentre means adopting this unemployed role as well as confronting the realities of living on an income below the level necessary for subsistence (see Chapter Three). The fresh experience of being unemployed can be a raw nerve at the time when people present themselves to the Jobcentre. The necessary interaction with front-line staff can be an emotional experience that is associated with self reflection and even self re-definition.

Becoming a Jobseeker's Allowance user could, therefore, be a significant experience, but not one that people encountered through choice. Users viewed the Jobcentre as 'a last resort' that should be avoided at all costs. Amongst those interviewed, attendance at the Jobcentre was usually brought about by immediate economic necessity (apart from one man who

did not receive benefit, but registered as unemployed to claim National Insurance credits). Interviewees experienced using the service as a sign of personal and systemic failure. For many users, their interactions with staff were tainted by this sense of enforced dependency. The loss of previous status associated with being a worker, or having held a particular position of status or respect, meant that the way they were treated by staff mattered a great deal to users.

Most of the interviewees had negative experiences of coming to the Jobcentre for the first time, often finding the visit difficult and emotional. They referred to having felt 'humiliated' (UP 24), 'embarrassed' (UP 7), 'apprehensive' (UP 32), 'undermined' (UP 32), 'scared shitless' (UP 15) and 'extremely nervous' (UP 19).

UP 26:            Coming to the Jobcentre the first time is very intimidating and I think it's a bit shameful. I felt a little bit guilty about it. Yes, it's intimidating. It's nerve-wracking. It's worrying and I think it's quite depressing coming to the Jobcentre for the first time and not actually having a job.

These feelings associated with confronting unemployment intensified for those who had never expected to be unemployed and who viewed their employer dispensing with their services as meaning they were 'on the scrap heap' or at the 'bottom of the pile'. Older workers, for instance, were all too aware that their value as a commodity in the labour market had

declined. These factors combined to mean that being inside the Jobcentre was something that made people feel uncomfortable:

UP 18:        You want in and out as soon as you can

The psychological costs of receiving welfare services were keenly felt by most of the interviewees, particularly those who had been unemployed for a long period of time.

UP 28:        You're down when you come in and even more down when you leave. . . . At the moment, perhaps because of the way I'm feeling, it [coming to the Jobcentre] means to me failure and embarrassment. That's, that's what it means to me. . . . I only come in here to sign on but I always come out here in a, well I don't always, come out of here in a rage. But I just come out feeling 'oh I'm glad that's over for another two weeks'.

The stigma of being unemployed was made worse for users by knowing that their unemployment was public, being flaunted to those who they were known to.

UP 29:        It's quite sort of demoralising and just walking in and stuff and just waiting around. . . . Och, it's just like a bit of an ordeal for me actually. It's like, oh you know, I just feel really

kind of useless, especially in this town where all people know you and stuff as well. It's like one time I came in and the woman said to me she knew my mum from years ago. I mean it's, I just can't stand being like this – unemployed. It's like, why am I such a waster?

Some interviewees did not like to be seen coming in or going out of the Jobcentre because their stigmatised role was made visible (c.f. Goffman, 1963: 48).

UP 25: Degradation. . . . I hate it. You walk out and you feel people saying 'There's another loser.'. You're going in and you feel like 'There's another loser'. They're not but I think that. It doesn't matter if they're doing that or not doing that. I think that. . . . I walk up to the top and I sneak in that door as quick as I can and I sneak out as quick as I can. I don't mind being in here because the people in here are in the same boat as me. But I hate coming to it because it just brings me down.

Some users felt ashamed because the exchange relationship that they previously had with an employer had changed to one that had a different sense of reciprocity. As Morgan (1992) argues:

If we see a sense of reciprocity as something which is very basic to human living . . . then unemployment entails the loss of that ability to engage in reciprocal exchange, and the unwelcome perception of oneself as being more of a receiver than a giver (Morgan, 1992: 104).

Receiving benefit provided users with a small income but left them feeling 'useless' because they had not exchanged their labour for it. Within the walls of the Jobcentre office, unemployed people were defined as passive recipients of state benefits whose efforts to find work had so far failed.

UP 13:       It's as if you're coming in and you're getting money for nothing. But you're actually looking for money, you know what I mean?

The interviewees had a clear sense that they did not want to be unemployed. They wanted to work and felt an obligation to earn their income through formal employment. This lack of ability to exchange left some unemployed people feeling that dependence on state benefits was akin to begging (cf. McIntosh & Erskine, 1999). However, unemployment benefits have a long history in the UK, and those who had 'paid into the system' (UP 33) through taxes or National Insurance contributions, personally resented being made to feel as if they were 'asking for something for nothing'. There was a strong sense of entitlement to benefits and a recognition that the service was funded collectively through

taxation, which should mean that it was there for people when they needed it.

UP 1: It's, sometimes, you know, you feel as if you're begging. They [front-line staff] think you're begging. You've got to actually fight for your money half the time, know what I mean? . . . It's as if you're begging to them and it's their money they're paying out. And it's the governments, know what I mean? They forget. It's not everybody that's been on the Bru for years. A lot of folk have been working and we pay our taxes and we're entitled to it [Jobseeker's Allowance] until we get a job.

The citizen principle of earned entitlement therefore stands in opposition to the application of market-based customer relations. This was a particular issue for older workers who had paid compulsory National Insurance contributions for the entirety of their working life before becoming unemployed. Despite having paid in, they found that the state had reneged on past agreements. The level of benefit and the length of time that they would have expected to be able to claim insurance-based benefit have changed dramatically, meaning the security they were promised had been eroded. These workers were discovering similar broken promises in their occupational and state pension entitlements. The imposition of market-based language can itself represent a broken promise for those

who expected the post-war welfare state to provide free universal services and a safety net to prevent poverty.

The relationship that users had with the state, as mediated through the staff-user relationship, was not market-based. Users did not identify with the label of 'customer' that had been applied freshly to them. Users conceived of themselves as 'customers' only in a very limited sense, for instance one man said that he did feel like a customer because it fitted with his idea of shopping 'you're only in to get what you need and then you're back out again'. Generally, people did not identify with being a customer because they did not want to have to come to the Jobcentre and they were deprived of control or choice about the terms, conditions, substance and quality of the service and benefit they received. In this way, the relationship users have to the Jobcentre can be seen almost as the reverse of a customer relationship:

UP 30: I feel a customer is, you know, you're going in to buy something and like they're there to please you sort of thing. Here it's not. It's almost the other way about.

Benefits and services for the unemployed were viewed as being controlled by elected and accountable government, which held irreducible meaning and significance. The partial marketisation of sections of service delivery did not separate the state from those services in the minds of recipients. Users held 'the government' responsible for the past and present 'system'

that structured the character and funding of benefits and sanctions (including the application of new language such as 'customer service') as well as the wider opportunities available to them.

UP 9: They're the people they should be giving us mair opportunities to get jobs and if they're no' then we're no' going to get jobs are we? They could gae us mair opportunities and mair vacancies than they are.

Another man objected to the term 'customer' because it is 'a business framework which just shouldn't apply here'. He considered the 'business ethic' to be 'part of the problem' of unemployment and as such entirely inappropriate to be part of its solution.

### **Customer Service**

One of the most obvious applications of new managerialist principles of customer service was in the improvement of the physical office environment. Jobcentre users thought that the office was pleasant, 'cheery' (UP 18), 'colourful' (UP 18) and 'nice' (UP 8). One interviewee felt that the open-plan layout and modern furnishings all 'help[s] enormously' (UP 11). It was noticeable that the Jobcentre office in question compared favourably with other offices that users had experienced in other areas or in the same office in the past. The office was open plan and unscreened. Interviews took place at desks, rather than the high counters of previous eras (that currently still exist in some Benefits Agency offices). Both users

and staff felt that this was conducive to a more positive atmosphere. This office was 'brighter' (UP 15), 'more personal' (UP 17) and 'no' as depressing' (UP 18). Ultimately, the effect was that 'when you walk in it doesn't make you feel as pissed off' (UP 15).

Beyond the office décor, however, users' views of customer service were less straight forward. Many of the interviewees held the view that all, or the great majority of the staff were generally 'friendly' (UP 35), 'helpful' (UP 7) and 'nice' (UP 4). Certain aspects of the way users were treated by staff were praised, for instance staff were praised by some as 'very polite' (UP 13), 'great' (UP 7), 'positive' (UP 33), 'very pleasant' (UP 24), 'understanding' (UP 33), 'courteous' (UP 13), 'amiable' (UP 33) and 'genial' (UP 33). One woman said that all of the staff that she had dealt with treated her with 'great respect and great dignity' (UP 10).

Even some of the interviewees who had very negative feelings about unemployment and who were critical of the Jobcentre and the staff generally, did concede that some staff members treated them well. Some individual members of staff were singled out for praise because of their local knowledge, length of service or extremely helpful and friendly attitudes. Users seemed to define good service as having been achieved if staff devoted time to their interview (being prepared to 'sit with you for any length of time and try and get you something' (UP 25) and provided a personal service ('a wee personal touch' rather than being 'treated as a number', UP 18). This demonstrated that staff were 'interested' (UP 35)

and willing to 'try their best' (UP 25) to find vacancies that would be suitable. The individual officials who received most praise were those whose worked in the Matching Section, whose role was assistance in finding work and did not involve benefit policing. It could therefore be inferred that the conflicting goals of assisting people to find work and policing benefit claims prevented other front-line staff from offering what users would identify as high quality customer service.

Most of the interviewees had some negative comment about the way they had been treated by staff. Long-term unemployed users were more likely than short-term unemployed people to have very negative views of staff. This was a reflection of the increased compulsion that these users are subject to as well as their extended experience of poverty, bad feelings about being unemployed and declining hopes of finding work. Officials can exacerbate these feelings:

. . . of profound importance in this discussion of the problem of stigma, there is the question of the attitudes of officials and of the interaction between officials and claimants. Clearly attitudes of implicit or explicit contempt can do much to exacerbate the problem and it would be naive to suppose that such attitudes were not on occasion apparent (Stevenson, 1973: 22).

The most negative comments were made by those who had been unemployed for longest, who said that staff were 'woolies' (UP 25) who had treated them 'like shit' (UP 15). One man said that the worst thing about the Jobcentre was the staff. Users described various bad experiences as 'frustrating' (UP 28), 'annoying' (UP 34) and 'irritating' (UP 16). Another man said that some of the Employment Officers had 'attitude problems' (UP 15). Some users felt that it was the majority of the staff that treated them badly, while others considered it to only be a minority. Staff were criticised for being 'a wee bit abrasive for the sake of it' (UP 33), 'bitter' (UP 33) or 'rubbish' (UP 25). Seven of the interviewees did not think that staff were at all helpful.

A few users felt that the majority of staff did not do enough to help unemployed people find work. One (UP 25) man said staff did 'nothing' to help him find work which meant they were not doing their jobs properly. These users wanted the Jobcentre workers to 'show a wee bit more interest' and give them more help to find work, rather than focusing on the necessary tasks for benefit administration.

Although Jobcentre users tended to view staff indifferently, or praised particularly friendly or helpful personal service, the general consensus was that the service offered by the Jobcentre was 'a waste of time' (UP 12), 'a lot of crap' (UP 1), 'useless' (UP 15), 'shite' (UP 9) or 'a bit of a joke' (UP 33). One man said he 'hated' coming to the Jobcentre (UP 26), while another man said that it 'irritated' him (UP 16). Only four of those

interviewed conceived of the Jobcentre in predominantly positive terms. Views of the service provided were linked to how people felt about being unemployed and the enforced dependency implied by that situation. Those who were most optimistic had been unemployed for less than three months and considered their immediate job prospects to be good. Others had distanced themselves from the stigmatised unemployed role by working part-time (for less than 16 hours, which is allowed by the Jobseeker's Allowance rules) or because they were nearing retirement age and were able to convince themselves of the merits of early retirement if they could not find work again.

Users often did not receive the service that they needed and wanted. The following sections consider some aspects of service delivery that do not fit within the customer service ideal. One user explicitly criticised the Jobcentre for providing 'poor standards of customer service' (UP 11), in reference to lengthy waits and telephones ringing out unanswered. Unemployment policy has a long history and in its past and present forms has been intended to discipline and control people who are out of work (c.f. Jones & Novak, 1999). Users are provided with income maintenance based on the principle of 'less eligibility', which does not provide for minimum levels of adequacy. Jobseeker's Allowance therefore fails to meet users' needs, let alone their wants. Punitive benefit sanctions also deny users the income they need. Benefit levels and regulations are therefore incompatible with the notion of customer service in the sense that good customer service means providing what customers want.

The predominantly negative feelings associated with visiting the Jobcentre were bound up with how people felt about being unemployed and living in poverty. However, there were particular ways in which users' experiences of the Jobcentre created anxiety. Foremost was the mismatch between the service available, and the assistance that unemployed people wanted in finding work. A common complaint was that the vacancies on offer were inappropriate.

The interviewees were keen to find work and the Jobcentre was intended to assist in this capacity. However, it has already been demonstrated that the pressures and constraints on routine interviews often resulted in job matching being neglected (see Chapter Five). There was evidence that access to vacancies was rationed by staff in a number of ways (see Chapter Five). In this section, the focus now shifts to considering the quantity, quality and type of vacancy on offer at the Jobcentre. The following analysis compares the type of vacancy service that users wanted and needed with the type of vacancies that were actually advertised in the Jobcentre office.

### **User demand for vacancies**

Most of those interviewed felt that the vacancies on offer were inappropriate to their needs (although it should be noted that the sampling design excluded those who had recently found work through the Jobcentre). Users usually wanted full-time, long-term employment

(preferably permanent) that was appropriate to their skills and qualifications. They did not have unrealistic expectations of the type of work and the levels of pay that they wanted.

Many felt that the pay that most of the jobs offered was too low, with too many jobs being temporary and part-time. Users needed a job that would offer a living wage. Some users felt that poorly paid vacancies<sup>1</sup> were 'scandalous' (UP 13) and should not be advertised in the Jobcentre and that vacancies offering 'commission only' should be 'thrown back to these firms' (UP 25) by Jobcentre staff. Some interviewees thought there was not enough variety in the vacancies, which were mainly service sector orientated. Shop work, manual work, kitchen work, security guards, cleaning jobs, hotel work or waiting staff, office work and telesales predominated in descriptions of the type of work that was advertised on the boards. Although this type of work was desirable for some of those interviewed, many felt that there was a lack of 'proper work' (UP 3). One older, semi-skilled, man commented that:

UP 25:        This is where people who genuinely want genuine jobs come and there're no' genuine jobs out there.

Several of the interviewees thought that the Jobcentre did not have enough vacancies available, partly because the jobs did not exist to get advertised and also because Jobcentre staff did not do all that they could

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<sup>1</sup> This fieldwork was conducted before the introduction of the National Minimum Wage.

to encourage employers to advertise there. The vacancies on offer were considered to be limited and careers information, including details about voluntary work, were found to be lacking.

UP 3: I mean they go through the motions here, but as I say the bottom line is that the jobs aren't there. You've just got to look at those ridiculous cards they've got up there, security men and . . . It's a joke really. I don't know if there's just no jobs at all or if they're just selective in what they've got.

Many of the interviewees were also critical of the frequency of vacancies changing on the boards, meaning that the turnover of vacancies was slow and that those advertised on the boards were sometimes out of date. Users felt that cards should be taken down from the boards as soon as the vacancy was filled because of the frustration of having to wait in a queue to enquire about a vacancy that was no longer available.

UP 1: The boards have the same things every time you come in. Nothing changes with the boards. I think it's terrible. They've been there for months, know what I mean. I tell you, I think they were up there six months ago when I was unemployed. And they're still there, know what I mean? There's nae fresh stuff. You maybe get one or two fresh ones up on the latest vacancies but jobs like them go quick, know what I mean?

Staff and users alike are aware that the vacancies advertised through the Jobcentre are not usually applicable to professionals. Unemployed professionals found this particularly frustrating because this meant that their visits to the Jobcentre were purely for benefit administration purposes, the second organisational goal of assisting people to find work being far removed from their needs. The Jobcentre therefore had very little to offer professional people.

UP 3:           You say you've got a degree and they look at you like you've got horns on your head. Like, 'What are you doing in here? It's a Jobcentre!'

The majority of interviewees who did not think that the Jobcentre presented a realistic opportunity for them to find work felt that the jobs advertised did not match the jobs that they were looking for. Approximately a third of those interviewed expressed particularly negative views of the quality of vacancies advertised on the boards, which was described as 'terrible' (UP 1), 'rubbish' (UP 25), 'absolutely ridiculous' (UP 13) and 'depressing' (UP 18). The Jobcentre was perceived to be a last resort for employers as well as unemployed people.

### **Mismatch between Vacancies Sought and Vacancies Advertised**

Having explored the type of work and conditions of employment that interviewees wanted from the service, it is now possible to provide details

of the vacancies that were on offer by way of comparison. The Jobcentre office where this research was conducted advertised vacancies notified to it directly, and vacancies from other areas. During the three month period (8<sup>th</sup> September 1998 – 4<sup>th</sup> December 1998) a total of 1726 vacancies were counted in the office. This number included 269 vacancies notified through other Jobcentre offices and 24 that were jobs in other countries. 11% of the jobs from other areas were armed forces vacancies. The following section will concentrate mainly on vacancies that were notified to the office where the research was conducted.

There was a dramatic mismatch between the type of work sought by unemployed users registered at this office and the type of work advertised there. The type of work on offer was compared to the type of work (by Standard Occupational Classification Group) that job seekers using the office were looking for at that time, using the official claimant count and notified vacancy data (provided by the Employment Information Unit) <sup>2</sup>. The vacancy data collected manually from the office also provided greater insight into the exact occupations, rates of pay, hours and length of contracts of a selection of vacancies.

Table Two compares the type of occupation sought by unemployed people registered at this Jobcentre office (which of course excludes other job seekers who were unable to claim Jobseeker's Allowance or were in

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<sup>2</sup> Data was not available for exactly the same period as that covered by the manual vacancy count. The notified vacancy count and claimant count contained in this table were provided by the Employment Information Unit, ©ONS. Any information about length

employment) with the type of work which was advertised there, during the period August to October 1998. Overall there was a total of 1223 notified vacancies, compared with a total of 1713 registered unemployed people. This means that there was a shortfall of 490 jobs, not counting those who were seeking work but not registered as unemployed (either because they were currently in employment or because they were unemployed and did not meet the conditions for claiming Jobseeker's Allowance). The Jobcentre is, however, only one source of employment opportunities and other vacancies are also advertised elsewhere, e.g. in newspapers, the Internet and through private employment agencies. The data shows that there was a mismatch between the type of occupation sought by those registered unemployed and the type of vacancies available.

The dark shaded boxes in Table Two show the top four frequencies for each column. The most common type of notified vacancy was 'Other Elementary Occupations'. This matched with the most common type of work sought by all registered unemployed job seekers, the most common type of work sought by men and the fourth most common type of work sought by women<sup>3</sup>. Unfortunately, there was approximately one notified vacancy for every two people looking for them in this sector. This is a serious shortfall considering that this is the type of work that Jobcentres seem to specialise in.

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of contract, flexible working hours, shift work etc. is based on the manual count for the overlapping period 8/9/98–4/12/98 .

<sup>3</sup> The proportion of men to women registered unemployed at this Jobcentre office was three to one.

The broad SOC group categories contain a very wide range of jobs. For instance, the 'Other Elementary Occupations' category covered a wide range of job titles, including: labourers, hospital porters, salvage collectors, postal workers, couriers, catering assistants, car park attendants, road sweepers, shelf fillers and cleaners. 28% of these vacancies were for cleaners and 25% were for kitchen porters or catering assistants. Only 23 vacancies (8.9%) in this category were for labourers. A labourer would not necessarily be seeking a cleaning job based in an office. The data collected manually (rather than the official data used in Table Two, which only shows the sector and does not give further details about the jobs on offer) shows that 19% of vacancies in the 'Other Elementary Occupations' category were for temporary positions. 10.9% of vacancies of this type required the employee to be flexible with regard to working hours; 9.7% involved shift work and 41.6% were for part-time work. The hours of work offered for positions in the 'Other Elementary Occupations' category therefore varied widely. At least 40 vacancies for jobs in this SOC group were not displayed on the vacancy boards. This was the sector with the highest incidence of vacancies not displayed.

**Table Two: Notified Vacancies Compared With Occupation Sought by SOC Group, August-October 1998**

SOC GROUP	Notified Vacancies	Occupation Sought		
		Persons	Male	Female
Corporate Managers/Administrators	11	71	55	16
Managers/Proprietors: Agric/Services	23	22	18	4
Science/Engineering Professions	1	28	21	7
Health Professions	0	1	1	0
Teaching Professions	0	29	13	16
Other Professional Occupations	1	23	17	6
Science/Engineering Associate Profs	20	25	17	8
Health Associate Professionals	12	7	2	5
Other Associate Prof Occupations	16	77	50	27
Clerical Occupations	4 <sup>th</sup> 115	4 <sup>th</sup> 178	4 <sup>th</sup> 103	3 <sup>rd</sup> 75
Secretarial Occupations	25	12	0	12
Skilled Construction Trades	29	67	67	0
Skilled Engineering Trades	29	37	36	1
Other Skilled Trades	73	2 <sup>nd</sup> 147	2 <sup>nd</sup> 142	5
Protective Service Occupations	24	17	14	3
Personal Service Occupations	3 <sup>rd</sup> 246	2 <sup>nd</sup> 147	60	1 <sup>st</sup> 87
Buyers, Brokers/Sales Representatives	25	21	17	4
Other Sales Occupations	2 <sup>nd</sup> 247	120	39	2 <sup>nd</sup> 81
Industrial Plant/Machine Operators, etc.	14	20	16	4
Drivers/Mobile Machine Operators	37	127	3 <sup>rd</sup> 125	2
Other Occupations: Agric/Forestry/Fishing	10	21	18	3
Other Elementary Occupations	1 <sup>st</sup> 265	1 <sup>st</sup> 499	1 <sup>st</sup> 446	4 <sup>th</sup> 53
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1223</b>	<b>1713</b>	<b>1285</b>	<b>428</b>

The second most common type of notified vacancy was 'Other Sales Occupations'. This was the category of work that was second most popular among women job seekers. The vacancies advertised were largely comprised of shop assistants, door-to-door sales people (often working on a commission only basis) and tele-sales positions. There were more than double the amount of 'Other Sales Occupations' notified as there were unemployed people looking for that type of work (the reverse picture to that of the other elementary occupations mismatch). Vacancies coded as 'Other Sales Occupations' were often undesirable because of the length of contract, unsuitable working hours including unsociable hours, as well as the low pay (which included commission only positions). 21% of vacancies categorised as 'Other Sales Occupations' were for temporary jobs. This was also the category with the highest proportion (22%) of vacancies requiring the employee to be flexible with regard to working hours. 7% of the jobs involved shift work. 62% of 'Other Sales Occupations' were for part-time work, accounting for 39% of all part-time vacancies.

The third most common type of notified vacancy was 'Personal Service Occupations'. This matched the second (equal with 'Other Skilled Trades') most common type of work sought by job seekers and was the most common choice for unemployed women. Again, the broad category name included a wide range of job titles: bar staff, chefs, dental nurses, care assistants, nursery nurses, hairdressers, caretakers and undertakers. The manual count data showed that 20% of jobs in the 'Personal Service

Occupations' were for waiters/waitresses, 17% were for chefs or cooks and 10% were for bar staff. Again, there were more than double the amount of vacancies available than unemployed people looking for that type of work. 12% of 'Personal Service Occupations' vacancies required flexibility on the part of the employee, 9% were for temporary jobs, 25% involved shift work, 34% were for part-time jobs. At least eight vacancies in this SOC group were not advertised on the display boards.

The fourth most common type of notified vacancy was 'Clerical Occupations'. This category had a good match with the type of work unemployed people were seeking, being the second most popular type of work for unemployed people generally, the fourth choice for men and the third choice for women. This time there were fewer vacancies than people who wanted them, notified vacancies providing only 68% of the demand. This was the category that had the highest rate of temporary work, accounting for almost a third (29%) of all 'Clerical Occupations' vacancies. At least 10 vacancies in this sector were not displayed on the vacancy boards.

The second choice for unemployed men was 'Other Skilled Trades'. This was an area where there was a mismatch between the type of work sought and the type of work available. The Jobcentre provided only 50% of vacancies sought in this field. Similarly, the third choice for unemployed men was 'Drivers/Mobile Machine Operators', but only a third of the number of vacancies sought was on offer.

For all four of the most common types of work sought by unemployed women there were more jobs available than women looking for them. The opposite was true for men, for whom there were almost always fewer jobs than unemployed men seeking them. The only exception was 'Clerical Occupations', where there were 12 less men looking for that type of work than there were jobs available, but there were also 178 women competing for the same jobs, leaving a deficit of 63 jobs.

Significant mismatches can also be noted by comparing the ratio of job seekers to notified vacancies for each SOC code. In Table Two, the mismatch between persons seeking 'Science/Engineering Professions' (28) and number of notified vacancies (1), is underlined in black. Similar ratios can be seen in other occupations. It is notable that there were no notified vacancies at all for the health professions or the teaching profession (despite there being jobseekers looking for this type of work). There also seemed to be a general lack of more professional work. At the top end only 15% of the sought vacancies were available in the 'Corporate Managers/Administrators' field. Similarly, only 3.6% of the demand from the registered unemployed for 'Science/Engineering Professions' jobs was met through notified vacancies in that sector. Only 4.3% of the vacancies sought under the 'Other Professional Occupations' heading were available through the Jobcentre.

### *Restrictions*

Chapter Five has illustrated the ways in which staff rationed vacancies to Jobcentre users. However, other factors also contributed to restrict access to the vacancies advertised on the boards, for instance the working conditions on offer. During the period of the manual vacancy count: 11.5% of local vacancies were for shift work, 10% included working in the evenings and/or weekends and 11.4% required flexibility<sup>4</sup>. This latter category of flexibility usually meant that the hours of work were not set. Such posts included bank care assistant staff, for instance, who would be required to provide relief cover for holidays and sick leave. One vacancy was advertised as a 'zero hours' contract, within which no hours were guaranteed but the post holder could be called on at any time to provide cover.

Such unsociable working hours and a high degree of flexibility effectively excluded users with caring responsibilities from applying. Another disadvantage of jobs that did not guarantee regular hours of work, especially where the number of hours was low, was that a situation could be created where people had to come off benefit and then have to reapply on a regular basis. Although Jobseeker's Allowance does allow for up to 16 hours work per week, there can be complications if someone works a different number of hours each week, varying between under and over 16 hours. This can also have consequences for Council Tax Benefit, where

people can experience difficulties in proving that they are still eligible to receive it. These arrangements can become extremely complicated if someone oscillates between eligibility and non-eligibility for benefits. A similar situation can also occur between claiming Jobseeker's Allowance and Family Credit (which has been replaced by the Working Families Tax Credit since the fieldwork was conducted).

### **Local Vacancies**

During the three month period a total of 1433 local vacancies (defined as those which were notified directly to the office in question) were counted in the office. The following sections provide an analysis of the details of these vacancies. Almost all of the local vacancies stated that they were for positions in the local area, which meant that these were the vacancies most likely to be of interest to people registered at this Jobcentre office. One notable exception was a security guard vacancy where the place of work was London. Local vacancies included vacancies that were notified as multiple vacancies (294 or 21%) at the time of registration, training vacancies (44 or 3% - these have been excluded from the following analysis of terms of employment) and vacancies that were not displayed (100 or 7%<sup>5</sup> - information about pay, hours of work and length of contract was not therefore available for those vacancies).

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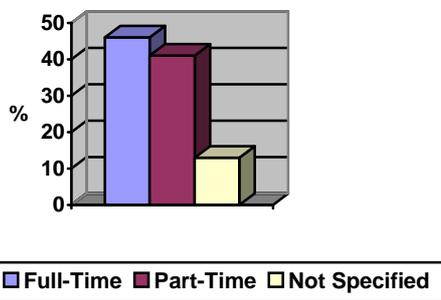
<sup>4</sup> These categories were not mutually exclusive so there may be some overlap between them.

<sup>5</sup> This excludes the seven training vacancies which were not displayed.

### Hours of work

Chart One shows the proportion of vacancies for full-time and part-time work. 41% of the vacancies were for part-time work<sup>6</sup>, while 46% were for full-time work. The remaining 13% of vacancies did not specify whether the job was full or part time.

**Chart One: % of Vacancies for Full-Time and Part-Time Work**



**Chart Two: % of Vacancies for Permanent or Temporary Work**

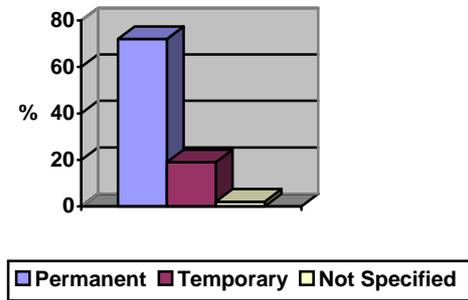


Chart Two shows that 72% of the vacancies were for permanent jobs and 19% were for temporary positions. 2% of vacancies did not specify the length of contract. Most of the vacancies were for permanent work, 81% of the part-time jobs and 80% of the full-time jobs offered a permanent contract. 22% of the vacancies that did not specify whether they were for part-time or full-time work offered only a temporary contract. 7% of all local vacancies were for part-time temporary jobs. Table Three shows the hours of work by the type of contract.

<sup>6</sup> Defined here as: part-time <30 hours, full-time  $\geq$  30 hours.

**Table Three: Hours of Work by Type of Contract for Local Vacancies**

	<b>Full-time</b>	<b>Part-time</b>	<b>Hours of Work Not Specified</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Permanent</b>	472	415	105	992
<b>Temporary</b>	105	88	54	247
<b>Contract Not Specified</b>	12	8	13	33
<b>Total</b>	589	511	172	1272 <sup>7</sup>

37% of vacancies were for full-time permanent work, while only 6.9% were for part-time temporary work. 30% of the vacancies that specified the exact hours of work offered either less than 16 hours work or a range of hours (e.g. between 10-18 hours), which meant that the actual hours could be below 16 hours. This is significant because unemployed users could continue to be registered as unemployed if they accepted one of these jobs. The jobs advertised in this Jobcentre office did not therefore guarantee a route out of unemployment if the claimant count is used as the measure. Those vacancies that did offer a route out of unemployment did not necessarily guarantee moving out of claiming benefit.

### *Temporary Work*

Although the majority of vacancies were for permanent work, there was still a substantial proportion of jobs that offered temporary employment. Some vacancies were vaguely described as 'casual' or marked as temporary without details of the length of contract. Other cards did give

details of the length of the contract, varying greatly from one day to three years. The structure of the benefits system is not geared towards temporary or part-time work and people who accept this type of work may be inconvenienced by form-filling and checking. There is therefore a discrepancy between the assumptions that the social security system still works on (i.e. a of traditional model of full-time employment), and the flexible labour market pursued by economic policies (see p188). For instance, if clients accept paid work of less than 16 hours they must declare it and complete a form for their earnings to be recalculated. The medium for managing changing hours of work is cumbersome and can be particularly problematic for people who move in and out of work and unemployment or above and below the 16 hours of work per week.

### *Rate of Pay*

The rates of pay for vacancies were stated in various ways - per hour, per week, per month or as an annual salary. Some of the rates were very specific and included different levels for people of different ages, for weekend work and for 'live-in' posts. The most common expression for the rate of pay for local vacancies was as an hourly rate, accounting for three quarters (75.6%) of jobs where a rate of pay was stated. Weekly rates were advertised for 5% of jobs, monthly rates for only three vacancies and salaries were advertised for 18.7% of vacancies for which a rate of pay was given. Table Four shows the rates of pay for local jobs.

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<sup>7</sup> This excludes training vacancies. Vacancies which were not displayed also led to

The majority of rates of pay advertised on Jobcentre vacancy cards were low. The lowest hourly rate of pay was £2.10. This research was conducted just four months before the introduction of the National Minimum Wage. Almost half (45%) of vacancies advertised an hourly rate of pay were below £3.60. This represents more than a third (34%) of all local vacancies for which a rate of pay was stated. 37% of full-time permanent local jobs which stated a rate of pay were below the Minimum Wage rate of £3.60<sup>8</sup>.

45% of weekly rates of pay also fell below the minimum wage level of £144.00 (assuming a 40 hour week). Even the maximum weekly rate of pay, £300, fell short of the £350.30 which was the average gross weekly earnings in Scotland in April 1998 (National Statistics: 2000).

**Table Four: Rates of Pay for Local Vacancies<sup>9</sup>**

	Hourly Rate	Weekly Rate <sup>10</sup>	Monthly Rate	Salary <sup>11</sup>
<b>Minimum</b>	£2.10	£70.00	£600.00	£4452.00
<b>Maximum</b>	£10.00	£300.00	£650.00	£32073.00
<b>Median</b>	£3.62	£160.00	£650.00	£10000.00

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missing data for these variables.

<sup>8</sup> for adult workers when it was first introduced in 1999

<sup>9</sup> In the case of pay ranges the minimum has been used since an applicant was not guaranteed a higher rate.

<sup>10</sup> Weekly rates are for full-time work only. In a few cases a weekly rate was advertised for part-time work. These were converted to an hourly rate for a comparable figure.

<sup>11</sup> 22% of the salaried vacancies were in fact for part-time work and are therefore pro rata.

7.5% of salaried positions offered less than the minimum wage (£7400.00 assuming a 40 hour week). 97% of the salaried positions offered less than the average earnings of £18215.60<sup>12</sup> in Scotland in April 1998 (National Statistics: 2000).

Shift work, jobs involving flexible working hours and unsociable hours were amongst the worst paying. 16% of full-time local jobs were for shift work. At £3.52, the median rate of pay for shift work was lower than the median rate of £3.65 for all work. The median rate of pay for work including evenings, nights, early mornings or weekends was £3.65 and the lowest paying job (offering only £2.10 per hour) included such unsociable hours. The median hourly rate of pay for jobs that involved flexible working hours was £3.51, the lowest paying job of that type offering only £2.65 per hour.

Thus, the advertised vacancies often did not match those sought by unemployed people. Users also expressed a general preference for greater assistance in finding work. Access to resources like local newspapers, computers for Internet and web access as well as for word-processing and printing CVs and covering letters would have been greatly valued by several of the interviewees. Others mentioned the use of telephones and the provision of paper and stamps as simple resources that would have been effective in helping them to find work. Some users would also have appreciated more in-depth careers advice. At a basic

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<sup>12</sup> Based on average weekly earnings.

level many of the interviewees would have been happy to receive the type of service that was officially intended for them.

*Consequences of street-level modification of policy*

Customer service was also affected by the street-level modification of policy. Users did not necessarily receive the service that was intended. This can be both to the benefit and detriment of users' interests. For example, if policy is re-created to be less disciplinary (see Chapter Five and Blackmore, 2001) then users can be advantaged. However, if interviews are much shorter than intended and the basic job matching function is undermined (as demonstrated in Chapter Five) then users can be disadvantaged. The following quote demonstrates one man's reaction to the re-created version of policy that he received:

UP 5:           They've no time for you, sort of thing . . . It was just sort of quickly 'there you go, that's you' sort of thing, so. I think they could spend a wee bit more time with people. And try to help them out as much as they can, but. They don't seem to do that. From start to finish they've never done that with me, so. I would prefer it if you came in and maybe they sat down with you for five minutes. Just spoke to you and looked through what there was on the thing [vacancies on the computer] and things like that. I mean they could help a hell of a lot of people if they done things like that, but they never ever do.

What is interesting about this particular complaint is that that service that the user desires is exactly the service that official policy dictates he should receive.

### **Lack of Control**

Users lacked choice in whether or not they accessed the service and in whether the service offered what they wanted and needed. After having approached the Jobcentre, users also lacked control over how they were processed and the opportunities available to them. Rather than being customers, users saw themselves as being subject to control. Benefit recipients were compelled to behave in certain ways according to a complex structure of rules. The following quote is from a man who resisted the customer label, describing his relationship with the Jobcentre as:

UP 23: More of a, I don't know, sort of 'them' and 'us' sort of thing, more I'm subject to their rules, to their . . . I've got to behave in certain ways obviously to be entitled to my dole cheque. I don't have a sort of customer's right sort of thing. I can't come to them to complain about the system, or at least I feel I can't go and complain about this aspect of the service or

that aspect of the service cause I just don't see how much difference it would make.

Compulsion is a central defining feature of interactions between staff and registered unemployed users in the Jobcentre. Users know that staff have 'power to take away the only lifeline I have left at the moment, which is my fortnightly giro' (UP 23). In order to continue to receive Jobseeker's Allowance, people must satisfy a series of conditions and participate in a range of activities. To users this felt like officials 'can pull the strings whatever way', so if 'the government says 'jump' and you've got to say 'how high?'

UP 31: If they want to see you you've got to go and see them. If you don't go and see them you don't get paid. You know. And you've got to get money to live. So it's just a vicious circle. If they ask you to do somersaults you've got to do it cause that's what the system declares. So you don't think about it. They say 'right you've got to be there on a certain day'. Fair enough. You go. So.

This meant that instead of feeling like customers, interviewees said they felt like 'a pleb' (UP 16), 'a problem' (UP 32), 'a loser' (UP 22), 'a waster' (UP 29) or an 'irritant' (UP 28). Interviewees also had their own alternative descriptions of the relationship they had with staff at the Jobcentre, each emphasising the powerlessness of being subject to official control.

UP 19: I imagine it more as a farm. And you're cattle coming in you know and you're going through the process of filling in forms, going back out. Look round, filling out forms, back out. It's like a clock going round and round in circles. But, more of a cow than a customer.

UP 26: It's just an institution feeling. It's like being in a hospital. You don't really feel like you're a customer if you've got a broken arm, just you're in a hospital and you have to get things done. It's like that kind of thing.

### *Having to wait*

A lack of control was apparent when users were required to wait. This waiting reinforced the power relationship between worker and unemployed person. The great majority of unemployed people who visited the Jobcentre regularly, and especially those who had been unemployed for more than six months, had had to wait for what they considered to be unacceptably long periods of time. There was, however, variation in what people defined as an acceptable amount of time to wait. Some users were willing to wait for 10 minutes, while others found this to be excessively long. Some users found waiting more problematic than others, with a small minority of short-term unemployed people never having experienced long waits, whilst others considered waiting to be 'definitely the worst thing' (UP 16) about the Jobcentre.

Interviewees provided examples of having to wait in different parts of the office. The average waiting times for each activity, e.g. making a fresh claim, signing on and enquiring about jobs, varied. The longest reported waiting times of 45 minutes (UP 12) and 95 minutes (UP 19) were for interviews with advisers where there was no flexibility in the waiting time for. This is unlike e.g. signing on when users could go away and come back at any time during the one hour slot they were allotted. Waiting times seemed to be lengthy even in situations where users could come back at another time, for instance it was not uncommon for interviewees to complain of having to wait half an hour to enquire about job vacancies.

Many of the interviewees found waiting for long periods of time, usually defined as more than 10 minutes, frustrating or irritating. The reasons for this being not only the boredom of waiting but also its symbolic meaning to users who felt that having their time 'wasted' and 'sitting about doing nothing' enforced their feelings of powerlessness. Interviewees felt that having to wait and being ignored by staff meant that they were not considered to be important and that their time was not valued. Users felt the attitude of staff was one of 'you've got plenty time, you're no' working' (UP 27). Being required to wait became all the more frustrating when contrasted with the rigidity of the rules affecting claimants.

Enforced waiting demonstrates the lack of service alternatives and also reinforces the point that users are non-voluntary (Lipsky, 1980). If these

users really were customers in the purest sense they could seek an alternative service provider once waiting times had exceeded the time that they considered to be acceptable or the times guaranteed by the Jobseeker's Charter.

A similar source of discontent among Jobcentre users that highlighted the way they were processed and objectified was that they feel 'shunted about' (UP 11) and pushed from pillar to post. This happened, within different parts of the office and between different offices, usually the Benefits Agency and the Jobcentre but also local authority offices (particularly for users who were claiming Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit) or between desks of the same office. The powerlessness of waiting could be duplicated in several different offices before users had their enquiry dealt with.

#### *Lack of Privacy*

Feelings associated with lack of control were heightened by the loss of privacy that making a benefit claim entailed. Users had to trade their personal biographical details for the chance of claiming benefit, without knowing how that information would be interpreted or to what uses it might be put. One user commented that 'you've got to tell them your life story before you can get a penny out of them' (UP 1). Some users felt violated by the extent of personal information required because it symbolised a relinquishment of power and control.

UP 4: They've got everything about you. [. . .] You feel like that's reaching too far into your own privacy. Even though they're only doing their job it feels like as if they're right in, knowing everything about you, more than you know yourself.

Whilst the open-plan office layout, without screens or buffer boards, was generally conducive to the development of good staff-user relations, it also meant that privacy and confidentiality could be compromised. Users complained that users and staff sitting at adjacent desks could overhear what they were saying and even see the computer screen that displayed their details. This could be very upsetting for some users. For instance for a 17 year old woman whose distressing conversation regarding her pregnancy and poor relationship with her own parents was heard by a variety of staff and users who happened to be in the vicinity of the reception desk when she arrived for her appointment. In his observations of a social work office Hall (1974) has previously observed a similar 'general lack of privacy for visitors when explaining to the receptionist their reasons for visiting the office' (1974: 121). These situations were exacerbated by the receptionists who were 'accustomed to tales of misery and deprivation, were hardened to most of the stories they were told and failed to see the lack of privacy as a problem' (Hall, 1974: 122).

### **Lack of Purchasing Power**

Users lacked choice and control. Fundamentally, they lacked purchasing power. As Jobseeker's Allowance claimants, their income was regulated,

the prevalence of means-testing (see Chapter Three) meaning that many short-term and almost all long-term Jobseeker's Allowance users were living below poverty levels. Users had very little control over their income and had to accept the level of benefit that was set by law. The legacy of the low levels of benefit available in the UK can be traced back to the Nineteenth Century principle of 'less eligibility' associated with the poor laws (Veit-Wilson, 1998). Official policy seems to have continued to be targeted at an image of 'the unemployed', who are thought to have certain past work experiences and particular morals and behaviours. During the interaction between front-line staff and users there is a clash between the type of policy that is to be implemented and the experiences and needs of the people using the service. In many cases, policy simply does not fit those it meant to be designed for. Unemployed people are a heterogeneous group who have various backgrounds, past work experiences, different skill levels and educational qualifications. They relate to the implementation of policy in different ways. This is an important factor in shaping staff-user relationships.

Interviewees, with a few exceptions, were unanimous that the levels of benefit were insufficient to cover the costs of living during periods of unemployment. Interaction with staff was part of the 'necessity' of claiming benefit. They saw the determination of benefit levels as something that was outside of their control and were aware that there were therefore limits to what they could expect.

UP 13: Well there's nae use complaining cause that's the set rate and that's the set rate, you know what I mean? You will get by if you've got to get by.

Some interviewees found that the low levels of Jobseeker's Allowance actually made it more difficult to find work.

UP 20: I'm totally skint. I can't get access to a computer. Ehm, Jobseeker's Allowance it's yeah. Ehm, not a lot to live on.

Low benefits had greater effects for those who lived a further distance from the Jobcentre, but did not qualify as postal claimants. The cost of using local public transport made it very difficult for them to attend the office to look for jobs. A lack of money meant that some users had to borrow money from friends and family, the repayment of which left them short on the next fortnight's worth of benefit. Living in poverty made life difficult for unemployed users. One interviewee spoke of the difficulty of living on the amount of Jobseeker's Allowance money he received and the cumulative effect of having to miss one bill to pay another, driving him further and further into debt. Certain circumstances presented people with dilemmas. UP 8, for instance owned a car, which he considered gave him a better chance of finding and keeping work. Without the money to run it and with the expense of public transport it did not know whether to sell it or keep it. Similar problems of poverty and unemployment have been well documented for many years.

Users are denied purchasing power in a variety of contexts because their incomes keep them below poverty levels. In their dealings with the Jobcentre, they do not pay for services and cannot take their custom elsewhere. They are also denied information about the financial 'product' they receive. Jobseeker's Allowance can only be accessed by completing long and complex forms, which were a source of irritation to many users. Precise information about how the final amount of benefit is calculated can be difficult to obtain. For instance, one man reported difficulties when he wanted to know how his means-tested benefit had been calculated because he had received less than he had expected:

UP 2: My benefit was like, they said you'll get this much each week. And I was saying to them, well how do you work that out, you know. Come on, why am I getting so little when it says in the booklet I should get this. And they weren't willing to tell me at first and I was saying 'Look I don't want to create a fuss I just want to know how you've come to this thing.' So finally after about sort of quarter of an hour arguing and then on the phone to people upstairs I was allowed upstairs to talk to somebody to tell my how they calculated it! Which was great cause then you knew.

## **Conclusion**

Users experienced unemployment policy in a range of different ways. Generally, interviewees resisted the market-based terminology of customer service. At best, users could only be described as pseudo-customers because, with few exceptions, they did not choose to use Jobcentre services, but depended on them as a matter of economic necessity. This verifies Lipsky's (1980) assertion that users of street-level bureaucracies are non-voluntary. In becoming a benefit recipient, people underwent a process of transformation from being a citizen to becoming a user, moving from the legitimate role of formal employment to the stigmatised role of unemployed. This meant that contact with the Jobcentre was often associated with negative experiences, a factor which had a significant impact upon the staff-user relationship. Most of those interviewed felt uncomfortable and embarrassed in the Jobcentre office because they were confronting their unemployed role in a public way. Receiving income from Jobseeker's Allowance also made some users feel like they were begging because the relationship was not reciprocal in the same sense as paid employment. Despite this, users still retained a strong sense of entitlement to benefits because they felt that they had personally and collectively paid into 'the system' through taxes and National Insurance contributions. The low rates of benefit also meant that users were likely to experience poverty whilst relying on JSA as their primary source of income. Users did not consider themselves to be customers because their relationship was to the state.

There was much criticism of the quality of the service in the Jobcentre and there was a wide gap between the sort of service that users wanted and thought would help them find work and the service that was available. The main issues were insufficient assistance in finding work, inadequate vacancies advertised in the office and a mismatch between notified vacancies and the skills, qualifications and occupational experience of users. Very few of the advertised vacancies were for skilled or professional positions. There was a relatively high incidence of low grade work and part-time and temporary vacancies were not uncommon. This was a magnified reflection of the state of the current flexible labour market, that was inevitable because of the Jobcentre's over-dependence on vacancies from the lower end of the market. The demand from interviewees was overwhelmingly for 'proper jobs' that were paid fairly, full-time and long-term. In some cases the type of service that users wanted was the type of service that they were officially meant to receive.

Users were also deprived of choice over the service they received. They were subject to a series of strict controls and had to comply with the regulations for benefit entitlement, which have become tighter in recent years and included training programmes that were considered to be 'useless'. Users were therefore more likely to describe themselves as cattle than as customers. The powerlessness of being denied choice and being made subject to control was reinforced by regularly being made to wait before accessing services and by a lack of privacy. There was, therefore, evidence of dissatisfaction (reaching intense levels in some

cases). There did not seem to be a close correlation between what clients required and what was provided for them.

Finally, users were not customers because they did not have purchasing power. They could not take their custom elsewhere and the very nature of a system of income maintenance means that users depended on the service for their income, which represents an inversion of usual customer relations. This lack of purchasing power was combined with feelings of dehumanisation, for instance being 'shunted about' between different sections of the office, or between different types of offices. This shows that despite the new managerialist emphasis on high quality customer service, the majority of interviewees were not impressed with the service they received. Clients were for the most part powerless, and this was the heaviest influence on the character of their encounters with staff.

The term 'customer' was therefore a useful tool for excavating down to uncover the core characteristics of the staff-user relationship. Aside from superficial improvements to the physical space in which interactions occur, new managerialism had not made noticeable changes to the conditions under which people received policy. Whilst the introduction of the term 'customer' might signal an aspiration for improvements to service delivery, the reality of visiting the Jobcentre did not match up. The fundamental basis of service provision was experienced as involving compulsion, conditionality and punitive measures that restricted and dictated behaviour. This means that users were represented in the official policy

arena by a label that did not depict the existing relationship. The continued use of the term 'customer' therefore reinforces the multiple levels of powerlessness that leave unemployed people at the bottom of the policy-making hierarchy, despite the fact that the service is said to exist for them.

This chapter has, therefore, provided insight into the meanings that policy holds for those who use the service and an appreciation of the reasons why users might resist or contest official definitions and policy solutions (a point developed in Chapter Eight). It brings users' perspectives to the forefront of understanding the policy process in ways that have been lacking (see Chapter Two). Taken together, Chapters Five and Six have painted a double sided picture of implementation that shows how staff and users each relate to official policy and discourse. This takes a step beyond the existing UK-based policy implementation literature, which has tended to focus on either one side (e.g. Blackmore's 2001 study of staff) or the other (e.g. Howe's, 1991 study of unemployed people). This understanding provides the essential precursor for the analysis of how policy is accomplished as a two-way social process, which follows in Chapters Seven and Eight.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Accomplishing Unemployment Policy: staff roles and the categorisation of clients**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter Five identified the external constraints that led to the recreation of policy and Chapter Six established the meanings that the Jobcentre and interviews with staff held for users and the staff-user relationship. This chapter takes the argument a step further to suggest that the implementation of unemployment policy in a Jobcentre is a process of interactional accomplishment. Policy implementation is, therefore, also affected by the perceptions and beliefs that staff themselves bring to their jobs. Rather than viewing policy implementation as an impartial and unilateral application of predefined rules, this chapter reveals the contested nature of social policy at the interface between those social actors who deliver policy and those who receive it. In doing so it recognises the two-way nature of policy accomplishment at street-level, which is played out within the boundaries of a strict power relationship. This accomplishment of policy takes place through a series of social processes, which are employed by both parties in order to shape the interaction.

As the first of a pair of chapters investigating the dynamics of the staff-user relationship through interaction, this chapter focuses on staff perspectives on the accomplishment of policy. One social process that is involved in the accomplishment of policy is that of categorising users in different ways. Employment Officers made two types of categorisations. The first, 'administrative categorisation', was the process by which citizens were transformed into clients. The second, 'moral categorisation', was a more subjective process by which users were constructed in different ways and dealt with accordingly e.g. as 'good' or 'bad' clients.

### **Constructions of Client 'Types': classification and 'people-processing' (Prottas, 1979)**

Unemployment policy is accomplished at street-level through the face-to-face interaction of staff and users. Front-line staff did not implement policies uniformly, so to understand the processes by which variation occurred it is necessary to take a closer look at the talk between staff and users<sup>1</sup>. From the staff perspective, one of the primary social processes by which this happened was the categorisation of clients. Categorisations were dependent upon the assumptions and perceptions that staff put into operation in their interactions

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis seeks to understand the culturally specific meanings associated with the interaction and does not attempt an in-depth conversation analysis, better done by those such as Hyden (2001) and Olesen (2001) who take talk as their main focus.

with users. Lipsky points out that front-line staff construct clients as they process them bureaucratically:

The social construction of the client, involving the client, others relevant to the client, and the public employees with whom they must deal is a significant process of social definition often unrelated to objective factors and therefore open to the influences of prejudice, stereotype, and ignorance as a base for determinations (1980: 69).

Client 'types' provided Employment Officers with a way of distinguishing between the many different users that they saw every day. The role of the street-level bureaucrat is to transform 'complex human beings, into categories/attributes that can be processed by the organisation. It is this transformation that allows the organisation to fulfil its function, by providing a basis on which services are rendered to individuals now constituted as 'clients' (Kingfisher, 1996: 83).

Two types of client categorisation could be distinguished from the way that Jobcentre staff processed users. The first, *administrative categorisation*, was a necessary part of how the Jobcentre operated, which governed entitlement to benefits and influenced how users would be processed bureaucratically. The second type, *moral categorisation*, was based on staff beliefs and moral

judgements about users. Both forms of categorisation affected the way in which users were treated and the type of outcomes that were possible for them.

### **Administrative Categorisation: the process of constructing clients**

Staff were required to 'judge and control clients for bureaucratic purposes' (Lipsky, 1980: 73). It was to this end that administrative categorisation was designed. This part of the categorisation process was the official way in which citizens became reconstructed as clients. The person presenting him or herself to the Jobcentre was processed according to a standard predefined 'menu of existing client types' (Prottas, 1979: 4). The ways in which users were initially categorised, and sometimes subsequently recategorised, determined how they would be processed. Administrative categories could therefore have important consequences for users.

#### *Becoming a Client*

The main point at which this categorisation happened was when a user registered as unemployed at the Jobcentre. At this stage users were sorted into different administrative categories. Exactly which client category a user ended up in depended on the negotiation process that occurred during the initial interviews.

The receptionists acted as the first gatekeepers, being in a position to either grant or deny access to the services on offer (Rees, 1978: 10). It was possible for the receptionist to give an indication of whether someone was likely to receive Jobseeker's Allowance, which might cause a potential user not to pursue a claim because they thought they might not be eligible. Receptionists therefore held the key to the first administrative category - that of becoming a Jobseeker's Allowance user (which is similar to Hall's, 1974, findings in a social service department). This task was entrusted to workers who were of the lowest administrative grade, often on short-term contracts (only one of the receptionists had been employed by the ES for more than a few months), who had not received in-depth training and therefore did not have the detailed knowledge of the complex benefits system that would enable them to make an accurate decision about whether someone would or would not be eligible for payment. The receptionists were aware of the importance of their role as gatekeepers.

SM 15: First of all we assess the person and decide if they should sign on. We decide which type of benefit they would qualify for. We issue them with forms. We basically assess everyone [. . .] we decide what's happening for each client.

One receptionist saw the scope of her role as involving more than just advising people about whether they will be eligible for benefit.

SM 35: We make sure that they are genuine claimants. If they're not fit, actively seeking work and available for work then they shouldn't be claiming.

### *Coaching Users*

What the receptionists did in this initial part of the claiming process was not confined to collecting information. At the reception stage workers could coach users in on how to fill in the claims forms. In this way the receptionists influenced how users were categorised and therefore the way in which they would be treated later. One example of coaching a user in their interest concerns a user who left her second last job voluntarily:

SM 35: (To user) It has to go to the Adjudication Officer because we're not allowed to make any decisions about that. If you just give me some more information about why you left that job. So just say it was for a better job and that.

The receptionists had the opportunity to make the claiming process either more or less difficult for people. During the same interview above the staff member reassured the user, telling her:

SM 35: So don't worry too much about it.

The receptionist could also influence how a user completed the claim forms, which in turn determined both how they would be processed and what they could be compelled to do later. One example of this was in a user's choice of work they are looking for.

SM 35:       What type of work is it that you're looking for?

User:         Outdoor work.

SM 35:       Is that general labouring, or . . . ?

User:         Well, countryside ranger.

SM 35:       Right. Well, you'd have to obviously think about other types of work because country ranger work is few and far between. So it might be like a trainee position or something that you could get with that. Is there any other type of work that you would consider?

User:         Well, temporary work till next year, 'cause I might be going to college.

In this example the older female receptionist persuaded the young male user that it was unreasonable for him to only look for jobs in the main occupation that he was interested in. Receptionists were also required to check the information provided by users. This involved querying availability for work, during which users could be persuaded to amend their forms to what the receptionist regarded as 'reasonable' hours of availability, usually persuading users to comply with maximum availability for work.

SM 35:        Could you do a Saturday or Sunday?

User:         Well, usually I go away with the cadets at the weekends.

SM 35:        It's just because shops usually open on a Saturday and a Sunday. The employer would probably expect you to work then. Would you be willing to work Saturdays and Sundays?

User:         Yes.

These tactics were also used by management grade advisers during Fresh Claims interviews. They ensured that users could be processed more easily and categorised more clearly for administrative purposes. Miller (1991) and Anderson (1999) describe such persuasion strategies as 'witcraft', emphasising the ways in which state employment agencies lead users to fulfil

particular goals. Jobcentre advisers also used 'witcraft' to persuade users to take certain courses of action during other types of interviews, for instance to convince users to participate in training courses.

### *Occupational classification and previous work experience*

During the Fresh Claim interview, advisers converted the information provided by the user on the application form (and vetted by the receptionists) into a series of entries in the Labour Market System (LMS) computer system. One part of this was to enter Standard Occupational Classifications (SOC) codes for each client. These codes were then used to search the computer system for job vacancies that would suit the user. Staff used a smaller subsection of SOC codes in their everyday use than the full range available to them, which is an example of one of the simplifications adopted to make the job more manageable (Lipsky, 1980: 83). The information entered by the adviser determined how the user would be treated later. These categorisations could mean the difference between a user having an opportunity to apply for a job and not having that opportunity, the consequences of which may mean getting work or remaining unemployed.

Occupational classifications influenced the attempts that front-line staff would make to match users to vacancies. Despite job matching being an officially dictated part of every signing on interview, staff were more likely to carry out job searches for some users than others, varying according to the type of

work they were looking for. If front-line staff considered there to be very few vacancies in certain occupations (e.g. teaching or forestry) they developed a habit of not conducting vacancy searches for users seeking those types of work unless specifically requested by the user. Similarly, occupational categories like SOC code 990 'Other Elementary Occupations', for which there was a large proportion of vacancies, also signalled non-action for staff. This time Employment Officers were unlikely to check for vacancies because there were almost twice as many unemployed people seeking this type of work than there were notified vacancies (statistics from the Employment Information Unit © Office for National Statistics).

SM 6:           It's because we're time-bound. It's like: 'You're a labourer. Oh right. Sign on the dotted line.' Then they're out of here. If we had more resources we could do a lot more.

Employment Officers also excused their lack of job searching activity for users because there are too many jobs to check through. They considered it to be a 'hassle' (SM 20) to search through long lists of vacancies in areas like clerical work where there were a relatively large number of vacancies, which would take too much time. Occupational classification therefore influenced the level of job matching that staff would conduct.

Users were required to make different types of effort to find work according to how they had been classified by staff. At the Fresh Claims stage there seemed to be a trend towards graduates or professionals being required 'to do more than just check the papers' (SM 40). This might include contacting employers speculatively, using the Internet or visiting their university careers service. In contrast, skilled workers might only be asked to look in the local newspaper. There seemed to be a greater expectation that users who had a degree qualification, or had previously done professional work, would be able to find another job more easily than other job seekers, whereas those who were less skilled could be expected to be unemployed for longer. This can be partly explained by the difference in the type of work that the users were looking for, but it seemed that graduates or professionals were being required to pursue many more avenues than skilled or unskilled workers are.

What was required of certain people was also related to the type of work they were seeking:

SM 10:        If it was maybe clerical work or something we would probably ask them to contact the Jobcentre three or four times a week because we get quite a high turnover of that type of work.

Another example of the use of information collected at the Fresh Claims stage was in the case of previous work experience. Front-line staff played an

important role in controlling access to the vacancies advertised in the Jobcentre. Employment Officers rationed vacancies by being selective about which users they would allow to apply for vacancies and this varied according to administrative categorisation. There were also examples of access being denied to certain vacancies on the grounds of age and sex. Previous experience of a particular type of work was often viewed by staff as a prerequisite for applying for positions, whether the employer had specified this or not.

SM 20: This is the people we're getting in this afternoon (pointed at files). The first one there is a labourer so there was nothing for him. The second one's a waiter, but he hasn't done any waiting so there's no point putting him forward for anything because an employer wouldn't want him.

In this case the Employment Officer did not check the LMS to see if there were any vacancies that she could suggest to the user (despite there being live vacancies for waiters on the system) simply because he did not have any previous experience. Although vacancies were usually advertised on the self-service boards in the office, a user might assume that if the worker did not mention a suitable vacancy then nothing was available. So although there was another way of finding out about vacancies, staff did limit access to information based on an assumption about what employers would want in

relation to an administrative category. They did not view this as discrimination against the long-term unemployed, but as a rational decision that an employer would have made anyway. A similar tendency was identified by Anderson (1999), who demonstrated the ways in which US employment agency staff used a variety of strategies to influence users' decisions about whether to apply for jobs or not, persuading some to apply for jobs they did not want and deflecting others from opportunities that they were keen to pursue.

### **Moral Categorisations: constructing 'good' and 'bad' clients**

Moral categorisations differed from administrative categorisations in that they were less precise and were characterised by some degree of ambiguity. These constructions of clients were made subjectively, based on judgements about users' attributes, behaviour or attitudes (also noted by Cooper, 1985). Lipsky (1980) suggests that this process of distinguishing between different 'types' of client is necessitated by the constraints of working within a public service bureaucracy. Within this framework the behaviour of front-line staff is presented as being determined according to the organisational arrangements and subject to the availability of resources. He seems to imply that were staff not under these constraints they would act otherwise. Making judgements about 'types' is therefore presented as being a rational reaction to a specific work environment. The data described here, however, suggest something qualitatively different – that rather than being a product of a bureaucratic work

environment, distinctions about 'types' were much more prevalent. The evidence shows that users also make judgements about staff and that staff made these kinds of judgement about social actors who were not users.

The initial moral distinction made by staff was between 'good' and 'bad' clients, which was similar to the constructions of clients found by Kingfisher (1996) and the importance of 'moral character' identified by Giller & Morris (1981) and Hasenfeld (1987), particularly in relation to the categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' (Howe, 1990). The type of treatment that users received depended upon the moral judgements made by front-line staff.

### **'Good' Clients**

Many unemployed Jobcentre users were thought to be 'good' clients, the great majority having been deemed indifferently as 'all right' (SM 14). Staff demonstrated a preference for compliant clients and praised those who made their jobs easier, for instance users who brought their CV with them to Fresh Claim interviews, or those who did exactly what was expected of them. This user compliance made processing a quick and uneventful matter of routine. Being 'keen', 'smart and presentable' and even 'nice looking' (SM 30) counted in a user's favour. Users who were deemed to be worthy or deserving of the service offered by staff were thought of as 'good' clients and 'decent people' (SM 21). Employment Officers identified genuine cases as those who were willing to work. The 'really nice ones' (SM 44) might secure a

better standard of service in terms of more staff time and effort. Staff were more sympathetic towards certain types of clients and they would make concessions or bend the rules for them.

Moral categorisations could have the power to overrule administrative categorisations, for instance some users were thought of as deserving even if they did not meet the criteria to receive the service offered, e.g. users who had previously claimed Incapacity Benefit but who were now required to claim Jobseeker's Allowance despite being unable to work because of a health problem. Older users were often seen as more deserving, particularly since they had 'paid in all of their life', pointing to the prevailing recognition of earned entitlement to benefit.

SM 32:        You know the genuine ones. There are some men in their late 40s or early 50s who've been employed for years. Then they get made redundant. That's very difficult. You really feel for them. They're just not going to get work again.

The most likely reason for users to be constructed as deserving was if they showed a willingness to work. 'Good' clients were thought to be unemployed through no fault of their own, their lack of employment being explained in terms of external circumstances rather than individual failings. Commitment to the work ethic was demonstrated by those who worked hard at finding

work. In fact being 'keen' to find work was the one characteristic that could override other negative attributes. In the following quote the adviser praised her long-term unemployed user for his willingness to work.

SM 21: One thing that I'm sure of is that he does want to work. He's got a criminal record and he's a bit simple so it makes it hard.

It was possible for users to make the transition from being perceived by staff as a 'bad' client to being accepted as a 'good' client, particularly if they began to demonstrate a willingness to work. One New Deal Personal Adviser described a process akin to character reform.

SM 32: That guy that Audrey was talking to is a cheeky wee monkey. He had a bad attitude when he first came along but after a while, once I got to know him a bit better . . . The other week he was filling in an application form and I was really surprised at how well he filled it in. He said 'aye well I've got to get a job haven't I?'. And I'm sure he will go for that work trial. I've seen a big change in him.

Staff were particularly sympathetic towards certain users who they viewed as vulnerable. In the following example the first worker made special efforts to comfort a user who was in distress. The user was constructed as particularly

deserving because she had a disability, which meant that the member of staff thought she should not have had to claim Jobseeker's Allowance.

SM 44: There's one wee girl that comes in and she's that frightened. She's disabled and her mum won't let her go on Incapacity Benefit. She has to claim Jobseekers. You see her sometimes and she looks really frightened, especially if it's really busy and there's big huge queues.

SM 19: Aye, sometimes you have to keep talking to her when you go by just so she doesn't burst into tears.

SM 44: Aye, she was in the other day and I actually had to go over to her and go (half hug) 'it's all right, you're fine'. She's all right with me now. She has a laugh with me and everything but it's a shame.

The ideal user would therefore be one whose case was administratively straightforward, whose circumstances were 'deserving', whose behaviour was compliant and whose attitude was keen and respectful. Staff also appreciated users who were well-humoured, that they could 'have a good laugh with' (SM 42), which demonstrated some positive aspects to staff-user relations.

## **'Bad' Clients**

There was greater variation in the range of 'bad' client types constructed by staff, although they were usually non-compliant in some sense. 'Bad' clients were often thought to be undeserving of the service provided by staff. Moral constructions of clients were to some extent fluid and overlapping, with individuals often fitted into more than one category. This section outlines some examples of client types that were constructed in negative terms.

### *'Wasters'*

Constructing 'bad' clients was similar to constructing 'good' clients in that willingness to work was one of the key defining moral criteria. There was criticism of users who were thought to be unwilling to work or not actively seeking work. These users were sometimes referred to as 'wasters' (SM 25). Being a 'waster' was related to various individual failings of behaviour and attitude. For instance, one New Deal Personal Adviser referred to one of his users as a 'lazy big shite' (SM 26) and another senior Employment Officer remarked that 'if they're any good they should have a job' (SM 24). 'Wasters' were those who wanted something for nothing.

SM 44: I think there is 1% that you get in all walks of life that are not wanting to work and are just wanting to sponge the system.

One New Deal Personal Adviser described how she reacted to users who were not well motivated and expressed a preference to work with keener clients who she admitted she would help more.

SM 32: You're supposed to spend more time on them than I do. That's terrible isn't it? If they sit down and they're like (made fed-up face and shrugged) I'm like 'why should I bother then?'. It's a terrible attitude. One guy wanted to do construction. I arranged a job for him and he got work boots and everything. It was meant to start on Monday. Did he turn up? No he did not. I was fizzing. Fizzing. I said 'you've not seen my anger yet, but you will'. He's not been in yet. He was meant to come in but he didn't show. He's got another appointment for next week. He's probably too scared. It was only for six to eight weeks right enough, but it's a foot in the door. That was £25 for nothing. If they're keen I help them more.

The level of motivation displayed by a user was therefore a key factor in determining the level of help they would receive from staff. Those who were disadvantaged most were likely to have least motivation and were therefore likely to receive less help from staff. This means that staff behaviour could compound the difficulties already faced by some users (Handler, 1992).

Although staff did often recognise the barriers that made it difficult for users to get work, welfare dependency appeared in these explanations alongside sympathy.

SM 17: People don't want to work because they wouldn't get as much money because they get their rent paid and their Council Tax [Benefit] and that. I think a lot of them have become dependent on the system. It's a shame.

Although these users were breaking the conditions for claiming benefit they were often able to avoid penalties for various reasons. Staff were reluctant to take action to stop a user's benefit because it required a lot of effort on their part to complete the paperwork.

Young men were often felt to be 'wasters' since 'a lot of them can't be bothered working' (SM 37) or that they 'dinnae ken how to work' (SM 44). Staff expected these clients to be less compliant, and particularly unlikely to attend appointments, especially early morning appointments.

'Young lads' could also present a challenge in other ways. The Employment Officer who conducted interviews for those 16 and 17 year olds claiming the Severe Hardship version of Jobseeker's Allowance described why:

SM 7: A lot of them are a bit cocky and think they're a hard man because they're in here signing. Either that or they're very quiet and they just say 'aye' and 'no' and again it's just with coming straight out of school. They don't have any experience of stuff like being in an office and the job environment and how to act. Sometimes they sit and look about and you're trying to talk to them and they're just looking about. The way people react is quite different from an adult or however you want to put it.

In this example there are several characterisations of young clients, relating to how they react to the Jobcentre environment and how they accomplish their interaction with staff. For some young people this was a very difficult process that are not able to negotiate easily. In the case of the type of client referred to as 'cocky' or a 'hard man', attending the Jobcentre was related to a sense of self. The staff perception in this case was of a young man exerting his masculine identity within a challenging context.

*The Unemployables: 'They're useless some of them'*

'Wasters' were a closely related category to 'unemployables'. 'Wasters' were those who would not work, whereas 'unemployables' were those who could not work. Staff made critical assessments of users' employability according to a range of criteria including appearance (e.g. 'she's a bit fat and she's got

a ring in her nose' (SM 32)), mental and physical health, personal hygiene and habits like time-keeping, alongside evaluations about work experience, qualifications and relevant skills for the job. Unemployable users were almost always categorised as long-term unemployed for administrative purposes. The category of long-term unemployed could also be understood in moral terms.

SM 13: With the long-term some of them are unemployable, not that the Department will admit to it, but they are. [. . .] If we sent all the riff raff we would lose the employers. They're useless some of them. Because of their lack of qualifications, or lack of skills, their background, their age even, they're unemployable.

Staff therefore accepted that there were users who would never work again. Long-term unemployment was much more readily linked with blame than sympathy as an emotional response. The long-term unemployed were also seen to have 'got into a bad habit' (SM 44). From the staff perspective there were only a limited number of logical explanations for long-term unemployment:

SM 10: They're either not looking for work or they can't work.

The only other option identified by staff was that long-term unemployed people were already working and claiming benefits fraudulently.

A small minority of users had their unemployable status legitimated by staff who took no further action when they were officially meant to do so. Part of the reason for allowing this to pass was that workers knew there was no other benefit option for users in this position.

SM 26: I've got one long-term I passed over because I saw him twice and realised I was wasting my time. He was a 58 year old alcoholic. I wasn't going to get anywhere with him.

On the other hand, there were clients who were categorised as unemployable but who were still pressured to find work.

SM 13: I've got one girl. She's unemployable. There's a lot of them like that. I did tell her she'd have to make more of an effort to find work or she'd get her benefit stopped. . . . I feel even more sorry for the ones that want to work and you know that an employer will take one look at them and not want them.

Some of the long-term unemployed users had been unemployed for a number of years and these clients were often referred to as the 'hard core'

(SM 18), who were 'not a choice group' (SM 24). In some cases there were extra years that had not been officially calculated as unemployment if, for instance, they were claiming Incapacity Benefit, had been in prison or had been full-time carers. These clients were difficult to process because staff had 'no idea what to say to them' (SM 40) and it was thought to be impossible to 'market' this type of client to an employer. Some officials felt that users had needs that were beyond the scope of the Employment Service to help with.

SM 25: You don't know what you're going to be dealing with when they sit down. I had one the other day that was a murderer. He said to me 'no-one will ever employ me'. I said 'I'm sure we'll be able to get you something'. He said 'I've served a life sentence for murdering the wife'. Just like that, matter of fact.

This meant that even measures that had been specifically designed to target long-term unemployed clients could be viewed by advisers as 'just going through the motions' (SM 10). Staff viewed their work with these users as futile, their time being better spent on those with a keener attitude or a greater probability of finding work. This meant that even the most active labour market policy could become an empty bureaucratic process as a result of moral categorisations made by staff.

A very small minority of users were classified administratively as unemployable at the Fresh Claims stage. It was a very rare occurrence, but the Fresh Claims supervisor explained how it was possible for a user to be exempted from an occupational classification.

SM 2: Clients are categorised into 'work ready' and then assigned to a caseload. . . . We like as many as possible to be in at least one. There is the odd client that isn't put into a caseload, if they're 'not job ready'. Maybe if it's a person with a violent nature, or people we know have had problems in the past, health problems or mental health problems, so they're not suitable for vacancies. They still qualify for work. We would dispute that.

The examples used by the supervisor are interesting in that many of the reasons given for allowing a 'non-work ready' categorisation, were grounds on which Jobseeker's Allowance claims could be disallowed, e.g. health problems.

*'Nutters' and 'Numpties': the benefits and costs of non-compliance*

Staff were agreed that 'the odd one or two' (SM 18) of their clients were 'nutters' (SM 41) and 'numpties' (SM 15). At the extreme end of this category were alcoholics, drug addicts and those with prison records for violent crimes. These were the true 'nutters'. 'Numpties' were a milder version of 'nutters',

constituting a nuisance to staff rather than a distinct danger. These labels were applied to users who challenged the workings of the Jobcentre bureaucracy or displayed discontent, anger or a reluctance to comply. 'Nutters' and 'numpties' were often, but not always, male. However, among the most notorious of the 'nutters' to visit the office was a young woman who had served a prison sentence for stabbing another local woman. 'Nutters' were also likely to be long-term unemployed. These were the clients who were 'really abusive' (SM14) or 'always in causing hassle' (SM 32). Behind the scenes, they were in turn likely to be referred to derogatorily by staff using such terms as 'wee bastard' (SM 32), 'pain in the arse' (SM 3), 'cunt' (SM 32) or 'arsehole' (SM 44). The dynamics of the staff-user relationship were therefore very different for these clients than for the compliant, keen, 'nice ones'. An examination of how staff dealt with conflict from these types of clients reveals some of the power relations that lie just beneath the surface of routine interactions.

'Nutters' and 'numpties' varied in their attitudes towards paid employment. It was not necessarily the case that 'nutters' and their less dangerous counterparts 'numpties' did not want to work. But they were unlikely to be considered as employable. In fact, one reason for this classification could be because the user was making excessive demands for staff assistance in finding work. Being keen to work therefore had an optimum level.

'Nutters' could represent a danger to staff, particularly because the Jobcentre office was open plan and unscreened, which was conducive to a more friendly environment but also meant that staff had to take greater risks with users who could be violent. A small number of users had their files marked 'PV' for 'potentially violent' as a warning that they could be dangerous. However, some Employment Officers felt that this labelling might have a detrimental effect on staff-user relations. Secondly, a criminal record made it more difficult for users to get a job.

### *Controlling Clients*

Staff dealt with trouble in different ways. Some Employment Officers took a pre-emptive approach in the belief that users would respond better if they were spoken to respectfully and given as much assistance as possible. Others chose to be more confrontational in approach, which was in breach of the official guidance and training:

SM 14: I just swear at them. I make sure there's nobody else around and nobody else can hear me then I tell them to 'fucking stop giving me shit'. If they complain I would just deny it.

Although Employment Officers embodied government to the users they dealt with, they did not see themselves as part of 'the system' or 'the government'. One strategy they used in dealing with difficult clients was to deliberately

depersonalise the interview, deferring to 'the rules' as the reason for their action.

SM 48: You do get some hiedbangers that nothing can stop them. What I do if they get a bit out of hand is say to them 'look this isn't personal. It's not between me and you. I'm just the person that has to speak to you about this. If you tell me what you've told me then I have to go by the rules and write a report to my supervisor, otherwise I'll get my arse kicked.' Because they think that it's you that makes up the rules and it's up to you whether or not they get their giro. If you make it not personal then they usually calm down. 'It's not me. I have to do this or I'll get my arse kicked.'

One strategy used by Employment Service workers to manage potentially difficult situations was to tell users that decisions were not made by the adviser themselves, but by a separate faceless decision-maker in a far-off office. This served to distance the staff member from the decision and to distance the user from those who make the decisions. This sometimes happened to such an extent that staff lied to users about who made the decisions that affected them, which in turn had consequences for any trust established between them. It removed responsibility from the shoulders of the adviser and saved any personal recriminations. One example came from

an adviser conducting a Fresh Claim interview for a young woman who was applying for the Severe Hardship version of Jobseeker's Allowance for 16 and 17 year olds.

SM 7: (To user) The only thing we'll need to do is contact your parents. Once we've done that it goes to the Severe Hardship Unit in Glasgow. Once it goes to them they can make a decision more or less straight away. So you come in and sign on on Monday anyway.

After the user had gone away he told me:

SM 7: We tell them that the form goes to the Hardship Unit. Usually that's not the case. I make the decision but I don't tell them that, so that they don't think that I made the decision.

Another response to rule-breaking or trouble was to seek to control or punish users. Users were the subject of control and being a client involved this realisation. Staff could punish users by imposing the rules more strictly, for instance by making users wait (Kingfisher, 1998) or by closely scrutinising the 'Looking for Work' diary during signing on interviews. This became more likely if users persisted in their rule-breaking or if their behaviour or attitude annoyed the official dealing with them. A clear example of the imposition of

control and punishment was in the case of a 'numpty' who had irritated a signing clerk by making what she considered to be excessive demands for information about the New Deal and by being aggressive. The user was a man in his late 30s who had been making various efforts, both within the Jobcentre office and through other means in his own time, to find out if he was eligible to participate in the New Deal for Musicians. The woman dealing with him had very little knowledge about the New Deal and was unable to answer his questions even after enlisting the help of New Deal staff. The user made an appointment with the New Deal receptionist to find out more but did not turn up for it. The user became frustrated and agitated. Between his signing on days he telephoned his MP and also tried to complain to the Jobcentre manager. The latter course of action presented further frustration when he was told that the manager would not speak to him unless he made a complaint in writing. The user recognised the costs of his assertive action.

UP16: It's like now it's a personal vendetta with her you know. And that's purely because I couldn't get information and she said I was being aggressive. 'Well tell me how I'm being aggressive and explain to me why I'm being aggressive?' 'Just by your attitude.' 'Well what do you think is causing my attitude? Because people like you are not dealing with my enquiry. You laughed at me when I said I'd heard something on Radio One'.  
[. . .] You know it's like she's going to scrutinise every form I

bring in. [. . .] But you know now that I'll have to be here every time between nine and ten to sign on. [. . .] I just want to guarantee that I get my giro when I'm supposed to get it. [. . .] Now if I irritate this woman any more, and I appear to be an irritation with her, I could almost, I'd be better off asking to be signed at another time somewhere else because like I feel it's just a personal vendetta with the woman now.

At first this user's response to the situation might seem extreme, but the Employment Officer in question concurred with the user's assessment of the situation.

SM 13: He came in and he was difficult and aggressive. And I'll tell you, I will be giving him a hard time. I'm no' putting up wi' that. The next time he comes in I'm going through his Jobseeker's Agreement with him. He's a music promoter, well if he's that good why is he unemployed? He's no' looking for work. His form had on it 'Looked in Jobcentre'. 'November'. 'Nothing.' Not even a proper date. Just November. I said to him 'have you not got any contacts in the music business Mr. Carpenter?' 'Of course I've got contacts.' 'Well are you telling me you've not spoken to any of them in the last week, or the last month?' 'Of

course I have.' [. . .] He will complain about me but I'm not standing for that.

The punishment exerted by the Employment Officer was decided upon because the client was a 'numpty'. He was categorised morally because he was aggressive and made what the official considered to be extreme demands. The punishment was also an emotional response because the user's behaviour had annoyed the member of staff and she wanted to assert her authority over him. This is an example of the range of factors that influenced how staff dealt with clients and of the possible effects of a 'bad' moral categorisation.

Another example of how users could be punished was through the allocation of appointment times. Users who had inconvenienced staff by being late or missing an appointment could be given the first appointment of the day. The paperwork provided by users at signing on times could be interrogated by staff members who want to put pressure on users who have complained about them. These tactics could also be used to test for users who were 'at it'.

SM 32: There's another guy, Mr Iqbal. I've called him in for a couple of interviews but he hasn't turned up. But I reckon that he's working. Just out of pure badness I arranged his next

appointment for one o'clock because I knew if he was working along at the Alhambra then he wouldn't be able to make it back along for that time. And sure enough he didn't make that interview. And he said for his next interview could we make it for first thing in the morning or last thing at night. So I'm sure he's working.

Time was therefore a significant resource which could be manipulated by staff and users. Despite a general reluctance to refer users for fraud investigation, staff members acted on the judgements they themselves made. These judgements about client types were used as a basis for applying informal penalties and rewards.

When users wasted staff time they momentarily reversed the roles between themselves and staff because workers were kept waiting and had to depend on the user arriving. Young clients and those who signed on by post were more likely to be thought of as time wasters by virtue of their moral or administrative categorisation. Non-attendance, or late attendance, at interviews influenced staff perceptions of particular clients and reinforced prejudices about certain groups of clients.

The tensions of these encounters were highlighted by one adviser, who described signing on interviews with difficult clients as 'a battle of wits'.

SM 10: It's like a game to them. You're taking a lot of anger and a lot of the abuse. At the end of the day you're just a face. It's not you. It's the system.

### *The 'Hoity-Toity' 'Snooty' Ones*

Some of the users that staff found difficult to deal with were those that were better qualified, middle class or professional. Employment Officers often got the impression that the 'snooty ones' felt that visiting the Jobcentre and being processed as a client was 'a bit beneath them' (SM 35). The 'professional people' were contrasted with 'normal folk' (SM 42). These 'hoity-toity people' (SM 17) could make staff feel intimidated or 'a bit out of your depth' (SM 18) because they had attributes that shifted the balance of power in the staff-user relationship. One adviser said they made her feel like 'a silly little girl' (SM 37). It was these 'posh' (SM 37) or 'well-to-do' users that were most likely to be described as arrogant or snobby. One particular user who fell into this category was referred to as 'an arrogant shite' (SM 13).

One implication of these feelings that staff had about more qualified users was that 'hoity-toity ones' could evade close scrutiny of their job search, especially since the Jobcentre was unlikely to advertise vacancies for professional positions. The following quote was taken from an informal interview with a Fresh Claims Adviser directly after his interview with a

professional user. During the interview SM 10 had been less probing with a company secretary than he would be with someone of a more usual occupation because he was afraid that his lack of specialist knowledge would be revealed.

SM 10: Sometimes you get different ones, like that guy [previous user] who was a company secretary. Once I had a minister in and I didn't know what to say to him. We're not like the careers service. We don't know about jobs and we don't know about pay either. One time I had a GP in who put her minimum expected salary down as £60,000. And I mean I don't know if that's reasonable or not. Because I don't know what GPs get paid. There was another guy that came in. He was a company director. And his minimum was £60, 000 as well. And I said to him: 'You've put down your minimum expected salary as £60, 000.' And the guy said: 'Aye that's half what I got.' And so when that guy was in, the company secretary I wanted to ask him what a secretary did. . . . I didn't want to ask him cause I didn't want to feel daft.

There was, therefore, a shift in the balance of power in the staff-user relationship. Unlike 'nutters' or 'numpties', these users could be intimidating

even without realising it, by virtue of their more privileged socio-economic position.

### *The 'At it' Label*

Some users were labelled as being 'at it' (SM 17), meaning that they were involved in some aspect of benefit fraud (although the actual term 'fraudster' was very rarely used by staff). 'Wasters' were usually thought of as lazy or passive, whereas those who were 'at it' were actively abusing the system. Being 'at it' was a source of criticism but did not necessarily cause staff to take the officially warranted action for reasons outlined earlier in this chapter. Making a moral judgement was therefore not necessarily linked to taking action on that categorisation. Certain client types, like those who lived in rural areas and signed on by post, were thought to be more likely to be 'at it'. Those signing on by post were suspected of fraud because their infrequent visits to the office meant they could not be the subject of close surveillance. In this case an administrative category coincided with a moral one.

### *Ambivalence and the categorisation process*

The moral categorisation process was rarely straightforward. There was evidence of ambivalence, particularly if staff were unsure as to whether a client was 'deserving' or 'at it'. Staff were involved in a constant assessment of the validity of the information proffered by users. It seemed to be more difficult for this set of Jobcentre workers to apply clear cut negative labels

than positive ones, which is in contrast to Kingfisher's finding (1996) that negative labels were more usual. There was a deeper ambivalence about bad moral categorisations.

One example of this was in the case of a male user who telephoned the Jobcentre on a Friday to say that he had not received his benefit cheque. He had given the receptionist 'a right earful on the phone' (SM 17) and therefore risked being constructed as a 'bad' client. It was also possible that he could be defined as a 'nutter' because it was anticipated that when he came to the office he would 'probably go ballistic' (SM 17). The source of his anxiety was the fact that without his Jobseeker's Allowance he would not be able to provide the basic necessities for his six children over a bank holiday weekend. On this count he was seen as deserving. The initial suspicions raised by staff were that he had received his benefit cheque but had cashed it unofficially through a pub or a shop. Different staff members (and the same workers over time) fluctuated between belief of his story, in which case he was 'a poor soul' (SM 17) and it was 'a shame for him' and disbelief, in which case he was 'at it'. As the day went on it was discovered that the user had previously had two benefit cheques replaced (i.e. he was given another payment because he said he had not received the first) and that he was being investigated by the Benefits Agency Fraud Investigation Officer. This further heightened suspicions that his claims were not genuine, although staff were still keenly aware of the possible effects on his children if he was telling the

truth. On attending the office the man's distress became apparent when he started to cry during his interview with the supervisor. He was not given another benefit cheque but staff remained ambiguous about his moral categorisation.

Staff seemed to go through a process of becoming accustomed to the difficult circumstances in which some users found themselves. In this way 'people work' de-humanised the staff as well as the users who were part of the bureaucracy.

SM 17: You get hardened once you've been here for ages. When you first start you think: 'That's a shame.' After a couple of months you're like: 'He's at it.' And they probably aren't!

SM 10: You start off like that, trying to help people, but it gets flung back in your face so you stop bothering.

In order to function as street-level bureaucrats the workers had to distance themselves from their emotional responses to user's circumstances and requests.

SM 33: We get irate clients. We get courses on how to deal with it. I mean, there's a time when I would have burst into tears about

things, but you get hardened to it and you know how to handle it. You realise that it's not you personally it's the system.

## **Conclusion**

It has been demonstrated that unemployment policy is accomplished at street-level through the face-to-face interaction between staff and users. The main focus for this chapter was the categorisation process that staff imposed on users. Administrative categorisations were made as a necessary part of the 'people-processing' (Prottas, 1979) function of the Jobcentre as a welfare bureaucracy. The implications of the administrative categorisation procedure were potentially far-reaching. Even those seemingly bland classifications of occupations and previous experience influenced how users were treated differentially by staff in immediate and future encounters. Administrative categories could determine which opportunities would be open to users (e.g. job searches were conducted more frequently for certain SOC codes than others) and could be decisive in setting the precise activities that users would have to meet to satisfy job search activity conditions for the receipt of benefit.

Moral categorisations were made subjectively by staff according to their own value judgements about the attributes, behaviour and attitudes of users. The main distinction was between 'good' and 'bad' clients, who could secure different levels and types of service according to the way they interacted with staff. The process of distinguishing between morally deserving and unworthy

users was identified by Lipsky (1980) as an exercise of discretion based on bias or prejudice. This study has provided empirical evidence to support the theory that front-line staff operate an informal discretionary system of rationing that apportions rewards, punishments and costs on the basis of moral judgments. Kingfisher (1996) made a similar observation of good and bad client types in her study of welfare workers and recipients in the US. Kingfisher found that staff constructed clients in predominantly negative ways, as deceitful or manipulative, lazy or unclean. She argues that these were 'negative traits typically associated with recipients of public assistance – specifically with the 'undeserving poor' (Kingfisher, 1996: 111). However, the Jobcentre workers in this study tended to view most users as averagely good. The 'bad' client type provided an example of the ambiguous and contested nature of policy accomplishment.

The processes of administrative and moral categorisation were distinct but also interrelated. Administrative categories were open to negotiation. At the early stages of administrative categorisation, clients had to co-operate in order to gain access to JSA. The gatekeepers of administrative categories were often low grade, temporary front-line workers. Despite their lack of training and knowledge, these workers could also engage in the 'rhetorical strategy' (Miller & Holstein, 1995) of 'witcraft' (Billig, 1996), usually associated with more senior or experienced members of staff. Moral categorisations could still be made at the earliest stages of a user's contact with the

Jobcentre. This could influence their administrative categorisation. Administrative categorisation could also lead to an increased chance of certain moral categorisations, for instance those 'postals' who lived in remote areas and did not have to attend the office to sign on, were often suspected of being 'at it' because they were physically removed from immediate staff scrutiny to a greater degree than other users who had to visit the office regularly.

The likelihood of categorisations being constructed and used as a basis for policy application seemed to be amplified by the volume of users, the lack of time and the pressure to meet performance targets. Just as Employment Officers responded to policy according to their own autonomous and collective interpretations of the policy 'problem' (see Chapter Five), so they responded to the people they dealt with in ways that were neither predetermined, nor predominantly influenced by their work environment. As human service workers their reactions could just as easily be emotional as objective. Categorisations, and the outcomes that followed from them, were rational in as much as they held an internal logic, but as informal processes they were not transparent and could not be independently scrutinised. There was a very real risk that workers could base categorisations on prejudices that could lead to either direct or indirect discrimination, even in the forms of sexism, ageism or racism.

This is significant because staff mediate between citizen and state. They do so not as empty vessels of policy delivery, but as social actors who have their own deep-seated understandings and belief systems. Staff might not have used all the powers they could to regulate behaviour or punish people, but at the same time they were able to use their power and position to punish people or regulate behaviour in ways that were unintended and unrecognised by official regulations. The move towards official policy being aimed at increased compulsion perhaps does not recognise the significant amount of control and punishment that is already exerted by staff in their dealings with users. The process of policy implementation not only involves the re-creation of policy, but its accomplishment. In Weber's ideal type, bureaucracies are said to operate 'without regard for persons' (1991: 215). It has been demonstrated that in practice the Jobcentre bureaucracy operated 'with regard for persons'.

Until now, the notion of interactional accomplishment has been furthest developed in the US literature. A body of work has emerged that acknowledges the 'social construction of reality in street-level bureaucracies' (Anderson, 1999: 236) and investigates the 'rhetorical strategies' employed by front-line workers in health (Holstein, 1993), welfare (Spencer & McKinney, 1997) and employment agencies (Anderson, 1999, Miller, 1991). These analytical developments have tended to focus on the management of disputes in 'social problems work' (Miller & Holstein, 1995) and the varieties

of persuasion tactics that are utilised to steer users into accepting particular courses of action or intervention. It is perhaps unsurprising, given the residual and coercive nature of the US welfare programmes under study, that these authors assume inherent resistance on the user's part. The evidence provided in this chapter moves the analysis of interactional accomplishment forward along two main tracks.

Firstly, the arguments presented here refine understandings of processes of categorisation that were identified by Lipsky (1980). The US social problems literature tends to divide users into 'regular clients' and 'difficult clients' (Anderson, 1999: 229), all being basically non-voluntary and resistant. An alternative binary division between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' users has dominated British accounts of client categorisation (Cooper, 1985, Dean, 1991, Howe, 1990), a distinction that has arisen from the historical antecedents of present day policy design. This chapter has cut the cake at a different angle, identifying the primary division as being between administrative and moral categorisation. In this case 'deserving' and 'undeserving' users were present in both administrative and moral categories. Front-line staff were shown to react to clients in different ways according to how easily they could be processed. The moral basis of decisions were found to be finely graduated. The fluidity of categories and possibility of movement between 'good' and 'bad' and within subcategories, distinguishes the analysis presented here from existing accounts in the US and UK

literature. It raises the possibility of uncertainty and ambivalence in front-line workers' responses to users, which highlights the intersubjectivity of policy implementation. Decisions were made on a number of different grounds (i.e. not solely on external characteristics e.g. type of claim, age or gender), then reinforced or altered during interactions.

Secondly, this chapter builds on the foundation laid by Kingfisher (1996), in encompassing both sides of the staff-user encounter within the notion of interactional accomplishment. Policy implementation is recognised as a social process that involves the interaction of two sets of actors, who are positioned differently in relation to interpersonal power dynamics and the hierarchy of the policy process. This therefore addresses a gap in the UK policy process literature, which has tended to approach the study of implementation by focusing on the role of front-line staff, without fully integrating the corresponding social processes that users are engaged in (although these have been documented separately elsewhere, e.g. Howe, 1990). This part of the analysis will be further developed in Chapter Eight by elaborating upon the processes of policy accomplishment from the user's perspective, to show that some users were aware of categorisation processes and could employ strategies (whether conscious or not) to influence how they are treated.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Accomplishing Unemployment Policy: users' roles in compliance, contestation, negotiation and co-production**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter Seven has shown the ways in which front-line staff differentiate between the users they process as clients in their daily bureaucratic work, illustrating some of the ways that policy can be said to be implemented differentially, according to administrative and moral categorisations. This chapter builds on the insights from Chapter Six to extend the investigation into the accomplishment of unemployment policy in a way that encompasses the roles played by users in their face-to-face interaction with staff. Here, Jobcentre users are represented as active agents in policy accomplishment, rather than as passive policy recipients. The implementation of policy can then be seen as a two-way social process.

This chapter begins by outlining the idea of policy accomplishment as a two-way process, focussing on the ways that users comply with and contest policy through their interaction with officials. The actively seeking work condition then provides evidence of the ways in which policy can be accomplished and negotiated, using the examples of the Jobseeker's

Agreement and the Looking for Work form. Finally, the concluding section examines examples of the co-production of policy in relation to users who were categorised by staff as 'good' and 'bad'.

### **Policy accomplishment as a two-way process: compliance and contestation**

The accomplishment of unemployment policy involved a complex process of interaction between staff and users. Jobcentre users, like officials, influenced the ways in which policy was applied and the patterns of distribution of benefits and sanctions. Users varied in their approaches to dealing with staff. Howe (1990) distinguished between 'reluctant' and 'assertive' claimants in his study of unemployment in Northern Ireland in the 1980s. Reluctant claimants were those who submitted themselves to being processed by the bureaucracy on the terms set by members of staff, regardless of whether they agreed with particular decisions or courses of action. Alternatively, assertive claimants were those who sought to change the terms of reference of the interaction, or to have a more direct impact on the outcome. Howe (1990) describes 'assertive' claimants in the following way:

such claimants become sensitised to the fact that their relationship to the staff is not predetermined but can be manipulated. When, or if, this happens, these claimants begin to perceive the situation in a new light, and become

aware that, *within limits*, it is possible to play a more active and ambitious role (Howe, 1990: 140).

The majority of Jobcentre users who participated in this research were similar to Howe's reluctant claimants in being compliant and acquiescent (see Handler, 1992). They co-operated with staff during their face-to-face interaction to accomplish policy. Those who exerted their agency in more deliberate ways, like Howe's assertive claimants, were engaged in negotiation, and in certain cases the co-production, of policy (this will be explored in greater depth later in this chapter). Both co-operation and negotiation involve interactional accomplishment, but the latter is a more active form.

#### *Complying with policy*

Jobseeker's Allowance users generally complied with policy and the street-level practice imposed by front-line staff. As Chapter Six has shown, they had little choice in this respect if they wanted to continue to claim benefit. It was also argued in Chapter Six that Jobcentre users had very little control over the policy they were subject to. Even compliant or 'reluctant' (Howe, 1990) users were aware of this, but they yielded to the bureaucratic demands and continued to do anything that was necessary to protect their much-needed benefit income. Accomplishing policy amounted to having to 'show face' (UP1) or 'go along with' what staff wanted them to do (see Chapter Six). The two-way nature of the interaction necessary to accomplish policy was recognised by some users:

UP 12: The staff are quite friendly though when you're actually willing to work with them they are friendly.

Interaction could come to be regarded as 'a game' by both staff and users.

UP 3: I'll just play word games with them. It becomes a game, to anybody that's got regular experience of the place anyway.

### *Contesting policy*

Although Jobcentre users often comply with policy and street-level practice, it was also evident that policy in general and particular staff practices or decisions were contested. Users saw policies as involving surveillance and control, rather than being concerned primarily with the promotion of their well-being. Policy was often viewed as being inappropriate to the needs of those receiving it and users could be very sceptical of new policy initiatives. Jobseeker's Allowance, for instance, was described as a 'government con' that was the 'latest thing the government come up with to try and keep the figures down'. Alterations to official policy were interpreted as developing against the interests of the unemployed.

### *Staff reaction to problems or complaints*

Some interviewees were of the opinion that the tasks of the Jobcentre could be accomplished satisfactorily if there were no complications, but

that if there was a problem the staff presented a united front and used the administrative rules and regulations to defend their action. Users complained that staff just 'quote the rules' (UP 31) and that there was 'no leeway' (UP 31).

UP 31: If it's straight forward there's not a problem but if you seem to have a problem you seem to hit a barrier and all they'll do is quote rules and regulations. And that's, that's it. And unless you know what they're talking about that's you. You're snookered.

Interviewees spoke of being faced with inflexibility when they had a problem. Even when the mistake was made by a staff member it could still mean that users are left without the money they need (UP 25).

### *Trouble*

Some problems culminated in incidents of trouble. The interaction that often ran smoothly was sometimes disrupted by problems that led to heated exchanges. Such instances of trouble have been considered by those like Miller (1983), Spencer & McKinney (1997) and Hasenfeld & Weaver (1996) who have interpreted them from a staff point of view. Hasenfeld & Weaver (1996) consider the conditions under which conflict is likely to happen to be when staff in welfare organisations are dealing with users who do not want to be there but are compelled to attend and are dependent on resources which far exceed availability (cf. Lipsky, 1980).

These conditions are also present for some users during routine signing on times.

Many of the interviewees spoke of instances of trouble, either that they had observed or that they had been directly involved in. One man described an extreme example of trouble that he had observed in another Jobcentre office.

UP 23: I was just sitting down filling out the endless forms when this guy came bursting out of one the interview rooms threatening to stab the guy. Sort of screaming at the security guard and stuff.

Instances of trouble were not common, and there were examples of varying degrees of 'bust ups'. The most serious involved raised voices or physical threats to staff. As discussed above, such behaviour led to users being labelled by officials as 'nutters' (see Chapter Seven). Staff and users were in agreement that trouble usually happened when a user had not received his or her benefit payment at the expected time and came to the office to find out 'where's my 'f'ing money?' (UP 18). One man blamed 'the younger ones nowadays' (UP13) for causing trouble.

UP 13: The younger ones nowadays they want, when they want something they want it right away, you know what I mean. It's a sort of well, they think these people here have got a

magic wand maybe sometimes that they can get them whatever it is that they're needing.

### **Accomplishing and negotiating the 'actively seeking work' condition**

Anyone wishing to claim Jobseeker's Allowance must satisfy the conditions for claiming benefit (see Appendix Six). The recent active labour market policy agenda has placed greatest emphasis on the 'actively seeking work' condition. Accordingly, users must sign a Jobseeker's Agreement to specify their availability for work and the steps that they will take to find work. Users must then sign a fortnightly declaration that they are actively seeking work and they are continuing to comply with the activities outlined in their Jobseeker's Agreement. In addition to this, users are also required to complete a log of their job seeking activities, the 'Looking for Work' form, to be presented to Employment Officers when they sign on. Although the interviewees were in broad agreement that those claiming Jobseeker's Allowance should be expected to be active in looking for work, the methods of putting this principle into practice were contentious.

Almost all of the unemployed interviewees were very keen to assert their willingness to work and the lengths they had gone to in pursuit of employment. As Chapter Six has shown, the interviewees internalised the dominant expectation that labour should be exchanged for income.

UP 21: I've been trying for jobs and that like. I just want to be a hard worker, you know? That's what I want to be.

UP 31: You know, I do actually come in looking for a job and am eager. You know, I'm intelligent. I have qualifications. I should be in work, you know?

However, when they came to the Jobcentre they were confronted by a system designed by elite politicians and civil servants who assumed that unemployed people had the opposite type of motivation and behaviour - that they were 'spongers' who needed to be cajoled and threatened before they would look for work. The consensus was that the system was designed to deal with those who were work shy or fraudulent but this operated against the interests of 'genuine people' (UP31). A tension therefore existed between the level of compulsion that the Jobseeker's Allowance regulations dictated and the level of compulsion that users' felt necessary in their own case.

This tension was further complicated by users' views of other unemployed people. There was some agreement that a minority of 'scroungers' and 'skivers' who were 'not interested in working', had 'never ever had a day's work in their life' and 'know how to get every single penny out of the government that's going' did exist. Users were very keen, however, to contrast to their own role as a deserving worker with the negative stereotype of the undeserving unemployed person (Howe, 1990, found a

similar tendency in his Northern Irish study). 'These people' were often talked about but rarely identified as an actual individual.

UP1: It's no' everybody that's been on the Bru for years. A lot of folk have been working. . . . maybe half of them need pushed. Half of them arnae even interested in a job. But they dinnae realise that half them are interested in a job. They just cannae get you nane here. And they cannae get you one outside either 'cause its hard, especially this time of year, ken?

This image of the undeserving unemployed was on a par with Kingfisher's (1996) notion of 'bad-people-exist-but-I'm-not-one-of-them', which was a discursive tool employed by US women welfare recipients to define themselves as deserving. Kingfisher describes this in the following way:

The strategy entailed acknowledging the existence of 'bad' individuals – individuals who were lazy, who lied and cheated – while simultaneously claiming that they themselves did not belong to this undeserving category (1996: 58).

When this was related to the actively seeking work condition, Jobcentre users were often resistant to compulsion in their own case, but felt that it should be applied to the mythical undeserving unemployed person (c.f.

Dwyer, 2000). The following sections explore the ways in which the actively seeking work condition was contested, accomplished and negotiated in the examples of the Jobseeker's Agreement and the 'Looking for Work' form.

### **The Jobseeker's Agreement**

At the Fresh Claims interview, users and staff were expected to co-operatively produce a Jobseeker's Agreement, based on the forms that had already been completed and a discussion during the interview. Once printed out and signed by the user this becomes a legally binding agreement of the activities that he or she will undertake each week to satisfy the 'actively seeking work' condition for entitlement to Jobseeker's Allowance. Creating a Jobseeker's Agreement therefore provides an example of the accomplishment of policy. It also marks an important stage in the 'people-processing' (Prottas, 1979) function of the Jobcentre bureaucracy, representing the point at which someone becomes a user (if their benefit claim is accepted). It is during the Fresh Claims interview and the accomplishment of the Jobseeker's Agreement that users become slotted into client types.

For users, creating the Jobseeker's Agreement could present difficulties, because the complexities of their previous work experience, future plans and aspirations had to be distilled down into three simple categories that would later be used for the purposes of job matching (therefore structuring the assistance it would be possible for them to receive from staff). The

interviewees sometimes also had several different jobs that they had done in the past or were looking for now. People might no longer be prepared to look for the type of work that they once did or could be willing to accept various types of work that they would not necessarily specify. Some of the interviewees also had very vague notions of the type of work they would want to do, which could be related to a lack of experience in some cases. One young man had never worked since being at school and was interested in finding a trade.

UP 9: I'm looking for anything. In general I'm looking for something that . . . a trade, like joinery, mechanics, plumbing. Something that'll just give me a trade so that I can continue.

To the user, this was a rational attempt at flexibility. However, the Jobcentre bureaucracy was designed to deal only with three specific job titles. Unfortunately, in this case the man quoted above had little chance of being able to find such a position through the Jobcentre because of the limited vacancies available and staff insistence on having relevant experience before applying for positions (see Chapter Five).

Graduates and professionals encountered particular problems in the administrative classifications used by the Employment Service workers to categorise clients. Specialised professions were not always included in the SOC codes, one interviewee (UP 20), for instance, was told that environmental management did not have a code. Specific job titles can be

confusing for staff members who have not have careers training, leading them to offer people inappropriate vacancies.

Users viewed completing the Jobseeker's Agreement as a condition that they had to comply with in order to qualify for benefit. They were therefore resigned to the necessity of the task. The following quote demonstrated policy accomplishment through compliance:

UP 21:       Just sign that you know just give me my money and that. It's just three options or some stuff like that and what you want to dae and I think mines a joiner and mechanic and something else. I mean that was it. Sign. You're agreed basically. It's just keeping the government happy isn't it?

On the other hand, the compilation of a Jobseeker's Agreement could involve contestation. Whether they agreed with the requirement or not, Jobcentre users had to complete the agreement before they would be entitled to claim benefit. One man reflected on his past experience of negotiating an agreement.

UP 23:       The way the guy conducted the interview was as if he was drawing things out of me and he was using it out of context, in the interview sheet. So at the end of the interview he asked me to sign the thing and I said 'well wait a minute I didn't actually say that'. He was sort of going, he was asking

this that and the next thing and I was saying 'well I'll be certainly looking for jobs, I'll be looking for as many a week'. And he was saying 'well like how many?'. 'Well as many as I can I don't know maybe 12 a week out the papers or something like that.' You can't always find 12 a week but now I'm supposed to sign this and be under obligation to provide evidence that every two weeks I'll apply for 12 jobs in the papers. Which sounds easy enough to start off with but you find yourself applying and applying for the same jobs.

In this example the staff member was attempting to use 'witcraft' to lead the user to agree to active job seeking activity. In this case the user was able to negotiate the requirement to allow him to apply for fewer vacancies. The creation of the Jobseeker's Agreement was one area in which users, as well as staff (cf. Anderson, 1999), could exercise a limited degree of control or 'witcraft' in the interaction.

By managing how they exchanged information, users could present their biographical details and previous work experience in misleading ways. This limited room for manoeuvre allowed some users to be more active in negotiating their administrative categorisation and the particular actively seeking work conditions that they would be subject to. For instance, users could choose not to mention certain types of work that they had previously done or would be prepared to do because they did not want to be forced to accept them later. This course of action, however, had

consequences that could be against the user's interest because some opportunities may be missed because staff cannot match to codes for jobs that have not been entered into the computer system. Deliberately influencing the actively seeking work conditions in the Jobseeker's Agreement could be a risky strategy because these users could be open to suspicions of fraud. By controlling the information submitted to staff, users could maintain a degree of control over how they were processed.

UP 23: I wasn't 100%, I don't know if honest is the right word, but basically my main concern is wage. Ehm, so I put down clerical work as my first choice because that is the higher wage.

UP 27: I just put down for driver, labourer cause I dinæ really want to go back on the forklift, but cause I've got my ticket and that but it's . . . I can dae the building trade and driving jobs, anything like that. It's, I'm qualified for it really, so. Ken I've got the forklift but I didnae tell them that yin. I mean you're sitting in that for eight hours depends on what building site. It's awfy uncomfortable up there. But I'll maybe have to go for it again I think.

The element of compulsion implicit in dealings with benefits for unemployment also influenced users in their choice of which jobs to put down. This young woman was a graduate who was looking for a

professional position but was willing to accept cleaning or waiting work as a temporary measure. It was not always clear to users which of the activities were requirements and which were voluntary.

UP 29: It's just like to put that on your Jobseeker's Agreement it's just like really bad. You don't want to do that. And like I just put sort of graduate trainee and stuff on this one. But I was confused, like you know if you put waitressing and stuff, you could get a waitressing job but you don't want one, but will you be forced to take one?

Some users were strategic in their choice of occupation sought. Some used different job titles for what was ostensibly the same work, or used job titles that were very similar within the same sector. Others thought that the job titles had to be completely different. Users could also choose types of work that they considered to be easier to find.

UP 33: Ehm, yeah I mean it's easier now. I mean before, a couple of years ago I put down jobs I thought would be easy to get, but now I put down jobs that I think I'm qualified for and jobs that I think I'm mature enough to do. So I don't see why I should put my name down and ask for . . . You have to put down sort of four or five job titles so they can see what you're looking for. It's easy enough.

### *Widening the job search*

The requirements to actively seek work became stricter the longer the claim for benefit went on. A key point was the 13 Week Review. In addition to participating in various schemes and programmes, users were also required to widen their search for employment beyond the initial three job titles specified in their Jobseeker's Agreements. Approximately a third of interviewees said that they did not mind being required to state three types of work that they were looking for. For some this was because they felt that it was in the interests of the unemployed person to be looking for more than one type of work, regardless of the Jobseeker's Allowance regulations. Others were sympathetic with quite wide job search requirements because they foresaw how a narrower seeking work conditions could be abused. Many of those who did not object to stating three different types of work found it easy to do.

UP 32: I think it's fair enough in as much as you could put down that you were a gas lamp lighter and you know it would be virtually impossible. . . . I think it's great that they give you an initial chance of not being flexible because I think at the end of the day you have to be flexible because somebody's paying for it.

Some held the view that there were jobs available and so people should take any type of work, especially after 13 weeks, which was seen to be a reasonable period of time to look only for a main occupation. There were

only a few people who thought that restricting the job search to one main occupation should be allowed for a longer period of time, but that in principle it was fair to expect unemployed people to look for more than one type of work after that.

Others would have rather done work that was not their first option than remain unemployed. Some people, however, had different ideas about what widening their job search would mean for them. This woman was prepared to look for other types of work, but the other occupation that she was considering was also an attractive option to her. Unemployed people who were not highly educated or skilled did not have the same options open to them so widening their job search meant a much lower grade of work than this woman was considering.

UP 28: To be honest I don't have a problem with that. . . . The type of background I've got there are maybe three or four different avenues I could take but I'm quite prepared to take something else on. Even now before my 13 weeks are up, although it is just about to be up. Ehm, but that's easier said than done because employers I don't think are happy to take you on. But to be honest I don't want to come in here every two weeks. I would much rather be out there working. So if it means becoming a driving instructor tomorrow then that's what I'll do.

At the 13 Week Review one user who had been allowed a permitted period, during which time he only looked for work in his usual occupation, was asked to give other job titles for work that he would look for. The user did not mind this.

UP 18: I was considering looking for something else. They said you're going to have to start looking for something else. He wasnae pushy or anything. I did a course in car valeting so I put that down.

There was an attitude amongst a few of the interviewees that they would just say what they thought the Employment Officer wanted them to say 'to keep the people upstairs happy' (UP 18) and that this compliance would allow them access to what they wanted, which in this man's case was only National Insurance contributions, rather than a cash benefit.

UP 14: Well there again it doesn't really interest me. If they said you need ten then I'd just stick ten in.

There were interviewees who thought that it was reasonable that everyone receiving Jobseeker's Allowance should be forced to widen their job search after 13 weeks.

UP 12: If you're being fussy it's your own fault. If you're not willing to work you shouldn't get any benefits.

Some who said that they did not mind the arrangements for specifying which types of job they wanted, and the widening of the job search at 13 weeks, changed their view when professional work was considered and said that they would mind then (UP 14). How reasonable it was to have to look for jobs outside your main area of work depended on what the occupation was.

UP 24: I think it depends. To consider, it depends on what you are. If you were an unemployed nurse you know I think it maybe would be quite unfair to have somebody like that to start considering anything else. I think it depends on how skilled you are in some ways.

This was a particular issue for those who had previously been professionals or who were highly educated.

UP 30: Ehm, depends what it would be. If a job came up like waitressing or something like that and they said 'well go for that'. Then no. I don't think that's very fair cause I don't think you should, when you've been to college, university and all that to train for something and then they expect you to go out, do you know what I mean? No. I don't think that would be very fair. But then it depends. Some people don't want to find jobs so they won't, you know.

Widening the job search was another area in which users had some limited room for manoeuvre. Users who agreed to certain job titles but then did not look for work in those areas used 'witcraft' to accomplish their interaction with staff and ensure their on-going benefit entitlement.

UP 15: Well according to them you're only supposed to keep a limited amount of work for six months and then you've got to diverse. So you just bullshit that tae. Aye, I'll be a labourer nae problem. Huh watch me!

9 of the 35 interviewees objected to having to widen their job search beyond their main occupation. One objection was that the demand for labour was not sufficient to provide a job for everyone. Requirements to widen the job search were therefore seen as being hard on people who had made concerted efforts to find work.

UP 31: I mean if you're no' diversified enough what can you do, well the only thing is retrain. I mean if they cannae find you work fair enough. I mean you cannae help it if you've done everything that you've agreed to. So basically it's just as a say it's a vicious circle in here. (Sigh) It's back to them.

The barriers to looking for different types of work were also highlighted by those who objected to widening their job search.

UP 4: If they say you can look for any kind of work, every work is looking for time served, or experience or a car, somebody that drives, whereas an awful lot of people haven't got that. They've just got the practical skill. And its no' fair saying 'just go for any job' cause you don't want any job. You want a job that you're going to be happy in and you've got the qualifications for or the experience in, no' for just any job at all.

A few interviewees spoke of being pressured to apply for certain vacancies. One interviewee had had this experience and accepted the job only because he 'wanted them off my back' (UP 1). Another young woman (UP 4) had refused a job in a café that a staff member had suggested to her. The situation 'worked out okay' because she participated in a Training for Work course instead but she did observe that 'they're kind of wary about if you knock back a job you've got to have a reasonable explanation for it' (UP 4). A painter and decorator (UP 18) also had been encouraged to apply for a cleaning job paying £2.50 an hour. He objected because as a tradesperson he expected at least £5.50 an hour for his labour. He considered being offered this work as 'degrading your work'. A small minority of the interviewees were so resolute in their views that they would be prepared to lose benefit rather than accept a job that paid too little or meant that they had to do work that they considered to be demeaning.

### **The 'Looking for Work' form**

The second example of accomplishing the 'actively seeking work' condition is the 'Looking for Work' work form. This form, otherwise known as the Jobseeker's Diary, was a document that registered unemployed people were required to fill in and produce for inspection every fortnight to show what efforts they had made to find work. Staff were able to compare the 'Looking for Work' form with the user's original Jobseeker's Agreement to judge whether the agreement was being met and if users were satisfying the condition of actively seeking work. Failure to meet the actively seeking work condition warranted a benefit sanction. Chapter Five has already demonstrated the pressures and constraints that impacted upon regular signing on interviews. Inspection of the 'Looking for Work' form was one part of the interview that was meant to occur but was not always implemented. In this respect, the action necessary to prove compliance with the 'actively seeking work' condition was subject to policy re-creation. In this section, the preparation and inspection of the 'Looking for Work' form provides evidence of how the 'actively seeking work' condition was accomplished as a two-way social process, through the face-to-face interaction between staff and users.

Users were usually aware that the completion of the 'Looking for Work' form and its presentation during the signing on interview were requirements for the processing of their benefit. Users recognised this practice as a bureaucratic simplification of the policy objective. For policy

accomplishment, it was the written evidence that was important, not the actions that the document represented:

UP 20:        They kind of give you the impression that if you don't write down that's it. You know, you've not been looking for work.

Interviewees were divided in their views about having to complete the form. A minority of the interviewees said that they did not mind having to fill the 'Looking for Work' form out. They concurred that it was 'not a big deal'. One or two interviewees even said that they found completing the form helpful for their own records. As one man put it, it 'keeps me right tae' (UP 1).

However, the majority of the interviewees did object to having to fill in the 'Looking for Work' form every fortnight. The process was condemned as 'total rubbish' (UP 25), 'nonsense' (UP 13), 'ridiculous' (UP 16), 'a bit tedious' (UP 29) and 'a nuisance' (UP 6). To some users, the form-filling seemed entirely ineffectual as a test of actively seeking work. They reasoned that those who were looking for work kept records anyway and that those who were not looking for work would just lie.

UP 6:        I think it's just a waste of time. It's just; I suppose it's just their way of knowing that you're looking for work. They don't check it up, phone up some company and say 'oh did so and

so phone up about a job'. They don't know if you did it or no.

What's the point?

This meant that filling in the forms was 'basically a waste of time' (UP 15), 'really silly' (UP 33) and 'just absurd' (UP 20). One woman said that she minded having to fill it in 'immensely' (UP 19):

UP 28:        Because as I say they should treat me as an individual and if I tell them I'm looking for work then that's exactly what I'm doing. And mine's is very repetitive. It's every Friday 'looked in Herald. Looked in Scotsman.' You know. Every single Friday. 'What did you do next?' Threw the papers in the bucket. You know. It's the way the thing is worded. It's so annoying. . . . But they should take me at face value. If I say that I'm job hunting I am. I shouldn't have to record my every movement.

Many of those interviewed fundamentally disagreed with the requirement to write down what they had done to find work. 'Pointless' form filling did not help them to find work. For most users, the 'Looking for Work' form was merely a surveillance tool that reminded them of their dependency and enforced a sense of individual failing. The purpose of the 'Looking for Work' form was interpreted as being to 'check up' 'to make sure you have been doing things' and to 'keep tabs on you', the sentiment of which aggravated some users. Users therefore felt watched and disciplined, as

if they had to 'report in' for 'naughty person time'. This was an acknowledgement of the power relations that existed between staff and users that meant users were compelled to complete the diary of job seeking activity, whether they objected to it or not. Completing the form was an empty bureaucratic process that very quickly became a matter of routine.

UP 27: It's just repeating itself every week tae. It's, cause after a wee while, cause the only place you can look is local, unless you've got transport. It's just repeating and repeating. So I could copy it out the noo for the next time I'm in, cause I ken what I'm going to be doing.

An important factor in shaping unemployed people's views of the 'Looking for Work' form was the reaction that they received from staff when they presented the log to them. Employment Officers varied in their level of inspection. Interviewees talked about some staff members who 'read it through' (UP 19), while others 'don't bother looking at it' (UP 7). There was a general sense that little time was dedicated to inspecting the 'Looking for Work' form. This was equated with staff being 'just not interested' in its contents or the unemployed person's job search.

UP 16: The woman here just signs it. They don't even look at it. I'm not blaming the women but they don't say 'well okay I see you've contacted there'. You know. And all these ones I've

filled out over two years. Once they're filled they throw them away. Cause they're finished with them. Cause no one says 'okay we'll keep that on file and look at your progress and see how you've done.' All they do is sign it. Even if you've forgotten it. It doesn't matter.

Some users learned which staff would scrutinise their form and which would not, highlighting the way different staff members enforced the administrative rules.

UP 6: Well, they just have a look at it and then they sign it. When I first signed on aye they did go through it, but then after that you got to know the faces that didnae check it. There's two young boys don't check it. They just go 'oh right' and then sign it: 'Right there you go'. And away you go. The older ones will look through it with you and say 'well how did you get on wi' that one or that one'. But how are they to know if you've actually went for that job or phoned up for that job or anything?

Many of those interviewed would have welcomed a greater proportion of staff time being devoted to inspecting their 'Looking for Work' form, particularly if it encompassed a constructive discussion of their job search. As Chapter Five demonstrated, the re-creation of policy meant that the job

search part of many of the routine interviews was either shortened or omitted because of the pressures of time and the queue of people waiting:

UP 3: They just go like this (glanced over). They open it up and they don't even read it. It's a joke. Of course if she wants to take this and check it over seriously she's giving herself more work obviously and it's more hassle. And there's a big queue. Clear the queue, clear the queue. It's cosmetic. It's all cosmetic. It's only to show they're concerned. That's the main thing.

The following quote is from a long-term unemployed man who also attributed the lack of staff effort in enabling him to actively seek work as a lack of interest. When he came to this realisation, he altered his own behaviour in response and began falsifying his form, despite the fact that he was regularly making very active efforts to find work.

UP 25: They don't, they're not interested. They just put it away. I just put Jobclub, papers. Tell a lot of lies cause they're no' really interested in what I'm daeing. They've got 3000 people unemployed. Are they going to say 'what papers do you use? How often are you at the Jobclub?' They'd have a queue out the door, waiting to come in. So it's 'that's you. That's you.' I come in there and forgot that. 'That doesnae

matter, doesnae matter.' No' interested. (Sarcastically) Full of enthusiasm. Dying to get you a job, you know?

Other users also developed their own strategies for accomplishing the actively seeking work condition. These strategies are examples of user 'witcraft' and are used to exert some control or as acts of resistance.

UP 21: I make my writing that atrocious that they cannae read it anyway. I deliberately dae that, but they dinae even look. They just go round and stamp it and that's it.

This action was seen as justifiable because staff did not inspect the form. Users also considered it to be safe because there was no proof of whether or not they had done what they said they had. One man felt that falsifying the 'Looking for Work' form was necessary because of the lack of jobs to apply for. This also highlighted a misconception shared by some users that they had to specify particular vacancies they were applying for, rather than just what efforts they had made to find suitable vacancies.

There were important differences in the way that users expected to be treated. Also as Chapter Seven has shown, staff treated users according to 'types', meaning that some users were more likely to be closely scrutinised than others. One of the interviewees did not receive benefit, but continued to be registered as unemployed so that he could receive National Insurance credits. This man took documenting his job search

even less seriously than he might otherwise have because he felt that there was little to lose.

UP 7: I mean I don't get any money. I don't think I should have to . . . They don't pay me nothing. I don't see why I should then produce documentation of looking for work. I mean they see me here every second day. They know that I'm looking for work. But they want it down in black and white. I don't think that's right, nut. I mean I don't get money, so it doesn't matter what I do. I mean the state's not paying me. So.

Low levels of staff knowledge about professional vacancies and recruitment practices, placed highly skilled and educated unemployed people in a stronger position of power than those without qualifications.

UP 2: It's funny but I don't think they're anywhere near geared up for coping with people that have come out of uni. Cause a few times last time they were out, completely out, of their depth. They were basically just accepting what I was telling them at face value, cause I sounded convincing.

## **Co-producing Policy**

In Chapter Two the concept of co-production was introduced. Although co-production was originally used by those like Witaker (1980) to refer to a particular mode of service delivery that required users to work with staff to

develop and provide services, it will be developed in this section in a rather different way. Co-production is used here in a similar sense as Kingfisher (1998) intended when she described the interactional accomplishment of policy between co-workers. I use co-production to describe a particular form of policy accomplishment that occurred between front-line staff and users. The previous sections have offered examples of the ways in which policy can be said to be accomplished and negotiated through the face-to-face interaction between staff and users. The notion of co-production develops this argument to suggest that in certain cases users influence their interaction with staff to secure different policy outcomes. The following paragraphs provide examples of the co-production of policy in relation to different moral categorisations developed by staff (outlined in Chapter Seven).

An example of co-producing policy with a 'good' client was the case of a 59 year old woman who had worked in a bank for the past 22 years. At her Fresh Claims interview she had been able to insist that she should only be expected to give one type of work that she was looking for, rather than the usual three. This in itself was reasonably common. What was not, was that when she came to her 13 Week Review interview she was able to continue with only one occupational code on her Jobseeker's Agreement. As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, official policy was for users to widen their job search at the 13 week stage and this was the usual practice, even for users who had limited their search initially. In this

case the 'good' client was very near to retirement and had been successful in demonstrating her willingness to work, as she explained:

UP17: Well, I think obviously I can prove that I have been actively seeking work. I mean I've been unemployed for 13 weeks and I've applied for 18 jobs.

Similarly, it was possible for users to have their rule-breaking endorsed by officials if they could secure a 'worthy' moral categorisation and elicit sympathy from an Employment Officer. Despite rule-breaking usually being a source of irritation or inconvenience to staff, it could be condoned in certain circumstances if Employment Officers conspired with users to outwit the system.

SM 24: There was another guy that I had one time years ago and he was signing on but I'd had an employer on the phone down at a building site saying that he just needed somebody for the day. It was £50. So I said to the guy. I told him where it was and said 'Just go up and you'll get your money and that. But if anybody finds out, I knew nothing about it.' [. . .] So he went and did the job and I signed him as usual and overlooked the whole thing.

'Bad' clients could also co-produce policy, using different discursive tactics. For instance, when users who were labelled as 'wasters' they

were often able to continue claiming Jobseeker's Allowance because they paid lip service to the labour market conditions they were required to meet.

SM 44: I hate it when you get the guys that come in and they're stinking of cigarette smoke and it's obvious that they've just come down from the pub. They think that you're not going to realise that they're going straight back up there again as soon as they've signed on. 'Are you looking for work?' 'Aye' (indignant tone).

It was possible for 'nutters' and 'numpties' to exercise slightly more control over their interaction with staff by being intimidating. This could help them to get what they wanted, which might be a quick and painless processing of their claim, or alternatively to command a greater amount of time and effort from staff. When users asserted themselves in this way it was possible for parts of policy to be co-produced. In the following example the young administrative grade worker described how he adapted policy as a response to the demands of a 'nutter'.

SM 22: He's mental like. . . . He comes in here and he's sitting tapping his fingers while you're getting the vacancy up on the screen for him. Sometimes you're not supposed to give out the employer's details and that, their address and telephone number. But he's like 'and just give me their number as

well.' And you're like 'okay there you are'. . . . He can be really scary!

There were instances of trouble when users were not compliant with the rules of the bureaucracy (c.f. Lipsky, 1980). This is an example of the ways in which social policy is contested. Lipsky himself sees individualised policy conflict in front-line services as parallel with the organised policy conflict conducted by pressure groups (1980: xii, also see discussion in Chapter Two). Trouble was usually caused by those labelled as 'nutters' or 'numpties', which was part of the reason for that label being applied to them. Users who had not demonstrated any other problematic behaviour but had become agitated or irate because of the particular circumstances in which they found themselves also caused trouble. One of the primary reasons for conflict was if a user had been denied access to the benefit that they needed.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter Seven demonstrated that front-line staff were active in influencing the way policy was implemented differentially, by treating users according to categorisations, as opposed to dealing with people uniformly. In this chapter, the main point was that users themselves were active agents in policy accomplishment, and therefore in the policy implementation process. Policy cannot happen or be brought into being without their involvement. As active social agents, the ways that users interacted with staff influenced the character of the service and could change the outcome

of the intervention. Users were active agents who had differing responses and coping strategies to the situation they found themselves in. Some users were more active than others in complying with, contesting, negotiating and co-producing policy. All were engaged in the accomplishment of policy through their face-to-face interaction with staff. To say that policy is accomplished, and even co-produced in some instances is, therefore, not to imply that staff and users are engaged in a harmonious joint venture, indeed, in one way or another, conflict was frequently a feature of interactions between staff and clients.

Users were usually compliant with the demands made of them, regardless of whether they agreed with the general policy objectives or the particular regulations that were invoked in their case. This demonstrated the power dynamics of that staff-client relationship and users' enforced dependency on the state. However, there was also evidence of users contesting policy, most notably in instances that had the potential to culminate in 'trouble'. The actively seeking work condition, as translated into front-line practice through the Jobseeker's Agreement and the 'Looking for Work' form, provided evidence of both policy compliance and contestation. In particular, the examples discussed above highlighted the ways in which policy was accomplished. They showed how users' experiences of the Jobcentre were influenced by their own predetermined views of the service, as well as by the ways in which staff dealt with them and delivered a version of policy that had been filtered through their street-level practice. Finally, the co-production of policy was illustrated through several

examples in which users were able to be active in persuading or intimidating officials into acting in ways that secured different outcomes from those that were officially prescribed.

The 'social problems' literature acknowledges the non-voluntary nature of user involvement in state services and views users as resistant. Anderson (1999) makes the distinction between 'regular clients', who are resistant only to a certain degree and 'difficult clients', who attempt to usurp the usual patterns of the worker's routine in order to get what they want (which was usually the opportunity to apply for a job that the employment adviser did not want to them have). These sorts of accounts of the roles played by users have been primarily concerned with the management of conflict and the uses of linguistic strategies of persuasion on the adviser's behalf. Users' contributions to interactional accomplishment have been viewed from the staff perspective, predominantly in terms of 'trouble' and users' agency has been typified by accounts of dishonesty and manipulation. This chapter counterpoises the analysis by providing evidence of how users view their interaction with staff, how they respond to policy (both in its official and modified versions) and how they exercise agency. It acknowledges that there are several possible roles for clients to play, some being more closely associated with 'good clients' and some with 'bad clients'. Foremost, is the progression of the use of interactional accomplishment to explain the intersubjectivity of the social construction of policy between both users and staff (see Chapter Seven). Four distinct but overlapping themes have arisen: compliance, contestation,

negotiation and co-production. These are all forms of interactional accomplishment, but some more active than others.

Compliance does not equate with a lack of conflict or resistance. As Chapter Six has pointed out, users felt powerless and subject to control. This chapter has developed this idea to show how users' frustrations in their attempts to complain could result in an acceptance that fundamental alterations to the conditions under which benefits and job vacancies were administered were outside of their sphere of influence. Such a realisation usually led to compliance. However, in some cases users reacted in ways that attempted to alter the power differentials of the interview, or were able to construct the interview more on their own terms than those of the agency, and secure alternative outcomes. Compliance could include attending courses that were thought to be 'useless', going for job interviews or even accepting work that was not of the type sought e.g. a cleaning job for a graduate. Acquiescent interactional accomplishment was associated with 'showing face' or 'working with' staff, which could be a conscious strategy rather than a sign of passivity.

It was also clear that policy was contested and that users often held negative views about the purposes of unemployment policy and the practices that influenced their routine interactions with Jobcentre staff (see Chapter Six). Users identified a discrepancy between the purposes and implicit assumptions that were built into the design of unemployment policy and their own experiences and behaviour. Users found it disturbing to be

processed as if they were workshy, when their intense job seeking efforts had been frustrated, either by a lack of appropriate vacancies (signally a mismatch between demand and supply in the local labour market) or because they had been unsuccessful at interviews. Users contested the requirement to prove that they were 'actively seeking work' through the completion of the Jobseeker's Diary, which was seen as ineffectual, inappropriate and patronising. Users therefore employed a range of strategies for contesting the policy. They either resisted the process by using bad handwriting or deliberately writing exactly the same entries every week, or chose to present it to members of staff who were unlikely to scrutinise it, or falsified the form because it was not inspected.

Their contestation of policy did not necessarily mean that they felt the rules should not apply to others. Indeed there was a reasonable degree of ambivalence in users' attitudes towards real or imagined unemployed others, which was most evident with regard to seeking work. What had been a chief factor in determining the basis of staff categorisation of clients (see Chapter Seven), was also a key concern to users in assessing the applicability of policy responses involving compulsion. Whilst compulsion was thought to be entirely inappropriate in their own case, it was defended in principle for those who were perceived to be made of different moral fibre (a finding supported by Dwyer, 2000, Howe, 1990 and Kingfisher, 1996). Users were enmeshed in the same popular discourses as those that staff drew on, absorbed or precipitated. In their efforts to demonstrate their own deservingness, users could actually paint a more

dramatically contrasting picture of the deviant other (the 'scrounger' or 'skiver') than was represented in the daily discourse of Employment Officers.

Negotiation is a broad term, that has been used in this chapter mainly to encapsulate the process of bargaining that can take place during interviews. Users could present their work experience or biographical information in ways that would affect how they were categorised, because they were aware of the potential uses of this information and the likely consequences, for instance users might omit a particular job title from their work history because they did not want to be compelled to look for that sort of work. Similarly, it was possible for users to assert themselves in negotiations surrounding the construction of their Jobseeker's Agreement. In some cases these were deliberate strategies to assert influence over administrative categorisations, that would affect how they were treated in the short- and possible long-term. This example also highlights a risky tactic, because attempted manipulation of an administrative category could result in being morally classified as bad, particularly as 'at it'. This might lead to the application of an informal punishment or a test of honesty, or it might raise serious suspicion that could lead to a formal fraud investigation. It was also evident that some users had greater knowledge and were better prepared to challenge or 'the system' and were more competent or adept at outwitting bureaucratic procedures that they viewed as pointless.

This chapter has also provided examples of the co-production of policy, in cases where interactional accomplishment was particularly active and effective on the user's part. In essence, the co-production of policy hinges on the user's awareness that they are, or have, noticeably influenced the outcome of a staff decision or non-decision. Co-production could be created through compliance and contestation. The defining feature is that the process is active and conscious, involving both user and official. Attempts at co-production were not necessarily always successful. Co-production was just as possible for 'good' clients who traded on their compliance as it was for 'bad' clients who were intimidating. For the staff's part, they could participate in co-production either reluctantly, in the case of intimidating 'numpties' or willingly, in the case of 'good' clients. This notion of co-production is similar to Kinfisher's (1996) usage of the term, but she uses it to describe active processes of policy definition between co-workers. The analysis presented in this chapter has developed this idea to include both sides of the policy implementation interaction.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **Conclusions**

This thesis has provided a micro level analysis of unemployment policy in practice. It has offered empirical evidence to determine the extent of policy modification and its consequences both for the staff who worked in the case study Jobcentre office and the users who relied on the service they provided. The implementation process has been taken as the central focus and it has been argued that this process must be understood primarily as a social process of interaction. The analysis has been based on the premise that policies do not exist independently from their implemented form. Consequently, the focus has been on the interaction of social actors, rather than the role of institutions, with the objective of better understanding how policies are constructed and what they mean to people. This thesis has brought an innovatory approach to the study of UK social security implementation, by studying both sides of the staff-user relationship simultaneously<sup>1</sup>.

The first contribution of this thesis is to present an account of active labour market policies as they operate in practice in comparison and contrast to their official formulation. This strengthens the existing UK unemployment policy literature, which has so far had to depend on official policy

statement and evaluations, or interview data as a basis for critique<sup>2</sup> (c.f. Finn, 1998, Millar, 2000, 2002, Trickey & Walker, 2000, Theodore & Peck, 1999, Tonge, 1999). This thesis has shown that the delivery of policy is shaped by a series of pressures and constraints that mean that front-line workers cannot comply entirely with the formal goals and guidance documents of the Employment Service. Staff time and effort was distributed unevenly between the dual roles of vacancy matching and benefit administration. Despite the emphasis on active labour market policies, workers prioritised benefit administration above job matching. Interviews were typically shorter than the recommended length and job search activities were either omitted or truncated in many instances. It was the pressure of time, the queue of people waiting, the structure of the forms and computer system, along with a preference to retain existing, well-established, work practices that shaped the construction of most interviews. Employment Officers did, therefore, modify policy as they implemented it. Although they did not re-create policy afresh, they did develop their own routines and simplifications to make their jobs possible. These work habits had important consequences for those using the service.

In particular, staff invented informal rationing systems in an attempt to deal with the conflicting requirements of employers and job seekers, under the increased pressure of placement targets. Here the organisational objective of enabling people to find work was converted into the more

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<sup>1</sup> This technique has been used in the US by Kingfisher (1996, 1998)

manageable goal of assisting certain users into certain vacancies. Officials managed the tensions between the interests of employers and the interests of unemployed people in ways that tipped the balance in favour of employers rather than the unemployed (for whom the service is said to exist). In this respect, the actions of Employment Service staff reinforced existing inequalities in the labour market. This process was influenced by new managerialist individualised performance incentives, which changed the way service was provided and the way Employment Officers related to their co-workers. When combined with the effects of cost-cutting, it seemed that this sort of incentive structure had the potential to undermine the ethic of high quality customer service for all.

This analysis has, therefore, contributed to the policy process literature by demonstrating that Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy still provides a useful explanation for the administration of unemployment policy in the new managerialist context. This is significant because the discrepancy between official policy and the implemented form actually resulted in a repositioning of the principles upon which the service was provided.

These factors combined to increase pressure for staff to invent discretion. This much was recognised by Lipsky (1980). However, the analysis presented here sees front-line workers as active agents who have independent and collective interpretations of policy problems and

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<sup>2</sup> With the exception of Balckmore (2001) and Finn et al. (2001) these have been one-

solutions. It was not just the bureaucratic work environment that influenced how discretion was applied, as Lipsky (1980) suggests, but also front-line staff's own beliefs and emotional responses to policy and users.

The ultimate consequence of the decisions and actions of street-level bureaucrats is that they will combine to 'structure and delimit people's lives and opportunities' (Lipsky, 1980: 4). Unemployed people have been subject to a series of policy changes that have resulted in increased compulsion, whilst benefit has become worth less, more likely to be means-tested and available on an insurance basis for a shorter period of time. The 'actively seeking work' condition has been tightened, particularly with the international vogue (Clasen, 1999) for active labour market policies (applied mainly in the UK case through Jobseeker's Allowance and the New Deal programmes), which have created harsher sanctions for non-compliance. Those registered as unemployed have had to make more effort to prove their availability for work and to provide evidence of the steps that they have taken to find work at a time when the labour market has become much more lightly regulated and restructuring has resulted in a prevalence of part-time, temporary, low-paid work. In effect, unemployed people are being compelled to accept temporary low paid work (in some cases state subsidised through the New Deal and Working Families Tax Credit) as an alternative to benefits that trap them into poverty (Forde & Slater, 2001). Crucially, these jobs do not necessarily

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sided accounts.

provide a route out of poverty and might result in a quick return to unemployment.

It was argued that Jobcentre users experienced policy in a range of ways, but that generally the new managerialist label of 'customer' was resisted. Users could not be described as customers because they did not have purchasing power. The very fact that they needed to depend on a system of income maintenance was evidence that the dependency of usual customer relations had been inverted. Most of those interviewed were surviving on incomes below a level necessary to meet basic needs. Their exchange relationship with those administering the system was therefore very different from usual customer relations. These users were committed to earning money through the wage relationship. Having been denied that opportunity, they were forced to depend on unemployment benefits, which made them feel powerless. This was further complicated by a cross-cutting experience of reciprocity, which meant that those who had paid tax and National Insurance felt that they had contributed to a system that they should now be able to claim from without feeling stigmatised. In fact it was this stigmatised role as unemployed that was the basis of much of the negative feelings that interviewees had about the Jobcentre and the service they received from staff. Users also resisted the customer terminology because they were denied choice and control. They considered the vacancies that were advertised to be of too low a quality because they were often part-time or temporary positions that did not offer a living wage. This perception was borne out by a detailed analysis of the

vacancies available in the office during a two month period. Marked discrepancies were identified in the type of work sought by those registered unemployed and the type of work available. This mismatch meant that in almost every case there were many more registered unemployed people seeking a particular type of work than there were vacancies available. Users often framed their experiences of the Jobcentre in reference to benefit administration. Very few of those interviewed felt that they had received meaningful assistance to enable them to find work. A contradiction therefore exists between the promises of high quality service and customer-orientation made by new managerialist discourse and the design and implementation of unemployment policy. This conflict originates in the differing models of user behaviour that new managerialism and unemployment policy adopt.

The argument then moved on, to demonstrate some of the ways in which unemployment policy was accomplished through face-to-face interaction. Front-line staff were seen to engage in a process of client categorisation, of which there were two varieties. The first, administrative categorisation, was necessary for processing people (Prottas, 1979), transforming complex people into more simplistic client types. This process of categorisation could have important consequences for Jobcentre users, particularly in relation to job matching. The second type of classification, moral categorisation, based on good and bad types, could be more significant in determining the type of service and treatment that users would receive from officials. This analysis has similarities to Kingfisher's

(1996) study of US women welfare workers and recipients. However, the users in Kingfisher's study were constructed almost entirely as bad, whereas the majority of Jobcentre users were seen as 'all right'. Moral categorisation was not based on official categories, but constituted the development of 'routines and simplifications' (Lipsky, 1980) invented by staff to make their jobs more manageable. Lipsky (1980) and Prottas (1979) did point to the ways in which street-level bureaucrats could bias treatment and act according to stereotypes. This thesis has shown that the categorisations made by Jobcentre staff were more fluid and subtle than clear-cut stereotypes or binary divisions between 'deserving' or 'undeserving' clients (Cooper, 1985, Dean, 1991, Howe, 1990); categorisations were not hard and fast (as those identified by Kingfisher, 1996, seemed to be). Users could also move between categorisations depending on circumstances and changes in behaviour.

Front-line staff therefore implemented policy differentially and developed strategies for rewarding, disciplining or punishing users according to subjective moral categorisations. This is significant because staff mediate between citizen and state, but they do so as active social agents, rather than impartial implementers. Users therefore receive a form of policy that has been modified by staff as they re-create it in practice and that policy is applied differentially according to judgements made during interaction.

It was demonstrated that the interactional accomplishment, by which policy emerges in practice, involves users as well as staff. Even the most

junior of staff were seen to employ the sorts of 'rhetorical strategies' (Miller & Holstein, 1995) that Miller (1991) and Anderson (1999) observed in use by more senior employment advisers. In addition to this, users, like staff, held preconceived ideas about the Jobcentre and the people they would deal with there. The meanings and understandings of the social situation were not static, but could shift and change in relation to the other party involved in the interaction. Unemployment policy was contested at the interface between citizen and state. Although many unemployed people did co-operate with the requirements made on them to continue their benefit claim, this did not mean that they agreed with the policy or the specific practices that were imposed. Whether acquiescent or troublesome, Jobcentre users interacted with officials to accomplish policy. As Howe (1990) observed, some users were more active than others in seeking to influence the outcomes of their interviews with staff.

Rather than simply viewing users as non-voluntary (Lipsky, 1980), this thesis has given serious consideration to the ways that individuals construct meanings about their experience of unemployment and their contact with the public employment agency. It has moved beyond the characterisation of benefit recipients as docile welfare subjects and has instead presented them as active agents of policy accomplishment. This extends the scope of the users' perspectives literature, which has been skewed towards understanding how users view services, rather than how they experience the receipt of cash benefits (see Beresford, 2002). The analysis has illustrated the juxtaposition between the powerlessness of

unemployed people to influence the formal political processes of policy design and their active contestation, compliance, negotiation and co-production of policy at street level. Implementation is, therefore, not just something that users are subjected to, but something that is achieved through a joint endeavour. Again, this has advanced the analysis of how users engage with policy in practice (particularly in the development of the term co-production, which draws on Kingfisher's, 1998, earlier usage of the concept) and how they respond to a policy design that is out of kilter with their experiences of work and unemployment, perceptions of self, motivations and behaviours. This recognises not only that users have agency, but demonstrates exactly how that agency is enacted in relation to the implementation of unemployment policy.

Anderson (1999) used the term 'interactional accomplishment' to describe the social construction of social service work in the US from a worker's perspective. This thesis has developed his concept to argue that it is in fact policy that is accomplished through the interaction between staff and users. This is to say that what a policy *is* depends on both how it is officially conceived and how it is interpreted and put into operation by those who deliver policy and those who receive it. This analysis has advanced the street-level bureaucracy approach and forged a stronger link (particularly in the UK context<sup>3</sup>) between interpretivist sociology and mainstream social policy literature. The work of symbolic interactionists like Goffman (1959, 1963) has therefore come to bear a greater influence

on understandings of the policy process. This has emphasised the intersubjectivity and interdependence of the strategies employed by staff and clients in their accomplishment of policy.

The strength of the approach of this thesis has also been its weakness. By focusing on what happens at street level, causes and consequences (and therefore possible solutions) have been understood largely within the single office context. This has detracted explanatory interest from those more powerful social actors, politicians and civil servants, who ultimately control and define the broad conditions under which policy can take place. Front-line staff do make policy through their interaction with users, but however divergent their interpretations, however great their intentions and however creative their actions, they can only manoeuvre within or in relation to the framework that has been centrally determined by government. Since top-level policy design is itself accomplished through a process of interaction and negotiation, it is influenced by the beliefs and interests of a set of privileged social actors (Levin, 1997). Like front-line staff, policy designers are active agents who work within a set of constraints, traditions and priorities. However, the reality of the policy problem as experienced by users and understood by front-line staff is at times far removed from the interpretations and discourses drawn on by policy designers when exerting influence over the direction, priorities, resources and management method of services and benefits for unemployed people. Such high-level decisions are shaped by ideological

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<sup>3</sup> Those like Miller (1991) and Anderson (1999) have applied such a framework more

preferences, personal or group interests and beliefs about how unknown unemployed others are motivated to behave (Levin, 1997).

## **Implications for Recent Policy Developments**

There have been several policy changes since the data presented here were collected. This section demonstrates the significance of both types of research findings (outlined above) for these recent policy developments.

The policy trajectory in the UK is now firmly established, placing emphasis on the links between welfare and work by making claiming benefits conditional upon looking for work. The Jobcentre model has been the basis for the new Jobcentre Plus service, thereby dominating the street-level implementation of social security in the UK. This means that the findings of this research might have a wider relevance than originally anticipated. Since this research was conducted, there have been several significant policy developments along the activation line. ONE, the single work-focussed gateway, was piloted in 2000 and 2001. Under ONE, users applying for a wide range of benefits were required to participate in an interview that not only established their claim for benefit, but also explored their work availability. The crucially important aspect of this reform was that it represented a redefinition of who could be expected to seek employment (although users were not compelled to take particular action unless they were claiming JSA). Unpaid workers, like lone parents with full-time caring responsibilities for young children, and people deemed

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readily to their empirical studies in the US than those analysing UK social security policy.

incapable of work, because of sickness or disability, have been reinterpreted as potential workers within a discourse that affords little legitimacy to anything but the wage relationship. Their previous right to claim social assistance without any work-related conditions was undermined by this new system of interviews. The supporting system for this emerging system of work-based welfare has included the twin strategy of 'making work pay' and 'making work possible' (Millar, 2002). This has amounted to the establishment of the National Childcare Strategy in 1998, the introduction of the National Minimum Wage in 1999 (which has remained at a very low level, particularly for younger workers) and the extension of the tax credit system (first through Working Families Tax Credit and Disabled Persons Tax Credit then through the Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit).

The development of ONE was superseded by the dramatic announcement in July 2001 that parts of the Department of Social Security were to join with sections of the Department of Education and Employment to form the new Department for Work and Pensions. The Jobcentre and the Benefits Agency have amalgamated to staff Jobcentre Plus<sup>4</sup>, a new organisation intended as a 'one-stop shop' for all benefit claimants, based on the Jobcentre model. Jobcentre Plus extends the requirement for a wide range of users to attend compulsory work focussed interviews, both before they can make a claim for benefit and at regular interviews throughout the duration of their claim.

The Pathfinder offices have been well funded and much effort has gone into promoting visible improvements to customer service through the creation of a more pleasant office environment, without observable queues of people waiting, and incorporating vacancy advertising through touch-screen computers (rather than boards of cards). Jobcentre Plus advisers are to emulate the personal and in-depth approach of the New Deal Personal Advisers and part of their role is to involve referral to New Deal programmes.

Nevertheless, Jobcentre Plus reinvents the same tensions that Jobcentres did before them. Encompassing a wider range of users within the activation aim is likely to bring the pressures on staff time the unresolved dilemma of whether to dedicate effort to benefit administration or vacancy matching more sharply into focus. Benefit administration has become significantly more complex as front-line workers are expected to have in-depth knowledge of a wider range of benefits and programmes. Additionally, increasing numbers of users will be urged to chase a limited number of low grade vacancies. One consequence is likely to be increased competition for staff to meet placement targets, which have become more detailed and specific. This would exert more pressure rather than relieving the need for vacancy rationing as a practical solution. This, in turn, may actually lead to greater inequalities of opportunity within the user group, disadvantaging those with the least chances of attaining

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<sup>4</sup> It had originally been anticipated that the new organisation would be known as the

bureaucratically defined success.

The higher profile of front-line advisers, who are equipped with an increased capacity for discretion and the threat of tougher sanctions, has increased the emphasis on one-to-one interaction. These developments can be interpreted as positive for users in as much as they formally represent a greater dedication of staff time and effort. However, it is possible to predict a situation in which users categorised as 'good' fare well, while those deemed as 'bad' are, at least, ignored and, at worst, have their disadvantage punished and compounded.

The success of any system of work-based welfare depends largely on the work that it is based upon. The unemployed cannot take jobs that do not exist. The supply-side measures that have constituted the UK approach to active labour market policies have done little to address the problem (King & Wickham-Jones, 1999, Peck, 2001, Theodore & Peck, 1999, Tonge, 1999). The designers of Jobcentre Plus cannot be held accountable for the health of the economy in the UK as a whole and in its constituent regions, or for the restructuring of the labour market. However, it is evident that Jobcentre Plus staff must secure a larger proportion of the vacancy market (I would personally advocate compulsory notification of all vacancies) and develop expertise in employment advice and counselling if they are to be effective in enabling people to find work. The advancement of this task and the development and enhancement of these skills depend

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'Working Age Agency' (Clasen et al., 2001).

on the provision of resources of time and finance. I also echo the findings of the 1998-99 Select Committee on Education and Employment (House of Commons Education and Employment Select Committee Publications, 1998b) in calling for a radical reorganisation of performance incentives for job matching in order to prevent the situation in which people who want work are discouraged from applying for certain vacancies. Any public (or quasi-public) system of job matching should be primarily concerned with helping unemployed people find work, rather than helping employers to fill their vacancies.

Services to the registered unemployed and other job seekers should be based on the principle of making job and training applications as simple and effective as possible. Users should not be restricted in the number of vacancies they can apply for at any one time. Unemployed people should not have to wait for six months before they become eligible for training courses to assist them to find work. Immediate training and access to resources would go some way to preventing the problem of long-term unemployment for some users. Application forms should be easily available. A range of resources should be provided, including a seated area where people can look for work in local newspapers, a wide range of recruitment newspapers and magazines and the Internet. Ideally, computers, printers, paper and envelopes should be provided, along with on-line resources to help people apply for jobs. I believe that if these basic job seeking essentials were provided free of charge, then the need for compulsion and harsh sanctions would be greatly reduced. Without

dedicated investment in enabling people to find work, Jobcentre Plus is likely to become a residual system existing only to force hard to place users into low paid insecure employment.

On the other hand, benefit administration cannot be seen simply as something that detracts from assisting people to find work. Active labour market policies do not eliminate the need for social security (Sinfield, 2001) and trends towards the individualisation of welfare have not yet eclipsed the need for collective provision. Whilst welfare-to-work policies might have some success in certain regions when the economy is strong and unemployment is low, they are incapable of dealing with the problem of unemployment in a downturn of the cycle (King & Wickham-Jones, 1999, Peck, 2001, Theodore & Peck, 1999, Tonge, 1999). There is a strong case for increasing the level of UK benefits to ensure that those who cannot work in the short or long term are provided with a level of income that allows them to maintain 'the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong' (Townsend, 1979: 31). Not least of all because this will allow a more effective job search.

The efforts of those staffing the new Jobcentre Plus system should rightfully be directed at guaranteeing fast and accurate benefit administration as well as enabling people to find work. However, it is important that benefit administration is expanded to ensure advice and

guidance as well as dealing with the nuts and bolts of processing claims forms. Previous research has highlighted serious concerns about the capability of advisers to provide broad-based benefit advice (see Foster & Hogget's, 1999, study of an earlier Benefit Agency one stop shop pilot and the evaluation of ONE, Kelleher et al., 2001). Advisers will need both time and expertise in a wider range of benefits. The existing information systems are insufficient for this purpose. There is, therefore, potential for the development of an accessible system of welfare rights advice, which might be most usefully supplied in an electronic form.

This thesis has therefore contributed to understandings of British unemployment policy in practice. Alongside the work of Blackmore (2001) and Finn et al. (1998), it forms the basis of a growing body of literature that is concerned with UK policies as they are, rather than simply as they should be. This work therefore supplements, updates and extends the earlier work of Cooper (1985) and Howe (1990).

### **Emerging Research Agenda**

The implications of this research have been outlined and their importance is clear. However, this thesis is based only on one case study office in the UK. A valuable development for future research would be to replicate the study in other UK offices, to compare, for instance, a busy inner city office with a rural office. This might highlight variations in the time allowed for face-to-face interviews and the emphasis placed on enabling people to find work, which might create different opportunities and outcomes for

users. In particular, it would be interesting to conduct an in-depth examination of the implementation of the new Jobcentre Plus agenda in a small number of the Pathfinder areas. The focus would be on the nature of the interaction between front-line staff and a range of different users. This would allow an investigation of the constraints and incentives affecting workers and how they continue to manage the tension between benefit administration and job matching when faced with the very different experiences and circumstances of users who are unemployed, lone parents, carers and sick and disabled people. Examining the Pathfinder offices would also reveal how the mixture of staff work together, with those from previous Benefits Agency and Jobcentre backgrounds having come from separate work cultures where they had established work practices. For instance, how have BA staff adapted to the unscreened Jobcentre style environment (an issue pertinent in the wake of union disputes over the matter)? And of course, it would be essential to look at how users have adapted to the new system and whether it meets their needs, causes increased inconvenience or creates new opportunities and assistance. Do Jobcentre Plus users accomplish, negotiate, contest and co-produce policy in similar or different ways to those presented in this research? Is customer service now a more meaningful term to them?

It is also clear that much could be gleaned from cross-national research, to develop theory and to assist policy learning. Here the key variant would be the arrangements for benefit administration and job search assistance. It would be very interesting to compare and contrast the street-level

implementation of single gateways in different countries (building on the work conducted by Clasen et al. 2001, for instance), considering the different patterns of funding and delivery. It would be valuable to understand some of the complexities and tensions of a partly or wholly privatised system of vacancy matching, such as in Australia (cf. Finn, 2002, Eardley, 2001), as an example of implementation in a liberal welfare regime (drawing on Esping-Andersen's, 1990, typification). For instance, how is the citizen-state relationship reconstituted when the representative of government policy is not directly employed as a civil servant? This could be compared with Jobcentre Plus and the new Employment Zones in the UK, where the social democratic form of centralised bureaucracy is undergoing a transition towards the more diverse type of delivery arrangements associated with neo-liberal values. Recent developments in Sweden would provide a third point of reference. Sweden is interesting because it is the archetypal social democratic welfare state, in which a system of compulsory vacancy notification still exists within a regionalised system of workfare. A street-level study of these three countries might usefully illuminate differences in approach, ideology and values (for instance there might be variation in attitudes towards the long-term unemployed) as well as understanding the practical constraints that influence the structure of the system and its implementation. Comparisons could be made about the extent and effectiveness of people processing (Prottas, 1979) and people changing (Hasenfeld & Weaver, 1996) that street-level workers engage in. The roles played by users in the accomplishment of policy might also differ in certain regions or nations.

In conclusion, this thesis has contributed to understandings of the policy process. Lipksy's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy has informed and focused the study, which has applied and developed his arguments. It has been demonstrated that street-level bureaucrats play an active role in policy making in the case of the unemployment policy in the contemporary British managerial state.

Accomplishing policy involves a range of social actors in different times and places, who are situated in different places within the organisational hierarchy and the social structure. At the top level, politicians and civil servants accomplish policy design through interaction and negotiation (Levin, 1997). Policy in its written form is therefore shaped by the interests, beliefs, ideological positions and practical considerations that matter to the privileged social actors who hold key positions. But the story of policy coming into being does not finish with the creation of legislation and official documents of various kinds. Policy making continues as long as social processes are involved, which reaches beyond the delivery stage. Social policy exists because of and through social interaction. This interaction is how implementation happens and where the influences, constraints, personal preferences, prejudices and habits of social actors continue to determine the character and outcomes of policy. What constitutes any particular policy is a matter of interpretation. The type of policy that service users experience depends on how it has filtered through a series of work practices and social processes and how it

emerges through the face-to-face interaction that the user has with front-line staff.

The exploration of these processes of interaction in this thesis has advanced Lipsky's approach. Front-line policy accomplishment involves two sets of social actors – service users and staff. I have presented evidence to support the argument that both play active roles in accomplishing policy and shaping policy outcomes. This also holds wider implications for the citizen-state relationship. This work reinforces the need to study policies as they are implemented, as well as policies as they are designed and written.

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## Appendix One

## **Staff Interviews**

### Work

- Explanation of your job.
- Do you like your work'? Why?
- What is good about it and what do you find frustrating'?
- How long have you worked for the Jobcentre?
- What is your background (within the JC e.g. UBO or JC if been working for ES for long time or outwith JC if not worked in JC for long)?
- Why did you want to work for the Jobcentre?
- What are the pressures you are under?
- What are your targets'?
- What do you think about targets? Do you think they are a good idea?
- How far do targets influence what you do in your day to day work'?
- Have you, or close family/friends, ever been unemployed? If so what are your reflections on the Jobcentre from a clients' perspective and has it influenced the way you do your job now?
- Would you say a lot of your work is routine? Probe: conveyor belt, saying same things to people.

### **Interaction with Clients**

- What do you think about the interaction with clients e.g. is it difficult or awkward or does it run smoothly?
- What do you think about the clients you see'?
- Do you prefer to work with some clients rather than others? If so why/can you typify that'?
- How do you feel when you're dealing with clients'?
- How do you think the clients feel?
- Do you find that clients open up to you and tell you a lot of things?

- How are you getting on with your caseloads of long-term unemployed? What do you think about long-term unemployed people?
- Do you think a lot of people that you see are 'at it'? Do you think people try to mislead you or lie to you? Do you think people that you deal with are trying to defraud the system'?
- How do you view Adjudication referrals and benefit sanctions'? Do you refer people for Adjudication?
- Do you think some clients are unemployable?
- Do you think some clients lack motivation? Do you find it easier to help clients who are more keen? What might you do for someone who's keen that you might not for someone who isn't?
- Do you think some of the clients have social problems? How does that relate to what you can do for them?
- Do you think there are some people who shouldn't have to sign on? Probe: Incapacity Benefit.

### **Decision Making**

- What decisions do you make about clients or for clients in your work?
- How do you make these decisions?

### **Jobcentre and Services Provided**

- What do you think about the services provided by the Jobcentre?
  - JSA
  - Special programmes e.g. JobClub, New Deal, Programme Centre
  - mandatory element
  - job vacancies
- What do you think could be done to improve the Jobcentre for staff and for users?

### New Staff

- What were your expectations of the Jobcentre? Probe: clients, benefits, job vacancies.
- What are your initial impressions of the Jobcentre as a staff member?

### **Personal Details**

- Age/age-group
- Sex

- Length of time in job.

## Appendix Two

## **Interview Schedule for Jobcentre Clients**

### **Introduction**

- Purpose of research for PhD.
- Not a member of ES staff and will not pass information on to them.
- All information confidential and anonymous, don't even need name or address. This office will not be identified.
- I will be the only person to hear the tape.
- What you tell me will be used for the thesis that I will write at the end of my PhD.
- Give university headed letter explaining research.

### **Unemployment**

- Autobiographical account of experiences of unemployment. Probe: length of time unemployed, different phases of unemployment.
- Classed as long-term unemployed?
- What type of work looking for?
- Postal signer?

### **The Jobcentre and Services Offered**

- How often do you come to the Jobcentre?
- What do you do when you come to the Jobcentre? Probe: vacancies, just sign, New Deal? Which point do you sign on at?
- What do you think of the Jobcentre? What's good about it and bad about it?
- If you remember back to your first visit to the Jobcentre was it a negative or positive experience? How did you feel? Did you know what to do? Was it confusing? Was it how you expected it to be?
- How do you feel when you come to the Jobcentre now?
- What do you think of the vacancies available here?
- Have you participated in any special programmes e.g. New Deal/JobClub/Programme Centre etc? If so, were they compulsory? What did you think of it/them'?
- Do you receive Jobseeker's Allowance? What do you think of it? Did you mind having to have a Jobseeker's Agreement and having to specify more than one type of work?

- What do you think of the compulsory element to some of the services e.g. that you have to look for more than one type of job or at the end of the 4 month Gateway on New Deal you have to take one of the options?
- Have you ever heard of the Job Matching Service? Have you ever used it? Did you like it? Was it helpful?

### **Meetings/interactions with Staff**

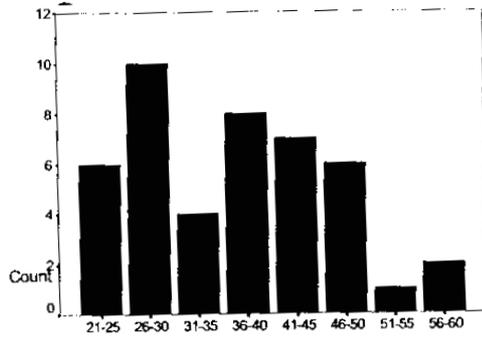
- What kind of meetings have you had with staff? (Might have already been covered in previous sections.)
- What do you think about the way you have been treated by staff? Do some staff members treat you differently from others'? Can you give any examples? Probe reception, new claims, just signing, RDV, 13 week interviews, 6 month interviews, Matching.
- If you have been called in for an appointment do you know why it is? Do staff explain what's going on? Do you know what's going on'?

### **Personal Details**

- Age/age-group
- Sex

## Appendix Three

**Bar Chart Showing Staff Age**



age group of staff

**Staff Grade by Section**

		Section						Total
		Fresh Claims	Vacancies & Matching	Signing & RDV	New Deal	Corporate Services	Manager	
<b>Grade:</b>	PB9	2	1		2			5
	PB8	2	7	13		1		23
	MPB7	6						6
	MPB6		2	1	4	1		8
	MPB3						1	1
<b>Total</b>		10	10	14	6	2	1	43

## Appendix Four

## FORTNIGHTLY JOBSEARCH REVIEWS – STRUCTURE

STAGE	CONTENT
1. Greeting.	Hello; Good morning/afternoon; apologies if kept waiting; good eye contact;smile; ice breaker.
2. Aim/Purpose.	Explain purpose of interview (not necessary every time - depends upon client); check client Jobsearch; undertake LMS Jobsearch.
3. Access Client Record.	a) Check personal details - address; telephone no., contact no., status eg. health, LTC; action hotspots; b) Check "conversations"; c) Check "More" box; d) Check "Actions" box.
4. Review Client JSAg.	a) Check JSAg - job goals, minimum weekly action; b) If required book ad-hoc interview with Adviser.
5. Evaluate Client Jobsearch activity.	a) Check "Hist." box; b) Has client heard from previous submissions?; c) Collect LLMI (Jobleads) - workflow to appropriate officer(s). d) identify and take RE action
6. Conduct LMS Jobsearch.	a) Check JSAg, SOC etc. b) make quality submissions; c) Endorse "Conversations" if no suitable vacancies found.
7. Close Jobsearch Review.	a) Recap with client; b) Thank You
8. Payment Activity	a) Collect LMU - excuse yourself. b) ES24 action - declaration, dates, signature; c) Input dialogue 470 to JSAPs; d) Confirm payment processed; e) Refer all non straightforward payment enquire! to BA - send client to BA.
9. Close Intervention.	a) If submission made ask client for feedback; b) If no submission remind client about Jobsearch responsibilities; c) Remind client that our job display changes daily; d) Goodbye.

## Appendix Five

### Example of a Typical Vacancy Card

Title:	Cleaner	MAN OR WOMAN
District:	Anydistrict	
Wage:	£3.62	
Hours:	Mon-Fri 5pm-7pm	
Duration:	Permanent	
Details:	P/T cleaner required to clean office areas. Duties will include dusting, polishing, emptying bins, hoovering and other tasks as specified.	
Ask For:	ANYTOWN12345	

## Appendix Six

## Conditions of entitlement to Jobseeker's Allowance in 1998

To get JSA you must:

- Be unemployed or working (on average) for less than 16 hours a week.  
If you are married or cohabiting and claiming income-based JSA, your partner must also be unemployed or working (on average) for less than 24 hours a week; *and*
- Be capable of work; *and*
- Satisfy the 'labour market conditions'. This means that you must:
  - be *available* for employment; *and*
  - be *actively* seeking employment; *and*
  - have a current *Jobseeker's Agreement* with the Employment Service; *and*
- be below pensionable age. Pensionable age is currently 65 for men and 60 for women; *and*
- not be younger than 19 and still at school or college on a non-advance course; *and*
- be in Great Britain.
- For Contribution-Based JSA, have been claiming JSA for less than six months *and* satisfy the contribution conditions.
- For Income-Based JSA, pass the means test.

(Barnes et al., 1998: 5-6)