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Emotional Professionalism in a Bureaucratic Context: Emotion Management in Case Handling at the Swedish Enforcement Authority

Bengt Larsson
Department of sociology and work science,
University of Gothenburg,
Box 720, SE 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden
Phone: +46317864775
Fax +46317864764
e-mail: bengt.larsson@socav.gu.se

Abstract

This article explores the emotional regime of case-handling of debt relief at the Swedish Enforcement Authority (SEA). The study analyses how emotion management and emotional display are justified by ‘being professional’ in interviews with SEA staff, revealing that this bureaucratic emotional regime is multidimensional and encompasses four different logics, which are connected to four central relational contexts of case-handling. The staff justify and perform a style of ‘affective neutrality’ in the context of law, ‘loyal productivity’ in relation to NPM policies, ‘empathetic respectfulness’ in relation to debtors, and an ‘authoritative and business-like’ style in relation to creditors.

Keywords: bureaucracy, debt relief, emotional regimes, emotional labour, emotional work, emotion management, feeling rules, justifications, New Public Management, professionalism

1 Introduction

Much research has been done on emotion management in organisations since Hochschild’s (1979; 1983) seminal publications. One strand of research focuses on emotions in bureaucratic contexts. Studies have been conducted in organisations such as immigration administration (Eggebo, 2012; Graham, 2003; Wettergren, 2010), health care (Obling, 2013; Pounds, 2012), labour administration (Terpe and Paierl, 2010), family law casework (Solveig Strøbæk, 2011), courts and legal work (Maroney, 2011; Roach Anleu and Mack, 2005), and other public management or frontline service organisations (Ashforth and Tomik, 2000; Du Gay, 2008; Guy et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2011). Some of these studies focus on feeling rules or emotional scripts prescribing how emotions should be managed. Others look at actual practice of emotion management and its consequences for handling cases. However, ‘writers in this field agree on one point at least: they all refute the idea of the purely “rational” bureaucratic organization in the classic Weberian sense’ (Sieben and Wettergren, 2010: 2). They all show that emotions are significant for bureaucratic employees and their relationship to clients/recipients.

This article presents a study from yet another bureaucratic organisation. Its analytical approach aims to further the development of more complex analyses of emotion management (cf. Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Cranford and Miller, 2013). The aim is to explore the emotional regime in handling debt relief cases at the Swedish Enforcement Authority (SEA) and to analyse the degree to which different justificatory logics exist in that regime (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999). The concept of an emotional regime aims to capture a prescribed set of rules or scripts that encourage, control and habituate individuals into specific emotional styles (Reddy, 2001: 124ff; Wettergren, 2010). One of the main results of this article, however, is that the emotional regime at the SEA is not homogenous and does not prescribe a singular emotional style in all situations. On the contrary, this regime is rather loose in that sense and encompasses competing values and justification principles, which case officers activate and balance.

The study is part of an in-depth, qualitative case study of handling debt-relief cases at the SEA (cf. Larsson and Jacobsson, 2013). The approach was inspired by institutional ethnography focusing on what people do, how they create meaning in what they do, and what role documents play within organisations (Smith, 2005: 101ff.). The research was approved by a Regional Ethical Review Board and complied with the principles of informed consent, voluntary participation and de-identification of participants. The article is methodologically based on an analysis of how emotion management and emotional display are justified in interviews with SEA staff. It focuses on how case officers and lawyers articulate what it means to be professional in the different contexts for handling cases. The rationale of this analytical approach is that professionalism is a concept through which the staff explicate and justifies the forms of emotion management and emotional display that make up the emotional regime at the SEA.

The article is based on 29 interviews conducted in 2010 and 2011 with management and staff from all five SEA locations that handle debt relief; these were comprised of 17 case officers, three SEA-lawyers, seven managers, and two administrators. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and was transcribed verbatim. A qualitative content analysis was performed in ATLAS.ti. The analytical constructs in this article are based on a second-order coding of two of the themes extracted in the first-order coding. One theme covered emotional aspects of work, and the other covered what it means to be professional. In order to distinguish different logics in terms of how staff discuss and justify their emotion management, joint sub-categories were constructed in the second-order coding. Since the aim was to explore the logics of a collective emotional regime, and to explain what relational contexts that activate these logics, the sub-categories were extracted from all interviews; that is differences between individual emotional styles were not targeted (cf. Terpe and Paiarl, 2010).

The article begins by theoretically elaborating the role of emotions and emotional regimes in bureaucratic contexts. This is followed by a presentation of the SEA bureaucratic context. The subsequent empirical analysis is divided into four parts presenting four justificatory logics relating to how emotion management is performed in the relational contexts. The article ends with conclusions based on the empirical analyses. All quotes have been translated into English by the author.

2 Rationality and emotion in bureaucracy

Bureaucratic organisations and decision-making have often been approached from Weber's vantage point, emphasising the instrumental character of bureaucracies. On the basis of legal formalism, technical efficiency and specialised expert knowledge, the bureaucratic organisation secures the calculability of outcomes through rational objectivity (Weber, 1948: 196ff.). This instrumental rationality is said to be 'anti-emotional' or 'affective neutral' in that bureaucrats perform their duties without self-interest by following impersonal rules (Brubaker, 1984: 21ff.; Parsons, 1951: 60). The approach implies that feelings and emotions oppose reason and rationality. However, feelings of duty, commitment to the task and pride in performance are legitimate, as are 'emotionalized disapproval' of breaches of bureaucratic norms (Merton, 1940: 566; Weber, 1948: 198f.).

Such distinctions between rationality and emotions are challenged by theories claiming that emotions guide rational decisions by creating a commitment to certain goals and values, and that emotions and rationality support each other (Barbalet, 2001: 30ff.; Sieben and Wettergren, 2010). Feelings are not just a backdrop against which rational decisions can be made. They are also sources of information about what is relevant and orients the decision-maker's approach to a case (Fineman, 2003: 95ff.). A number of empirical studies confirm that emotions exist in bureaucracies. Some emotions provide background and guidance for decision-making, while others must be managed in daily work (e.g., Ashforth and Tomik, 2000; Du Gay, 2008; Eggebø, 2012; Graham, 2003; Obling, 2013; Guy et al., 2010; Maroney, 2011; Miller et al., 2011; Pounds, 2012; Roach Anleu and Mack, 2005; Solveig Strøbæk, 2011; Terpe and Paiarl, 2010; Wettergren, 2010).

Emotional guidance and management do not just concern individuals. Neo-institutional theories argue that institutions and organisations influence actors' identities and conceptions through rules, norms and cultural-cognitive beliefs (Thornton et al., 2012). Similarly, organisations guide emotions through implicit and explicit rules and scripts that shape what actors subjectively feel and how they manage and display emotions (Fineman, 2003: 2ff; Hochschild, 1979; 1983; Sieben and Wettergren, 2010). In that sense, organisational or institutional emotional regimes consist of rules or scripts that encourage, control and habituate employees into specific emotional styles (Reddy, 2001: 124ff; Wettergren, 2010). Such regimes encourage individuals to perform emotional control by suppressing inappropriate feelings and emotion management to evoke or display appropriate emotions (Hochschild, 1979).

Berger et al.'s (1973: 57) discussion of the emotional style of bureaucracies implicitly articulates the notion of a bureaucratic emotional regime: 'Bureaucracy...imposes control upon the spontaneous expression of emotional states. There is, however, also a more positive aspect of this: bureaucracy *assigns* emotional states'. While their analysis is similar to Weber's approach, they highlight that affective neutrality is an emotional state based on feelings and display rules. Even so, their analysis implicates a 'strict' bureaucratic emotional regime in that it offers 'strong emotion management tools at the expense of allowing greater scope for self-exploration and navigation' (Reddy, 2001: 126).

On the basis of neo-institutional theory, one might question the notion of a strict, homogenous, bureaucratic emotional regime. Given current emphasis on the plurality of institutional contexts, logics and values, it is more reasonable to assume that bureaucratic emotional regimes are 'loose', allowing a 'diverse set of management tools to be fashioned locally [and] individually' (Reddy, 2001: 126). This approach suggests that emotional

styles depend on specific relational contexts, which implies that bureaucrats must activate and balance tensions between competing logics and justification principles (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; Jagd, 2011; Thornton et al., 2012). Bureaucratic emotional regimes can be multidimensional and varying, although some central aspects remain similar. Such regimes do not strictly regulate emotion management, but rather have loose guiding principles that can be activated in different situations and relational contexts (Bolton and Boyd, 2003).

3 Bureaucracy and professionalism at the SEA

The Swedish framework for debt relief was introduced in 1994 and slightly reformed in 2006-2007 and 2011 (Larsson and Jacobsson, 2013). The main purpose is 'that it shall be rehabilitating; gravely indebted persons shall have an opportunity to solve their economic problems and thereby get a new chance to a life more liveable and beneficial to society' (SOU 2004:81: 143). However, debt relief is not a fresh start, since debtors must pay creditors a specified monthly amount for five years after the decision to initiate debt relief is made by the SEA.

Debt relief cases are handled by professionals working in a bureaucratic context. Most case officers have law degrees, others are social workers, economists or have social science degrees. These professionals are obliged to follow legal and SEA policies, but handling cases also includes room for discretionary judgment. During the last decade, a number of reforms have aimed to reduce this discretion in order to increase legal consistency and turnaround time in case handling. In addition, there has been a political ambition to make it easier for debtors to enter into the debt relief process, thereby paving the way for a more 'generous' policy at the SEA (Larsson and Jacobsson, 2013). Even though these reforms have strengthened the existing bureaucratic principles, professionalism is also an organisationally prescribed value at the SEA. Case officers and lawyers express pride in professionalism, which is a central tool in managing private feelings at work (cf. Obling, 2013; Wettergren, 2010). This may seem paradoxical, since professionalism theoretically represents a different logic from bureaucracy (Freidson, 2001). Professionalism is based on discretionary decision-making rooted in specialised knowledge and skills exercised by a profession with exclusive jurisdiction. However, the application of this concept within a wider range of sectors indicates that tasks previously considered nonprofessional today have become entangled in the discourse of professionalism (Evetts, 2011).

The important question in this article is not whether case officers truly are professionals, but what they mean by 'being professional' in their work. In the interviews, the concept was actually used to justify different principles guiding work and different forms of emotion management. Thus, the concept points to the emotional regime at the SEA. The fact that case officers and lawyers justified their emotion management with notions of professionalism, rather than by merely referring to bureaucratic principles, is also related to the New Public Management (NPM) turn at the SEA. NPM-inspired practices, such as case-management systems, productivity performance measures, and even some lean principles focusing on 'customer value' and 'doing more with less', were recently introduced (Larsson and Jacobsson, 2013). The SEA's mission statement speaks of giving 'professional service' to creditors and debtors. A middle manager compared this to the newly set 'customer requirements':

Our mission statement on professional service is based on the customer requirements, that we believe our customers have on us, and there are six customer requirements: We shall uphold quality, high quality, decisions should be, should be uniform, sustainable, intelligible, just, and so on – prompt. And it's very important that we treat all parties equally and respectfully, and accommodating. (Manager I.1)

This statement also contains concepts central to traditional bureaucratic decision-making, relating to legal consistency and uniformity. Whereas such statements show that SEA management prescribe professionalism, the empirical problem is how such professionalism is interpreted and practiced. This article focuses on how case officers and lawyers articulate what it means to be professional in different relational contexts of case handling, and which tensions arise between different dimensions of professionalism. The empirical analysis shows four such relational contexts. Before moving on to analysing the justificatory logics of these relational contexts, I will briefly present each context in which case work is performed. First, SEA bureaucrats must relate to the legislation governing the case-handling of debt relief. The important actors for case officers to relate to in this context are SEA lawyers and their legal network, and the courts deciding appeal cases. Second, case work takes place in relation to SEA policies. Central and local management are the important actors to whom case officers must relate in this context. Third, case officers must relate to the individuals applying for debt relief, who are the main clients of the debt-relief process. Fourth, they must relate to the creditors to whom the debtors owe money, since they are the other party of the debt-relief process. Creditors are also sent SEA proposals and decisions, and have the right to object to them. The central point of the analysis below is that these contexts activate different principles of what it means to be professional, and thus different emotional styles.

4 Professionalism as affective neutrality

When performed in a legal context, professionalism in case handling is about ‘trying to weigh each circumstance of the individual case together, and then making a decision based on the guidelines that the Parliament has settled in the debt relief law’ (case officer I.13). In relation to law, the SEA lawyers and the courts, the ideal of professionalism prescribes the distanced objectivity of bureaucracy, implying a bracketing of personal and emotional considerations (cf. Roach Anleu and Mack, 2005). This emotional style seems to be the most central element of the SEA’s emotional regime since it relates to the legal basis of the exercise of public authority, which is of particular importance to the management (cf. Wettergren, 2010; Eggebø, 2012).

However, this affective neutral approach is an emotional style. As such, it requires quite some emotion management, and may also have negative or positive emotional consequences, such as feeling badly about decisions or taking pride in not letting emotions affect decisions. It requires emotional effort to be neutral, because of sympathy with debtors whose situations often include unemployment, divorce, addiction, death in the family, loss of friends and family, and bankruptcy. There are also cases where debtors are physically or mentally ill, or have attempted suicide after a negative decision. All this makes case officers ‘feel badly’ when rejecting applications. However, there are also cases that arouse feelings of antipathy; for example, if the debtor has committed serious crimes. Even though it is emotionally difficult, case officers have to keep a distance to perform professionally. For example, in cases where debtors have committed crimes:

The application of the law has turned [...] we’re now more generous in granting debt relief also for those who have committed crimes. Even though that is not something that we’re fond of, it’s something that, like, we can handle. (Case Officer I.8)

Such emotional bracketing also applies to debtors that case officers pity. Although it feels hard to reject applications, especially if the debtor is in hardship, they have to make a legal assessment, regardless:

We’re supposed to make an overall assessment [...] As you turn over to a no, then you may feel that, well, it can feel a bit difficult [...] But once you’ve done it [...]. Then it’s like, it’s still a judgment. It’s part of the job, the assessment you make. You must have, try to have, a bit of a professional (laughs) approach to it then! But, on the other hand, when people are calling, being desperate or, like, then you may be affected by that, kind of, take over that feeling yourself. (Lawyer I.10)

Thus, this emotional style is about distancing oneself from the debtor’s situation. One of the main instruments for creating distance is law, since the legal rules prescribe what should be considered and not in the assessment, and bracket most of the emotional aspects of a debtor’s life situation:

Some write real, like A4 pages about their miseries, and (sigh) [...] they present lots of things that are not relevant in my assessment, but the debtor does not understand that. So they’re in the process of explaining everything, how proper they are and how sad it is for them, but I do not care about it! (Case Officer I.11)

Another prerequisite for affective neutrality is physical distance, facilitated by indirect communication via documents, supplemented by email and phone contact. The assessment can even be done without any contact with the applicant, although case officers do not always feel good about that. There are few actual meetings with debtors. According to an experienced lawyer, some officers even fear being confronted by these persons, because such meeting could become too emotional. This is confirmed in interviews exemplifying the difficulty of staying emotionally neutral after meeting debtors:

I’ve had a few times when the debtor has come here [...] It’s been fun for me to meet with them, because you get a more of a sense of reality regarding whom you are working with, and get a feeling for the person and so on. But it becomes so much harder to make an accurate assessment. For then, you get to, I feel that [...] I, like, want initiate the case [i.e. decide to approve of debt relief] at all costs. (Case Officer I.3)

Even phone contact can complicate emotional distance from the debtors, and it becomes emotionally harder to reject an application: ‘The more contact you’ve had with someone, the harder it gets to reach a negative decision’ (Case Officer I.4). In some situations, case officers may even need to avoid cases or let another officer take over because they have difficulty upholding impartiality. This is particularly the case in situations in which case officers feel antipathy against an applicant who has committed serious crimes, or if they quarrelled with the applicant.

5 Professionalism as productive loyalty

If the above professional style is close to the traditional bureaucrat, there is also a NPM-professional ideal that is encouraged and practiced. This professionalism consists of loyalty to SEA productivity and service goals. Regarding productivity goals, the number of cases has been increasing to increase turn-around time and overall productivity (Larsson and Jacobsson, 2013). As for customer service, the ideal is to provide high quality and prompt service:

Above all, the debtor is supposed to feel that, that this went quickly, and well, and professionally, and that we've done a good job and so on. And even if you, if we reject the application, and they are not so happy with that, so, so, they should still feel that, somehow, that we [...] did a professional job, then. (Case Officer I.7)

This NPM professionalism encourages a slightly different emotional style from that of the traditional bureaucrat, and therefore requires a significant degree of emotion management. A similarity with the bureaucratic style is that it requires a bracketing of personal and emotional considerations. Some case officers may actually find emotional rewards and pride in managing private feelings and performing the productive loyalty expected by the organisation:

I try to follow what is said [...] I try to be loyal, even though I may privately have a different view. I just love to meet the target [...] I feel that I am professional [...] It's, like, one thing what I think, another thing what [...] I'm there to do. And it's what I'm here to do that has to be done at work, then. (Case Officer I.6)

For many case officers, however, these goals are stressful and a nuisance, implicating that the SEA puts quantity before quality in case handling. The productivity orientation makes some case officers feel that they lose the human relationship with clients, and they compare their work with an assembly line that forces them to process as many cases as possible. This is felt as difficult for those who want to scrutinise cases thoroughly to benefit the weaker party, the debtor. For some, there are also negative emotional consequences of struggling to meet the targets:

We have very high quantitative targets. And even though you measure the entire team [...] in the end it all sums up to an individual evaluation. And that is the basis, of course, both for your pay, and how you feel. If you underperform for a long time you will feel like a failure. (Case Officer I.2)

The productivity goals would probably have created even greater emotional tension or emotive dissonance (Hochschild, 1983: 90) if the SEA had the kind of rejection culture described in bureaucracies such as the Swedish Immigration Office (Wettergren, 2010). However, SEA productivity is combined with a generous policy to grant debt relief to as many people as possible (cf. Larsson and Jacobsson, 2013). This reduces the emotional tension between concern for the debtors and organisational goals. Yet, some SEA staff members are frustrated because of another tension that is created as a result – in relation to bureaucratic professionalism and the principle that handling cases should be based on law:

As a lawyer, I think that you should use the legal method, and in that case there is this hierarchy that applies: first there is the law, then there are the preparatory governmental inquiries, then case law, and then there's doctrine, and then there is the governing signals from the SEA way beyond that. Had I used that [order] in my work, there had been much more rejections than initiations. Now [...] it is the aim of SEA that we should try to get through as many as possible through this debt relief. One cannot push enormously but, [...] you may well have to ignore certain things. So it's a little, it's a little hard. (Case Officer I.9)

To be professional in accordance with the NPM ideals, case officers must distance themselves from these negative feelings and display the loyalty required by the SEA. They simply have to accept the policy and try to manage the tension between private feelings, and the diverging values of bureaucratic and NPM professionalism.

6 Professionalism as empathic respectfulness

The two forms of professionalism described above concern the context of law and policies and the relations to SEA lawyers, the management and the courts. It is now time to turn to client relations. The most emotionally

dense of these is the relation to the debtors – which is already implied in that it is feelings towards debtors that should be bracketed in the emotional styles above. In addition to providing good service, which includes effective case-handling and communication with debtors, professionalism in the context of client relations is mainly a question of being respectful and showing empathy (cf. Graham, 2003; Wettergren, 2010). This context thereby introduces a third logic into the SEA emotional regime. This respectful empathetic approach implicates that clients should *not* be treated equally in all respects, as is the case in relation to law and SEA policies. On the contrary, individualising the approach toward debtors is required, based on client needs and situations.

There are different aspects to being emphatic to a client, all of which involve emotion management. In some cases, officers personalise their interactions with debtors by surface acting (cf. Hochschild, 1979; 1983). They tune into their clients' state of mind and try to adjust to how the debtor 'sounds'. If the debtor sounds gloomy, they must adapt to a certain degree without allowing the conversation to become truly negative:

You have to sound very optimistic. Positive and happy. I think that helps a lot, so that they feel comfortable [...] Often, when you make those calls, you call because you have found something that is wrong in the application, which led to a rejection [...] and then it may be difficult to sound happy and positive (laughter), of course! And now and then the debtor can see through that. And sometimes, well, maybe you can start by asking, perhaps not move directly on to the negative things, but asking a bit: 'I see here that you have kids, how nice, are they to begin their upper secondary school education soon?' (Case Officer I.9)

In these situations there are informal display rules that the case officer should sound optimistic, friendly and understanding to create trust and security for the debtor. However, the basic approach may still be instrumental, as this is done to calm down or cheer up the debtor, so that the debtor understands the situation and may provide the information needed to handle the case. Thus, depending on what feeling case officers get from clients, they may strategically choose different emotional displays and approaches: 'One is like that: "If you take on more debt, then like the heaven will open up and the earth shall devour you!"... Or you like: "This is really your chance!" like, encouraging.' (Case Officer I.2)

However, the emotional display toward the debtor need not just be about surface acting. It may also be based on private feelings, which may arise naturally in relation to debtors in difficult situations, although not always for more 'ordinary' people:

It doesn't affect me all that much if they are, like, more like people in general, that is [...] pretty ordinary people. Then, it doesn't move me that strongly, but it might move me strongly because I get annoyed with them, that they have to get their act together [...] You have to adapt your requirements to the person, their circumstances (Case Officer I.3)

Debtors are seen as more or less worthy of sympathy. Even though few officers acknowledged that they were distrustful, some stated that other officers tended to question debtors. Such an approach is sometimes seen as less professional since it doesn't comply with the feeling and display rules of empathy and respect. On the contrary, the core of empathic professionalism is to treat all debtors with equal respect:

This whole questioning attitude [...] that you can say that someone is lying, and so on, I think that is completely and insanely unprofessional. I think we have to understand that, even if someone withholds or angles information, these people do have such strong grounds for doing it. [...] We should always be respectful of people, no matter what they have done. (Case Officer I.11)

For this reason some case officers believe that empathetic professionalism must be based in an inner deep driving force and a maturity built upon a true disposition to help people. Such statements disqualify surface acting, partly in favour of deep acting, in the sense that they evoke truly empathetic feelings or sympathy (cf. Hochschild, 1979; 1983; Pounds, 2012). These feelings should already be there naturally, as their own feelings, to properly perform the work (cf. Curley and Royle, 2013: 106). There must be a real capacity for empathy and ability to put oneself in the other's position, and truly feel that everyone deserves a second chance.

A consequence of this emotional approach is that it is not always possible to maintain bureaucratic professionalism and treat all cases affectively neutral. The empathic orientation tends to produce a sympathetic attitude and a responsibility for the debtors, which may result in an attempt to help out as much as possible. Once they have decided to support an application, they may find it difficult to put the debtor through new hardships. Some will therefore push the limit; 'maybe a bit too far sometimes'.

There is an inherent tension between the two forms of professionalism depicted previously and this empathic emotional style, but there is no absolute contradiction. Even though debt relief aims to balance the interests of creditors and debtors, the interest of the latter is held higher, and is reinforced by the policy of generosity. In addition, the relatively vague legal framework allows emotional aspects to be weighed, since the debtor's need for debt relief should be considered in the overall assessment. Therefore, it is not surprising that some case officers find it justifiable to be influenced or guided by emotions. These may actually indicate important facts to be considered:

Sometimes you are really moved. You are, and I don't think that is something, something wrong, since I think you should be. We must be empathetic. And it is important for our decision making process also to, to embrace these facts which are emotionally charged. [...] These emotional aspects, they must be weighed in. We cannot just say this doesn't matter. (Case Officer I.11)

The performance of such empathic professionalism is emotionally rewarding. However, unlike the aforementioned pride in keeping a neutral distance or being loyal and productive, the feeling is one of having done a good deed and being recognised for that – of being the fairy godmother. Some interviewees have stated that such recognition is also valuable for the quality of case handling since it encourages them do an even better job next time.

7 Professionalism as authoritative and business-like

In contrast to this empathic emotional style towards debtors, the approach towards creditors is mainly characterised by a distanced and instrumental approach. To be professional towards creditors is to balance between expressing public authority and acting business-like. Although these approaches are different, they are both based on an instrumental orientation to make creditors accept the SEA proposals and decisions. Unlike the other two professional ideals that encourage affective neutrality, this form of professionalism does not require that much emotion work, and has few emotional consequences. The neutrality toward creditors is easy to perform, particularly because these clients mainly are big banks and collection companies towards which an impersonal and instrumental approach seems natural:

In the conversation [...] with debtors, you may feel more personal. While, with a creditor it becomes more impersonal, since [...] it is a company, not a private person, who owns the debt. (Case Officer I.4)

Case officers distinguish between big collection companies or banks and small companies or private creditors. The latter are often ill-informed about law, so it is important to express an attitude of public authority towards them. Just as in relation to the debtors, the case officers have a service obligation toward creditors, and it is important to make them feel that they have understood. Case officers may pity some private creditors, but ignorant creditors are not met with the empathic approach used towards debtors. On the contrary, case officers were irritated by objections from creditors. Such are often seen as nonsense objections since they question the competence of case officers without solid arguments. In such cases, the officers may find it necessary to clarify the formal authority of their decisions:

Well, it is obviously easy to [...] develop empathy [when] you know a person's whole life-story, so. And [the company] has never presented its life-story too me [...] When writing proposals, you never address the debtor; they are always addressed to the creditor. Then, you display a completely different language, like, and it gets to be well, you know, the public authority does not 'believe that', the public authority 'finds' and 'judge'. But it doesn't 'believe'. (Case Officer I.2)

However, big debt-collection companies and banks have knowledgeable staff that case officers find to be professional, which allows for a more business-like approach. They can find common ground, in that they both have a strictly factual and economical approach to the issue. In these cases, the dialogue is usually very good:

They have a very professional way, and it's like dollars and cents for them, it's not persons in the same way [...]. Their whole business is really a question of getting paid for the debts they purchase. So, in a way, it's a venture capital business for them. If they are representatives for other private creditors, or small companies, they, the creditors have, well, more of an unreasonable approach towards the debtor, if you say so. For then there is a personal history behind it. (Case Officer I.22)

A 'professional' case officer understands the creditors take on the problem, which is characterised by purely economic logic. It is therefore possible to behave business-like. This is also expressed in terms of 'selling' the

creditors on the proposal for debt relief. Such an approach fits the NPM discourse, implicating that the SEA should provide prompt service to customers who follow the market logic. This distanced approach does not seem to have any strong emotional consequences for the case officers, nor does it require much emotion management. The only feeling they must manage seems to be irritation at unwarranted objections from ignorant creditors.

8 Conclusions

This article has aimed to explore the emotional regime in handling debt relief cases at the SEA. The main result is that this emotional regime is rather loose, and encompasses competing values, logics and justification principles – that is, competing emotional styles – are activated and balanced relationally by case officers. This emotional regime is multidimensional in that it encompasses (at least) four different logics, according to which case officers orient and justify their emotion management and emotional display. These logics are expressed through the case officers' statements of what it means to be professional in connection to the four main relational contexts in which case handling is embedded.

First, in relation to law, SEA lawyers and their legal network, and the courts deciding appeals, professionalism signals affective neutrality. This implies that case officers must manage private feelings to treat cases consistently from the point of law. This suppression of feelings is facilitated by legal rules and formal communication, which helps create emotional and physical distance toward creditors.

Second, in relation to NPM policy guidelines prescribed by management, professionalism entails being productive and loyal. This approach also implies bracketing personal feelings, and evoking the appropriate emotional states and displays.

Third, in relation to debtors, professionalism means being empathic and respectful. This approach may entail both instrumental emotional surface acting to tune in to debtors' emotions and evoking more authentic and deep feelings of empathy and respect. In addition, this form of professionalism implies that case officers also may be guided by emotions when making decisions.

Fourth, in relation to creditors, professionalism implies acting in an authoritative and business-like way. Even though this is an affective neutral approach, it is an emotional state that is relationally embedded. The authoritative emotional displays are performed mainly toward 'ignorant' private creditors and small companies, whereas the business-like display is made toward big collections companies and banks that behave according to economic logic.

All these forms of emotion management have emotional rewards, such as pride in upholding emotional distance in the bureaucratic or NPM mode, or having done a good deed through an empathic approach toward clients. Even so, there are also emotional costs attached to these logics, including distancing oneself from feelings of pity or sympathy with debtors in difficult situations. There is also frustration and emotional difficulty in performing the prescribed emotional styles in some situations and balancing the tensions between these four logics that encourage and justify different forms of emotion management and emotional display.

An important question is how this emotional regime is enforced and reproduced. Only parts of it are formally prescribed, whereas much seems to be implicitly learned and reproduced. The bureaucratic and NPM logics are, in part, explicitly prescribed by law and SEA policies, and relate to the legal education that many employees have. The staff are further socialised into these and the other two logics through their training at the SEA, which is reinforced through reports and follow-up procedures by the management and the legal network, with the aim of improving the quality of case handling. Nevertheless, the practice of these emotional styles in connection to the different contexts of case handling seems to be upheld and reproduced through the collective culture among the staff. This is, however, not done in an isolated organisation. On the contrary, the different logics that make up this emotional regime are strongly related to institutionalised values in the organisational field of public authorities and welfare professional work in Sweden (Thornton et al., 2012). Therefore, although there are some differences, there are also several similarities between different bureaucratic service organisations (cf. Wettergren, 2010).

Another important issue concern the consequences that this emotional regime has for bureaucratic decision making. Since no attempt was made to review outcomes in relation to the emotional styles practiced by singular case officers, no detailed conclusion can be drawn from this study. On a general level, however, it confirms previous research that there is a lot of emotion management going on in bureaucracies. In addition, some case

officers confirm the theoretical critique against conceptualising formal rationality and emotions as contradictory. Feelings are not only a ‘bias’ that must be managed, but may also be seen as sources of information orienting a case officer towards important aspects of the case (Barbalet, 2001: 30ff.; Sieben and Wettergren, 2010). Interestingly, the legal reform of 2007 opened up a greater space for discretionary judgement by introducing the ‘overall assessment’ of a case in addition to the previous, more specified, conditions to be assessed (cf. Larsson and Jacobsson, 2013). However, the way in which this discretionary space and the emotional guidance in case handling is dealt with is, like the issue of how tensions between the different emotional styles are balanced, something that must be studied further.

One shortcoming of this article is, thus, that it says little about how these justificatory logics are balanced and how the emotional styles are adjusted situationally on a case-to-case level. If one accepts Boltanski and Thévenot’s (1999: 369) assertion that ‘the same persons, have, on the same day and in the same social space, to use different devices for assessment [...] when they shift from one situation to another’, such case-to-case analyses of situational practice would be important for future research.

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