Persistent poverty in the Netherlands
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4. Close Encounters of the Bureaucratic Kind

4.1. Introduction: welfare dependency

People in poverty often depend on social security benefits. Scholars, who try to explain social security dependency (often long-term receipt of welfare), focus on different aspects of the relation between people in poverty and the welfare system (Fraser & Gordon, 1994). They note, for example, that people in poverty often seem to have a choice between low paid work and living on welfare, and prefer the latter. For instance, Charles Murray (1984) suggests that, as a result of the strategic use of social policy, the number of people in poverty has been raised. The laws that were developed to relieve the poor became a major cause of poverty (cf. Wilson, 1987; Peterson, 1991; Kelso, 1994; Wilson, 1996). Therefore, public assistance – although originally designed to provide temporary relief – is said to have created incentives for permanent reliance on government support (Fernandez Kelly, 1995; p. 214). This perspective also became popular in the Netherlands; according to Engbersen et al. (1993; p. 227-8), the mixture of the corporatist, social democratic and liberal welfare state created a group of strategically operating welfare clients. Accordingly, there is a general concern that welfare creates dependency. The concern about this is that people have a choice what to do: living on welfare or taking up employment. The manner in which policy is designed reaffirms this line of thought. Policy programs to challenge welfare dependency often begin with the idea that people rather stay on welfare than going back to work. This vision still maintains centrality in policy and policy reform. Whether policy makers emphasize the carrot of making work pay and providing programs to enhance employability or the stick of time limits and sanctions for failure to adhere to social and program rules, norms and values, “reform policies purport to embody a commitment to a behavioral model that focuses on individual utility maximization based on the values that policy makers assume” (Tickamyer et al., 2000; p. 176). However, there may be other factors involved, for instance the manner in which welfare distribution is organized.
For decades, scholars developed another perspective. To analyze welfare dependency, contradictory arguments of scholars focus on the *interactions* between welfare officials and welfare clients. These interactions happen at the so-called street level, where policy delivery may be most critical, because the interactions of the welfare officials with clients have substantial and sometimes unexpected consequences for the actual direction and outcome of public policies (cf. Blau, 1960, 1965; Lipsky, 1980; Engbersen, 1990; Van der Veen, 1990; Meyers et al., 1998; Ypeij & Engbersen, 2002; Ypeij, 2004; Laakso & Drevdahl, 2006). These interactions between welfare officials and clients – in case of a poor relationship – might become an impediment for the latter to take up employment; if the client and the welfare official cannot get along very well, the chance that the client will go from welfare to work declines. Therefore, I am particularly interested in the interactions between welfare officials and clients, and what the consequences of the interactions are for poverty perpetuation. For that reason, this chapter addresses the nature of welfare dependency. After a description of the welfare bureaucracy, I will describe the struggle between the welfare officials and clients. Finally, I will give examples of how respondents (“as clients”) experience the bureaucratic encounters.

### 4.2. The bureaucratic field and the symbolic struggle

I am particularly interested in the field of social welfare provision (i.e. government programs which seek to provide a minimum level of income, service or other support for disadvantaged people), and whether this field enables or constrains clients from taking up employment. How does this field look? The welfare office is one of the major elements of the welfare field for people in poverty; if they want to apply for welfare they have to make a claim. At the welfare office, consequently, they face large-scale bureaucracies. Bureaucracies are goal-oriented organizations based on a clearly defined division of labor whereby each job in the organizational chart is spelled out in detail (Katz & Danet, 1973; p. 4).

The Dutch state distributes welfare via these large-scale bureaucracies – and not via tax legislation. Because many people (for example, 412,320 in the year 1998) in the Netherlands depend on welfare, the bureaucracy is the most rational way to accomplish welfare distribution. Since a relatively small number of people (welfare officials) can coordinate the activities of a relatively large number of people (welfare clients), bureaucracy is inevitable (cf. Dahl & Lindblom, 1953; p. 237). Max Weber (cf. Ringer 2004; p. 221) characterized bureaucracy, on the one hand,
as a crucial element in the rationalization of modern political economic institutions: technically efficient, sustained by specialized knowledge, and indispensable as an organizational device in every realm of modern life. On the other hand, he characterized bureaucracy as a threat to individual freedom, equality, and cultural vitality (cf. Blokland, 2001; p. 64). However, it is unsatisfactory to argue that the bureaucracy is the ultimate cause of welfare dependency. To continue this line of reasoning, the bureaucracy becomes a big vague Kafkanian structure, which fully controls the lives of clients. This is not very accurate. What is real are the relationships and interactions between clients and welfare officials, which is why scholars argue that policy outcomes are to a large extent jointly produced through transactions between frontline workers in social agencies and their clients (Meyers et al., 1998; p. 2). Oftentimes, “the welfare state (and its bureaucracies) is defined, in a very literal way, in terms of the relationship between administrative agencies and clients” (cf. Offe, 1984, cited in Peillon, 1998; p. 215). Therefore, it becomes necessary to study the relationships and transactions between welfare officials and the respondents. These transactions and interactions can be observed, are real and relational, and show what actually happens.

Central question is: What are the features of these transactions? An important element of the transaction is that clients must prove they deserve social assistance. If people want to claim welfare, they have to demonstrate need. Welfare benefits in the Netherlands are characterized by income and/or assets tests, and are means-tested (Behrendt, 2000; p. 24). Means-tested indicates that the provision of the benefit takes place after a bureaucratic investigation and assessment of income and wealth, which demonstrates need. Welfare officials execute these bureaucratic investigations, and they have some discretion to determine whether clients deserve social assistance. Therefore, welfare officials interact directly with clients (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; p. 175), they are mandated to determine eligibility, levels of entitlements, the actual benefits clients may receive (Hasenfeld et al., 1987; p. 397), then they continue to check on whether clients remain eligible – a continuous classification (Blau, 1973; p. 230).

The question: What precisely happens during the bureaucratic encounters? When clients have to show their deservingness during these bureaucratic encounters, they earn their rights by demonstrating that they are “deserving poor” – a symbolic and moral classification (Hasenfeld et al., 1987 p. 388; Knegt, 1987; Engbersen, 1990; Van der Veen, 1990). The deserving poor were those people who
are not able to take care of themselves. They were not expected to work because of their age, gender, family status, or physical limitations, so that they are thus deemed as meriting government support. The undeserving poor, on the other hand, are expected to work and consequently warranted only (limited) haphazard government support (Steenland 2006; p. 1274). This distinction is also used in the Dutch welfare system (cf. Engbersen, 1990; p. 151). People who are not entitled to any other social security benefit and prove to be incompetent to work, are eligible for welfare. Thus, during the bureaucratic encounters, this dichotomy is central. Hypothetically, – theoretically – clients want to belong to the deserving poor, and attempt to present themselves as deserving. For their part, the welfare officials have to decide to classify clients either as undeserving or deserving. In these processes, the client must present her / himself as deserving, while the welfare official has to accept or to reject their classifications as worthy. In these decisions, the interest of clients and welfare officials may conflict (Hasenfeld et al., 1987. p. 401). During the interactions, there is a tension between the welfare official and the client about whether the client deserves social assistance. Therefore, scholars often suggest that social welfare policy cannot be fully understood without recognizing that it is fundamentally a set of symbols that try to differentiate between the deserving and the undeserving poor (cf. Handler & Hasenfeld (1991; p. 11). However, if everything goes by the book, what is the problem?

Both the welfare official and the client have some space to determine the outcome of the transactions. On the one hand, scholars argue that “street-level bureaucrats” experience organizational pressure, have to make many decisions, and sometimes their individual preferences predominate in these decisions (Lipsky, 1980). Because welfare officials have some space to maneuver, they can interpret the rules to their own benefit (making work easy, reducing work pressure) (cf. Riccucci et al., 2004). This is often referred to as discretionary space or bureaucratic discretion (cf. Keiser et al., 2004). On the other hand, not only the welfare officials are afforded considerable discretion in meeting their roles and obligations, clients may well respond to “the practices of control through strategies of resistance or submission” (Peillon, 1998; p. 222). In this way, clients also have a kind of “breathing space” as do the welfare officials. During these bureaucratic encounters, they also have many choices at hand. They can avoid the bureaucracy, demolish the welfare office, threaten the welfare officials, or abuse the system. It seems that power operates both relationally and reciprocally. The bureaucracy is not a “one way street” in which welfare officials determine who gets what by the
book. The bureaucracy is a field within which people frequently regularly interact, classify, and struggle for their interests. The features of the relationship determine the outcome: either take up employment or stay on welfare.

Due to continuous eligibility checks, welfare clients develop a durable relationship with the welfare office, i.e. with various welfare officials. The quality of the relationship (and the exchange) might influence the outcome. To grasp the interactions and the relationships in the welfare bureaucracy, the dichotomy of deserving/undeserving can be used as a heuristic device. For several reasons, it enables us to analyze the interchange between welfare officials and clients. First, (as we shall see) the interactions and exchanges are interspersed with questions as to whether clients are entitled to welfare and whether they belong to the right symbolic category. Second, the Dutch welfare state draws boundaries between those who are entitled to welfare because they cannot work (the deserving poor, who have acceptable reasons for being poor), and those who claim welfare, while still able to work (the undeserving poor, those who many people thought could and should earn a living for themselves). Therefore, this chapter addresses two questions. 1) How do the respondents experience the eligibility checks and the relationships with welfare officials? 2) How do they react to these checks? This chapter begins with the premise that people are not passive entities that simply live through the bureaucratic encounters, but are active agents that shape the interactions with the bureaucracy, in general, and the welfare officials in particular. Therefore, people might employ several strategies to manage and, challenge practices of the state. Welfare dependency is not the outcome of a choice, but needs to be approached as a process. Thus, I address the question of welfare dependency and focus on how the respondents make sense of and deal with the welfare system and its related symbolic classifications. I take the client’s point of view. Although the respondents hardly used the terms deserving and undeserving, they told stories and gave examples that closely mirrored the meanings of these terms that are extensively found in both US public opinion and policy circles. Of course, the results and interpretations reported here cannot determine definitively the objected circumstances of how welfare functions for these individuals. What they do show is how the respondents perceive the reception of benefits. In what follows, the experienced encounters are described. First of all, I have to determine which respondents are part of the analysis.
4.3. In search of welfare dependency: The data

The majority of the respondents live from a welfare, disability, or unemployment benefit. They depend on these benefits for an average of seven years, with a minimum of one month and a maximum of thirty-seven years. Those who are depending on the state for decades often receive a disability benefit and are no longer obliged to work. About 21% (N=45) lives on a benefit up to two years, 25% (N=53) two to five years, 24% (N=52) five to twelve years, and 25% (N=53) lives on a benefit over twelve years. Hence, this researched group depends on welfare for quite a few years (see also Table 2.1 Labor market position, gender, age and poverty duration, page 46). Because many respondents live from a welfare benefit (or they apply for exceptional welfare needs), they have some sort of connection with the welfare office.

Table 4.1 Quality of interactions with the welfare officials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>161</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>216</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analyzing the transcriptions, I focused on how the respondents experience the relationship with the welfare officials (Table 4.1). Many of the respondents (N=59) accept the manner in which they are treated, and understand why they are checked. However, it is, from their viewpoint, not one of the most enjoyable things in life. Most significantly, forty-two respondents feel they are treated by the welfare officials without any respect. During the interviews, they harshly express their discontent towards the welfare officials; they absolutely do not like receiving a benefit, and feel dishonored during the encounters. Only fifteen respondents have a satisfactory bond with the welfare officials. Although some of them are obliged to work, they maintain a good relationship. About ten percent of the respondents do not have any trouble with the welfare officials.
Table 4.2 Labor market position and quality of interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>OTW couples</th>
<th>OTW single parents older kids (v)</th>
<th>OTW single no kids (v)</th>
<th>Subsidized job, training</th>
<th>Working poor</th>
<th>NOTW medically unfit</th>
<th>NOTW single parent kids under five</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has no connection with the welfare office</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feels treated without any respect</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences no problems because of handicap</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understands the checks, but does not like it</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory bond</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 shows the relationship between the bureaucratic encounters and the labor market position. The elderly are not included. What is noteworthy is that many of the subsidized workers express their discontent towards the welfare officials. The explanation: they are often reintegrated by the welfare office and still have a durable relationship with one of the welfare officials. They are often not satisfied with the payment and the manner in which they are treated in their new profession (see section 3.4.3. The investments’ symbolic and economic pay-off). This strengthens their discontent towards the government and the state. The majority of the respondents living on welfare shows their dissatisfaction towards welfare officials. It is precisely this group that struggles with the deserving / undeserving classification. This group is also relatively young, often consists of single parents, and couples with kids. Noteworthy is that many of the single parents with children under five – who are not obliged to work – have a difficult relationship with the welfare officials. Hence, all the categories are part of the analysis, although some do not have to work or already work. Furthermore, people who are tested medically unfit sometimes have to apply for additional welfare at the welfare office. Therefore they have often a connection with this office. These respondents contemplate on their past or their future prospects. Again, I am not particularly interested in which groups are better in dealing with the welfare officials, nor I am interested in which groups have a better chance in escaping
their poverty situation; I am interested in the mechanisms and relationships between welfare officials and clients that might contribute to welfare dependency.

4.4. The bureaucratic practices

During the transcription analysis, it became clear that the respondents go through three kinds of classification procedures (after the regular intake) during the bureaucratic encounters. First, at a particular moment in the respondents’ life, they gained access to the welfare system and were at that moment a deserving poor. However, after a while, according to the respondents, the welfare officials started to approach (classify) them as undeserving poor. This is what I call the informal classification. Informal classifications are the subjective, individual and dynamic means welfare officials use to operate during the bureaucratic encounters. As research showed (cf. Engbersen, 1990; Ypeij & Engbersen, 2002; Ypeij, 2004), on the basis of their individual, subjective preferences, welfare officials make distinctions between the undeserving and deserving poor. Second, clients are officially classified according to their economic value, i.e. their chances in the labor market. This is what I call the formal classification, which may show degrees of institutionalization or standardisation within the bureaucratic system. All the information is embedded into the structure, or simply the record keeping systems. These systems register as to whether a client is obliged to work and/or deserve social assistance. Hence, classifications may be either informal or formal. Third, the respondents are constantly checked and rechecked as to whether they continue to belong to the appropriate category of deservingness. The welfare officials’ task is to control whether clients continue to deserve social assistance. These three practices are central in the next three sections.

4.4.1. Informal classifications

In several qualitative studies, concentrating on how clients negotiate with welfare officials, scholars addressed stigmatization and classification (cf. Jarrett, 1996; p. 369). It was found that clients were reminded of their deviant status as they were queried about their sex lives, judged as reluctant workers, and overall treated as disrespectfully (ibid.). McPhee and Bronstein (2003) showed that welfare experiences did not take the form of shame at accepting assistance from the government but, rather, of the stigma created by welfare professionals. The clients perceived professionals as going out of their way to humiliate them through words and interactions, with the purpose of highlighting their lower status.
(McPhee & Bronstein, 2003; p. 38). Hence, because clients have to go to the bureaucracy, they consequentially become stigmatized by welfare officials. This stigma can attach, in particular, to receipt of means-tested welfare. It can be reinforced by the manner in which welfare is sometimes administered so as to degrade its recipients (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1997; Jones & Novak, 1999; Gilliom, 2001, cited in Lister, 2004; p. 117, see also Engbersen, 1990; Ypeij, 2004). In the following section, some cases will illustrate the respondents’ experiences with the welfare officials.

Among the respondents, there is a general discontent with reference to the welfare office and its welfare officials. In the first place, they feel stigmatized. For example, Justin [170] dislikes living on welfare, and how he is treated at the welfare office. He would rather work: “welfare officials, they think it is their money you receive”. You have to show your gratitude, which I dislike. I am not gratified that I receive a benefit. I would rather have a job, so I can spend my summer in Spain. Going to the welfare office, they look at me as if I am a bum and that I have to be thankful... you have to beg for alms. That’s the feeling you get from it. You see them [the welfare official] thinking ‘there is another one’. If I get a job, they become unemployed. So in principle, we are the bureaucrats’ employers.” Nicole [141] wants to restrict the number of bureaucratic encounters. According to her, the women behind the counter are ‘dumb and ignorant’: “at the welfare office, I am in a dependent position. That is frustrating, annoying and irritating. You depend on her [the welfare official] and she represents the welfare office. They have to transfer the money every month, as we agreed upon. I’m sitting there, powerless.” She reflects on a social contract between her and the institution. But she sometimes feels misunderstood and misrecognised. It causes frictions and, in the past, something went wrong with the welfare distribution. One time she felt the urge to physically attack the welfare official: “you feel powerless, and because of this, you become outraged. Being there, I always think, what a bunch of suckers. I can completely understand the aggression at the welfare office. Many times, I feel misunderstood.”

Because the administration is complex and both welfare officials and clients make mistakes, much goes wrong. Brittney [237] feels dominated by the welfare office and the encounters are mostly negative. After it went wrong one time, ever since, she is labeled as a ‘welfare fraud’. But this is a misconception: “years ago I didn’t fill out a form, because I was in hospital. They stopped providing the bene-
fit. After I was fired from hospital, I went to the welfare office and they said to me ‘didn’t you notice that you didn’t receive any money’? I responded that I was in hospital.” Ever since, the relation is strained between her and the welfare officials.

The respondents feel frustrated because they cannot do anything about their “deviant” status. They have to go to the welfare office and every time they go there, they are reminded of their position. Heather [153] is not obliged to work, because her children are still young. However, she feels powerless with reference to the welfare officials. Because the benefit is transferred every month, it can also go wrong every month: “The welfare office can make and break you. They have a lot of power, because if they do not pay you, you do not receive anything.” One time, the computers went down and she had to wait one week for the money transfer. She was desperate. She contemplates on her powerlessness: “they can easily do everything, and they do not give a shit. Even if you start to cry or molest the interior, they look passive. And if I didn’t exist, they [the welfare official] would be unemployed.”

She also reflects on the patronage of the welfare officials and their condescending practices: “they put you down, and if they do that, I always say that I’m not less than you, and the situation could be reversed easily. I depend on welfare, that is the situation and I cannot do anything about it. So please stop preaching and the way you look at me, because I dislike it.”

Respondents feel treated without any rights, as outsiders. For example, Cynthia [311] dislikes the impersonal treatment: “I dislike how they treat me. You are a number, and they do not look at your personal trouble, your personal history. They are welfare officials in the first place, and then they are people.” To avoid conflicts, she lives up to the rules. She hands over all her personal information and she expects the organization to do the same: “well, we all know that many people are frauds. I don’t mind that they verify everything. I do not have anything to hide. But I think, if I ask them questions, I would like to have an answer.”

The relationship between her and the welfare officials is flawed, because the welfare officials do not reciprocate information. “If I request something, I do not get an answer. If they ask me something (via mail), and I do not respond, they will send a registered letter. That’s not right.” She concludes: “power, that’s it. They are in the position of power and they abuse it. They can treat people in a normal kind of way.”
Welfare officials have to deal with a growing number of clients, changing regulations, work pressure, and have to make distinctions between clients who are likely to go back to work and those who cannot (cf. Engbersen, 1990; p. 183). Respondents experience these distinctions made by the welfare officials. For example, Elizabeth [133] is ambivalent about welfare. On the one hand, she is able to stand on her own feet as a single mother; on the other hand, the social distance between her and the welfare officials is enormous: “well, they feel privileged!” Michael [106] feels treated as a beggar, less than a refugee: “a younger welfare official started to become familiar on first names with me; I do not like that at all.” According to Ashley [105]: “some of them are nice and treat you well, but some of them are twerps. They think that they are the higher power.” Tiffany [156]: “They treat you like a stupid cow. They are in the power. You have to do what they ask you to do.”

The physical space of the welfare office also came up. Seats and tables are attached to the ground, and even the design of the welfare office desk enormously separates the client from the welfare official. Some respondents experience this as threatening. Jennifer [121] thinks that the office design mirrors the practices of the welfare official: “have you ever been there? All these seats are attached to the ground. I think it is terrible.” Allison [353] complained many times about the welfare office. Every time she has been there, she leaves angry. According to her, the physical space is threatening: “they are sitting behind this giant desk. It is like it is saying ‘well, you have to be down there, and we are up here’. The welfare officials are not interested, they walk away any time, and they do not know the rules. One moment, I was so angry that I almost blew a fuse.”

This illustrates the bureaucratic experiences of the respondents. First of all, many felt, as a general rule, stigmatized. During the bureaucratic encounters, they feel transformed to nonstandard citizens making immoral claims. They suffer from an utter feeling of powerlessness. Second, during the encounters, sometimes the transactions and exchanges went wrong. Ever since, they feel labeled as abnormal, and they are confronted with this label each time they go to the welfare office. For example, Britney felt labeled as a welfare fraud, and, for her, it is very hard to escape this stigma. If she goes to the welfare office once per decade, it would be no problem. However, the bureaucratic encounters are a regular process. Her situation made clear that, from the viewpoint of the client or the organization, previous encounters influence present ones, and the outcome of the pre-
sent one may influence any or all aspects of the next encounter (Katz & Danet, 1973; p. 21).

Third, according to the respondents, the welfare officials display their privileged position. This ceremony reifies the respondents’ stigma. Fourth, the respondents experience an unequal power balance. This unequal power balance reaffirms their incapability to reciprocate goods and services, and this reminds them of their poverty status. For example, Cynthia contemplated on the norm of reciprocity; if she hands over information, the welfare office has to do the same. However, this is not the case, so it frustrates her. Therefore, she feels more or less labeled as a second-class person without the same rights as everybody else. At last, the physical setting is experienced as stigmatizing. The physical setting not only sets the stage for the interaction between officials and clients, it also affects the course of interaction. The architecture of waiting rooms has implications for the values of privacy, interactions, surveillance (Katz & Danet, 1973; p. 280). Being at the welfare office, means being different. Thus, during the bureaucratic encounters, the respondents feel that they have to submit themselves to the welfare officials. They feel treated as deviant, disadvantaged, abnormal, and approached as undeserving poor. This is contrasted with their self-image, as being deserving poor. There seems to be incongruence between the respondents’ senses of self and the states’ divisions.

4.4.2. Formal classifications

In Overseers of the Poor, Gilliom writes: “welfare programs need to simplify the world by focusing on a limited set of factors. The fundamental question, that is the bedrock for all the state’s knowledge about the poor, is whether they are ‘deserving’, ‘worthy’ or ‘eligible’ for assistance” (Gilliom, 2001; p. 22). Besides this simplification, people, in their encounters with bureaucracies, are transformed into clients, “identifiably located in a very small number of categories, treated as if, and treating themselves as if, the fit standardized definitions of units cosigned to specific bureaucratic slots” (Lipsky, 1980; p. 59): a vast number of different people is categorized into few sections. During the transactions and interactions between welfare officials and clients, these official categorizations cause trouble.

To shed light on the official classification practices, one of the most lucid state taxonomies is the “job seeker classification system.” This classification system was introduced to measure the individual labor market prospects (Sol, 2001; p.
89). In the process, consideration is given to exemptions, the realistic labor market prospects, and impediments (intellectual, physical, or financial). All job seekers are classified accordingly. The system distinguishes four categories (phases):

1. The job seeker is *eligible* for direct placement in the labor market.
2. Employment prospects require *limited* improvement by means of measures lasting less than one year.
3. Employment prospects require *more comprehensive* improvement by means of measures lasting longer than one year.
4. *Hardly any* prospects of finding work.

The phasing determines the type of intervention and the services available to the job seeker (ibid.). Another taxonomy is the kind of benefit clients receive. The received benefit echoes the clients’ characteristics. Obviously, the sick receive a disability benefit, the elderly a pension, the majority of the single parents a welfare benefit, and the jobless an unemployment benefit. However, these classifications also reflect whether clients deserve social assistance. For example, based on their health situation, people who receive a disability benefit probably deserve assistance. In addition, people who are categorized as Phase 1 probably do not deserve social assistance. They simply can go back to work immediately. What happens if clients are categorized as such?

Brandon [178] did have some small time jobs but finally, he was fired. During the interview, he was unemployed for four years and he is obliged to apply for jobs. However, because it is useless, he laughs at this requirement. According to him, no one wants to hire him and he does not expect to get a job in the future. He does not have negative bureaucratic experiences, and is categorized as a “Phase 4” person: hardly any prospects of finding work. “I’m Phase 4. I received three job openings from the welfare office and I wrote some application letters to several employers, but it is utterly pathetic. I did not receive any response. However, I have to do it, but I will not find a job. I am convinced that I will be refused. That’s the way it is. After all, I am Phase 4.”

Ryan [174] is an artist. He is categorized as unemployed and, therefore, feels stigmatized: “I am recorded [in the computer] as an unemployed. That is a negative mark. I’m kept under control, and I’m the outsider of society.” He is a busy man, and he objects to the labeling of the welfare office; it does not correspond to
his self-image. “What I do not like is that they only look at my economic prospective. I have to have a job according to the welfare office. Artists do not fit into that picture. I am a very busy man, but I am labeled as a good-for-nothing.”

Sonya [245] has negative experiences with the welfare office record-keeping system. She is in a wheelchair. However, the welfare office is not informed about her situation. One time, she had to go back to work: “Because my daughter became five years old, they said to me that I have to go back to work. I replied that if you have a job, I would like to work. At that moment, the official noticed my wheelchair, and she apologized. I asked them if my record did not include information on my health situation. It did not include any information, so I was very upset. I think the officials should know their clientele. They do not know anything.” The principle of reciprocity is involved. Sonya hands over information in exchange for a benefit. But if the welfare office is not functioning properly, the reciprocity fails.

These cases make clear that some accept their classification, others object to their label, and some categorizations are totally incompatible. Sonya felt classified as an undeserving poor, while in her opinion she is a deserving poor. Ryan is also classified as an undeserving poor, but in his opinion he is a hard-working man. Brandon is labeled as somebody who has hardly any prospects of finding work, and, as time went by, he gradually accepts his classification. And so the phase taxonomy defines respondents often as unwilling to work and sometimes through a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, this definition of the situation structures the individuals’ future career. Oftentimes, the formal classifications seem to reflect the deserving-undeserving dichotomy once more. Because the respondents are treated too compartmentally (Katz & Danet, 1973; p. 6), a clash occurs between the state categorizations and how the respondents experience their situation. Due to this clash, it frustrates productive interactions between welfare officials and the respondents.

4.4.3. Controlling the clients

The state checks for undisclosed cohabitation, bank accounts, whether clients work on the side, illegal possessions, and illegal income. Welfare beneficiaries are restricted to go on holiday, are often prohibited from studying, and have to be available for the labor market. The state employs several technologies of control78, and these technologies do not pass over unnoticed – they penetrate deeply
into the personal lives of people. Scholars mentioned this decades ago. Jeffers (1967) and Valentine (1978) argue that if clients were served, they were harshly interrogated about their claims of economic deprivation, requiring multiple documents (in: Jarrett, 1996; p. 369). People are checked as to whether they are entitled to their benefit, they are controlled as to whether they still fit into the right category – the class of the deserving poor. If not, they lose their entitlement to social security. Then again, as we shall see in the next illustrations, these technologies of control influence the interactions between welfare officials and respondents.

Kathryn [315] understands the welfare office’s monitoring, “It is tax money after all.” However, she also dislikes it: “disgusting, my life already sucks. I do not blame the welfare office, I even welcome it. Being oppressed, you get into that kind of trouble [violating the rules]. And the government forgets that. I worked in the past and I condemned the unemployed. I did not know better. It is easy to criticize the unemployed. In this situation [state dependency], I experience the downside; now I judge differently.” However, she dislikes going to the welfare office to show that she is entitled to her benefit: “I always dislike going to the welfare office. You do not have any privacy. People in the waiting room can hear you. You have to fill out many forms; have to tell your personal history, hand over your bank duplicates. On one occasion, they threatened to curtail my benefit, because I didn’t bring my whole kit and caboodle.”

The eligibility checks about whether individuals belong the right category penetrated deeply into the personal lives. People feel sensitized to this intrusion. For example, Eva [169] is a married woman, has two children, and dislikes the complexity that goes with receiving a benefit. She feels treated like a child: “Welfare is the worst thing that’s ever happened to me. If I can escape this situation, I will keep it that way.” Although the inspections are severe, she understands it: “I have to show the bank duplicates of my children. I understand that they check everything, because there are so many welfare frauds. They are allowed to check everything, but this is out of line!” She is suspiciously approached by the welfare office and she undergoes humiliation: “they approach you as a swindler, and you have to show that you are not.”

Once a year clients have to hand over their bank duplicates, so the welfare officials can check whether they belong to the category unemployed – if they do not
work on the side. Checking the bank duplicates is felt as shameful. Welfare officials said to Angelica [157] that she should give away her dog to make ends meet: “you have to account for everything. Even if you have a bank account containing five Euros, you have to hand over the bank duplicates.” Jeffrey [320] experienced the equivalent: “checking bank accounts is a very bad thing. It violates my privacy. It is not their concern how I spend my money. Some time ago, I did a [illegal] job for somebody in home improvement. He deposited the money on my bank account. So stupid. The welfare official asked how I acquired the money. I lied, and said that some friends burned a cigarette hole in my couch, and my friends compensated me via a bank transfer. The welfare official believed this story.” Sometimes, these inspections are treated with irony, for example in the case of Stephanie [130]: “what are they doing? I have to show even the silliest bank duplicates, those of the children. Some time ago, I had to show everything. I was looking for all these bank duplicates, and I found a bank duplicate of one of my children. That bank account contained three cents. I said to the welfare official ‘you have to Xerox this bank duplicate, otherwise I’ll rip off three cents’.”

Home visits – to check for undisclosed cohabitation – are also experienced as humiliating. Single parents with children under five are not obliged to work. However, they must live as a one-parent family. If not, they lose their benefit. Victoria [308] does have a relationship for fourteen years. Her ex-husband tipped the welfare office off that she was living together with this new partner, which is not the case. Consequently, the welfare officials visited her on her daughter’s birthday: “they searched through the entire house. In the closets of my children, in the washing machine, and in the fridge to check as to whether I was living as a single parent. I also had to show my administration and what I spent the last couple of months.” Jennifer [121] did not experience the home visits, but she did hear the stories about the surveillance for undisclosed cohabitation: “if they check your situation, you will be in dire straits. They will visit you and count the number of toothbrushes in the bathroom, or search for male shoes under the hall-stand. They are very precise. I think you should not abuse the system.”

Respondents are categorized as unemployed. However, remarkably, they are not supported to get a job. According to the respondents, instead of labor market integration, the main concern of the welfare office is to check for eligibility. Jenna [359] feels treated like a number. They ask bizarre questions from her viewpoint, such as whether you are working on the side. As if you will answer that question
honestly. Interviewer: “do they help you to find a job?” Jenna: “No, you have to do it on your own.” Joshua [136] says he went through the same experience: “you have to go to the welfare office for investigation, once a year. They look at your possessions, your income, and as to whether you are working on the side. It has nothing to do with going back to work.”

This paragraph shows how respondents experience the eligibility checks, as to whether people fit into the category of deservingness. They constantly have to account for their expenditures and are checked for undisclosed cohabitation. Kathryn understands and even supports the eligibility checks. However, her situation made clear how these categories work. First, while she worked she condemned others, but now she is stigmatized herself, and experiences the eligibility check. Eva felt a priori categorized as an undeserving poor and, a posteriori, she has to show that she was a deserving poor. The onus probandi rests on her. For Victoria, the home visit was very humiliating. Other respondents show their discontent for having to demonstrate that they belong to the deserving poor, while not being supported to lose their poverty status. They are checked whether they belong to the right category, but are not supported to escape their unemployed status. Scholars address this notion, for example, Seccombe et al. (1998) suggest that clients view the welfare office with suspicion and distrust rather than as a sanctuary for help.

In sum, first, the bureaucratic encounters are experienced as stigmatizing. Respondents feel constantly reminded of their poverty status and approached as undeserving poor. Second, the respondents’ self-image does not correspond to the formal classifications. Third, the eligibility checks penetrate deeply into the lives of the respondents. The respondents frequently have to show that they fit into the right category, the deserving poor. These three mechanisms do not go over unnoticed; in one way or the other, the respondents react to these procedures. In the first part of the chapter, I outlined how the respondents experience welfare; in this second part, I outline the respondents’ reactions.

**4.5. Responses to the bureaucratic practices**

As we saw, respondents went through three kinds of practices: informal distinctions made by welfare officials, formal state categorizations, and, finally, the controlling mechanisms to check whether they belong to the deserving poor. Respon-
dents are not helpless victims that fully submit themselves to the structures of the bureaucracy. Within their own leeway, they respond to the practices of control and the manner in which they are treated during the bureaucratic encounters. In response to interactions with the welfare officials, they might resist or submit to the fabric of the welfare field. Generally, there is a rich literature on various forms of resistance and responses by dependent people (cf. Hutchinson, 1988; Scott, 1990; White, 1990; Winter, 1996; Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Gilliom, 2001; Noble, 2004; Handler, 2005). Several scholars address the manner in which clients resist to the practices of the welfare officials. For example, responses of welfare recipients to finger-imaging reveal a mixture of themes, ranging from approval of finger imaging because it enables them to distance themselves from welfare fraud to outrage at a procedure that is viewed as criminalizing the welfare receipt (Murray, 2000; p. 39, my emphasis). Cooney (2006; p. 218) notes several strategies to manage welfare stigma. Two prevalent strategies are identified as: 1) distancing, also known as the “bad people exist but I am not one of them strategy” (Kingfisher, 1996; p. 61); and 2) reframing so-called deviant behavior (such as not reporting paid work) as evidence of their own resourcefulness and responsibility for their family in the midst of an irrational bureaucratic welfare system. Nevertheless, as a general rule, stigma and labeling do not easily slip away (see chapter 5): Richard Jenkins (2000; p. 9) brings to mind that labeling in general may evoke resistance. For example, people might conform or resist classifications (cf. Engbersen & Van der Veen, 1992; p. 222). Reading all the transcriptions, I distinguish several responses to the bureaucratic practices.

4.5.1. Take up employment

Because of the enduring checks, some desperately want to take up employment (only under the conditions that they are able to work). This is how they can escape their stigma. Other scholars already mentioned this; according to Rank (1994), women who received AFDC indicated that the lack of privacy and the stigma associated with the program, in part, fueled their desire to exit from welfare (Jarrett, 1996; p. 369). McPhee & Bronstein (2003; p. 39) argued that many of the women in their study expressed their desire to be independent and to maximize control over their and their children’s lives. I notice similar motivations. Alicia [372] took up employment exactly for these reasons. She experienced the relationship with the welfare office as extremely negative: “since I work, I do not have to go to the welfare office. I am not humiliated by showing all my bank duplicates. They always looked at my gold ring, as if I am not entitled to
have one. It is such a relieve. No longer these compulsory visits at the welfare office. That woman behind the desk who thinks she has to pay the benefit personally.” The next case shows a similar line of reasoning. Morgan [177] is a working single mother of one. Once she applied for additional welfare. But if people have savings, they are not entitled to additional welfare: “even if you have ten Euros on your saving account, you will not receive anything. That is so frustrating.” She experienced receiving welfare as humiliating. She works because she does not want to be associated with “welfare claimants”, those who refuse to work because they will not gain from taking up employment. She does not have any trouble working for a few pennies more: “living on welfare, your self-esteem suffers. You simply do not deserve the money you receive.” She hopes to avoid claiming welfare in the future. Besides the negative encounters, she disassociates from others who undeservingly take up benefits. Actually, Morgan and Alicia take up employment to avoid being stigmatized as undeserving. Although there is not a direct causality between the bureaucratic encounters and taking up employment, I might hypothesize that the negative bureaucratic encounters contribute – as an unintended effect – stimulating employment take up. In this manner, going back to work is one of the responses to the bureaucratic encounters and its classifications practices.

4.5.2. Assertiveness

Because clients during the encounters feel approached as undeserving poor, they articulate that they deserve social assistance. They try to convince the welfare officials with the help of arguments that they do belong to the appropriate category. However, only after several encounters they learned to do business with the welfare officials. After some experiences, they know the ins and outs, and this knowledge empowers them. For example, Melanie [346] sheds light on the bond between her and the organization: “I try to stand up for my rights, but it is getting harder. One time, I had to go to the welfare office for absolutely nothing. I did not accept it. To complain, I wrote a letter. I may receive a benefit, but I am not sitting all day at home waiting for them. At last, they apologized.” She more or less used the principle of reciprocity: if they are demanding, she can be demanding too. A similar situation: As a consequence of her divorce, Christina [154] had severe debts. She searched for help and knocked on the door of the welfare office: “according to them, I had to go to my ex-husband [to solve the problem], and therefore, I left with my tail between my legs.” She did not deserve assistance. Nevertheless, she learned from this experience: “I will never do that again, now I
She adapted to the customs of the welfare office and stood up for herself and her rights: “nowadays I have a big mouth at the welfare office. I try everything. You can always take no for an answer.” But there is some ambivalence. On the one hand, she [by nature] does not have a big mouth. On the other hand, she has to be bold, otherwise she will lose. So, if respondents are classified as undeserving poor, they become more daring in showing their deservingness.

4.5.3. To justify their deservingness

In the Netherlands, affirmative action policies are designed to reintegrate minorities into the labor market. These policies help people in a disadvantaged position to be encouraged to work and end their poverty spell. However, these policies might help minorities, but these methods might provoke some discontent among native Dutch. The latter opposes these affirmative action programs, merely because it does not empower them, but others. This is called opposition to affirmative action. Especially in the US, scholars pay attention to this phenomenon (cf. Nosworthy et al., 1995; Tougas et al., 1995; Hughes 1997; Hing et al., 2002; Martin, 2003; Lowery et al., 2006). For example, DiTomaso (2000, in: Lamont & Molnar, 2002; p. 175) describe white opposition to affirmative action by looking at how middle class and working class whites construct their experiences in the labor market compared to those of blacks, particularly whether they and their children receive more help than blacks. Among the respondents, some are opposed to affirmative action, which enables them to claim that they are the deserving disadvantaged poor. They use this affirmative action policy to justify their position, assign themselves to the deserving poor, and to evade the bureaucracy. Consequentially, they unintendedly reduce their chance of becoming reintegrated into the labor market. Justin, again [170], uses the affirmative action policy to justify his social standing. His bureaucratic experiences fueled his opposition to the state and its policies. “Interviewer: who’s responsible for your low-income situation?” Justin: “well, the wrong government policy. Everybody should have the same job opportunities. But particular groups are privileged, like women. The governments’ policy is wrong and responsible. I want the same opportunities as women, adolescents, and migrants. I am the low man on the totem pole. In addition, at the end of the line, we are of any significance. By any means, the sequence is wrong. Everybody should have the same opportunities.” Interviewer: “will your future change?” Justin: “well, it will stay the same, only if I win the lottery. But that will never happen, because I belong to the category that never
Justin feels like living at the bottom of the pecking order, uses policy to justify his own position, and makes distinctions too. The bureaucratic encounters fueled his resentment, and this resentment probably obstructs a productive relationship between him and the welfare official.

4.5.4. Refusing to acknowledge a line of authority

To deal with the bureaucracy, clients can also relativize their position vis-à-vis the welfare officials. Although they are often approached as the undeserving poor, clients can say to the welfare official that they could have been in their position. The relationship between client and professional could easily be reversed, and the professional could have been an undeserving poor himself. By practicing this strategy, clients more or less put their own position in perspective, and disturb hierarchical differences between them and the welfare official. Ewick and Silbey (2003) describe different forms of resistance to legal authority. One of them is disrupting hierarchy: “Transactions among persons of different degrees of power and authority rely on a silent but mutual recognition of those differences. Because hierarchical differences so often go without saying, ignoring these structural differences is disruptive precisely because it requires power to articulate itself” (p. 1355). The respondents do not ignore the differences but actually “refused to acknowledge a line of authority or chain of command” (p. 1356), even though the hierarchical differences are clearly articulated during the encounters. Some respondents practice this strategy. Knowing that they are classified, they try to make clear that the welfare officials could be in their place. They say, i.e. that
they are no less than the welfare officials, and that they are the officials’ employers. Justin [170] said earlier that if he were not living on welfare, they would not have a job either. Heather [153] said that the welfare officials were condescending towards her. She also says that if she did not receive a welfare benefit, the welfare official would be unemployed too. She reverses the social hierarchy and emphasizes the arbitrary character of the relationship. She is more able to stand up for herself: “I learned dealing with the welfare officials. I used to be very shy and I always kept my mouth shut. Now, I say everything. I do not have any secrets, and I have to stand up for myself. I am nothing less than you, and I deserve being here. The mentality of the organization is entirely wrong.” Although she depends on the welfare office, they depend also on her. In addition, she emphasizes the capricious nature of the relationship. She more or less disrupted the hierarchy, trying to make clear that the welfare officials could be in her stigmatized position. When respondents are classified, they try to relativize their position vis-à-vis the person who classifies him or her. This is a barrier to the productiveness of the relationship between the welfare official and the client.

4.5.5. Welfare fraud

Kathryn [315] said earlier: “Being oppressed, you get into that kind of trouble [violating the rules].” Individuals become ironic and rule breaking because the bureaucratic rules are complex, laws change, welfare officials are unsupportive, and employment brings about many risks. Twenty-four respondents (11%) informed the interviewers on committing fraud (informal work not included). Some commit fraud to fit in the category of the deserving poor. Cynthia [311] receives a disability benefit, feels disturbed, and abandoned by the state. People who receive a disability benefit have to be checked as to whether they are able to go back to work. Although Cynthia receives a disability benefit, she is retested. Finally, she was tested medically fit and now has to apply for jobs: “they started to change the laws, and they started to haunt people. Many are not able to resist and for that reason end up in a mental institution.” She had to apply for jobs compulsorily, but she never took it very seriously: “well, I have to write many application letters. But at a certain moment, I thought, this does not make any sense. I go crazy. So, I started to write fake application letters.” According to her, the benefit offers more security than taking up employment: “each time I have to fill out forms, I get sick to my stomach. If I get a job, I am not sure if I can keep my rental subsidy, my health care insurance. Due to this scum, I’m so frustrated.” [Her income rises as soon as she gets a job, but she may lose her rental subsidy – that was dis-
tributed via the ministry of housing – so she finally receives less income]. Because she knows that she has to apply for jobs, she knows that she officially belongs to the undeserving poor. Nevertheless, if she is (fictitiously) rejected repeatedly for jobs (which means she is still not able to work), she can become part of the deserving poor. She more or less committed fraud (writing fake application letters), so that she could switch from undeserving to deserving poor.

4.5.6. Non-take up

Moffitt’s findings (1983, in Etzioni, 1988; p. 71-3) show that large proportions of people eligible to receive welfare refuse it because of the stigma attached. He points out that for those he studied income is not simply income; it matters where it comes from (see also Zelizer, 1994). These findings can be applied to this study. The respondents can also make use of additional welfare, for example to buy new glasses. For each additional benefit, they have to be checked as to whether they are entitled to it – if they really need new glasses. They have to be completely checked whether they deserve these goods. Because they have to show their deservingness, some of the respondents do not make use of additional welfare. Fifty respondents use additional welfare, twenty-eight are familiar with additional welfare (but do not make use of it), and forty-five are not familiar with the system [no information on 94 people]. Eva [169] is well informed about all the regulations. However, because of the unproductive welfare office relationship, she does not make use of it: “I know it is possible to apply for exemption for real estate tax\textsuperscript{87}. I hate to apply for these exemptions, because you have to show all your personal information. There is no guarantee that you will receive it. I feel ashamed. And if you meet a moody welfare official, they do not treat you respectfully.” As a result, she pursues alternative strategies to pay the bills: “I will find another solution. For example, I use the child benefit to pay my bills. I think that’s terrible.”

Monica [313] does have an ambivalent relationship with the welfare office. One time she had a negative experience: “all these forms, hopeless. It violates my privacy and I have been struggling with feelings of disgust over these forms. I want to throw these forms away, but I know that the consequences are nasty. Useless, because they will not get in touch with the true welfare frauds.\textsuperscript{88} I never applied for additional welfare.” Because these further checks are experienced as stigmatizing, and although they are entitled to it, they do not apply for additional welfare. Along these lines, during the ongoing classification practices, clients are perpetually confronted with their alleged undeservingness. Consequen-
ially, they try to avoid these bureaucratic encounters. In the end, they fail to take up additional welfare.

4.5.7. Conservative resistance

In response to the bureaucratic encounters, clients might avoid going to the bureaucracy. Or, they can simply “just suffer through it.” This kind of response is almost similar to non-take up. Clients do not resist, but actually do quite the opposite: they surrender to the practices of the bureaucracy. For clients, this submission is probably the easiest way to deal with the bureaucracy. Just say “yes”, avoid conflicts, and wait until the storm is over. They seem to accept the category of undeservingness and then face the consequences of being an undeserving poor. Scholars call this “conservative resistance”. Conservative resistance strategies include overt resistance to innovation, covert foot-dragging, scepticism about officials’ wisdom and abilities, chronic criticism of policy, and risk avoidance (cf. Markham et al., 1985; p. 132). Although conservative resistance is outwardly passive, it is apparent that conscious hostility toward officials underlies it. This hostility is seldom expressed openly (cf. Gulick, 1958; p. 77, my emphasis). Jordan (1993; p. 215, in: Dean & Melrose, 1997; p. 115) suggests that people who are structurally disadvantaged – by class or gender relations – “choose not to challenge the dominant order, but seek a measure of autonomy within it.” The costs of them of doing otherwise would be too high. For those who practice this strategy, submission is probably more liberating, and resistance probably more alienating. They meet head on this paradox of the dominated, and there is no way out of it (cf. Bourdieu, 1990, p. 155).89.

Because Chelsea [208] receives a benefit, she feels uncomfortable. She knows she is entitled to it: “I was ashamed, but I do not see any other option. I have to live, and without money, you cannot live. Everybody is entitled to it, so am I. Deep in my heart it does not feel good, but now I am used to it.” Receiving a benefit triggered some uneasiness. However, as time went by, she accepted her situation and her welfare dependency. She does not contest her classification, but endures it. Kimberly [210] had also some trouble becoming accustomed to encounters with the bureaucracy: “I always had troubles with the welfare office. I wasn’t used to it.” Individuals seem to have some difficulties accepting their new situation (depending on welfare) in the first place. Nevertheless, in the long run, permit the influence of the bureaucracy, in such way that they finally submit themselves. They are not overtly in conflict with the bureaucracy. Although some
did have a conflict, but as time went by, they became more apathetic. The case of Jasmine [231] illustrated this. She does have a negative relationship with the welfare office. If she telephones the welfare office, she has to wait for a long time. She is confronted with an enormous bureaucracy. She is asked how she experiences the relationship: “negative, you feel like a beggar. Money-wise, you have a hard time, and you feel like a worthless person. Your self-esteem suffers, and that is caused by the manner in which they talk to you.” She suffers through it, misses much information, and fails to take up additional benefits. Instead of becoming a loudmouth, she surrenders to the complexity of the bureaucracy.

In this manner, many respondents are not really in conflict with the welfare officials. On the contrary, they seem to have and sustain a neutral relationship with the welfare officials. However, this kind of relationship is not very productive. The welfare official and the client might have a good, but infertile bond.

4.6. Conclusion: infertile bureaucratic bonds

This chapter addressed welfare dependency concentrating on the respondents’ perceived interactions with welfare officials. Elaborating on the premise that enduring classification practices take place to differentiate between the deserving and undeserving poor, the respondents experience three kind of classifications. First, from the perspective of the respondents, the welfare officials unofficially categorize them as the undeserving poor. Second, the state employs formal categorizations to manage diversity. However, these formal classifications regularly differ from the situation of the respondents. Third, the welfare officials have to verify whether the respondents still belong to the appropriate categories. These three practices provoke responses among the respondents who responded in numerous ways; on the one hand as cunning, provocative, and aggravating, on the other hand, they act passive, avoid communication, and refuse to take up additional welfare. Via these (harsh) reactions, they reaffirm the image of an unenthusiastic individual, who does not want to work or wishes for job training or a subsidized job. Ultimately, they reproduce the image of an undeserving poor. In the end, they contribute – unconsciously – to the reproduction of their own position.

In this field, a symbolic struggle occurred between welfare officials and respondents centering on whether people belong to the category of the deserving or undeserving poor. Respondents often felt stigmatized and approached as undeserv-
ing for social assistance. In order to become a deserving poor, respondents could stretch their own classifications. They can simply say that they deserve social assistance or they can commit fraud. By not going to the welfare office, they could avoid this stigmatizing. These symbolic struggles may have serious economic consequences. If respondents avoid the bureaucratic encounters (only get in touch with the welfare office for the yearly checks), they lower the chance to become reintegrated into the labor market. Moreover, inevitably, their poverty is perpetuated.

Correspondingly, the unintended consequences of social action are very well observable. The respondents did have some choices to deal with the bureaucracy. Because of the manner in which they were treated, some took up employment; others became more assertive, or passive. Another group relativized their position with reference to the welfare officials. Others committed fraud or failed to make use of additional welfare. Their alternatives seem to be the best options in the short run. However, in the long run the relationship between the welfare officials and the respondents did not improve. Factually, the relationship between them became more tensed and infertile. For the respondents, this might result in fewer chances for employment take up.

Finally, there is a strong relationship between the welfare field and the labor market. For the respondents, the welfare field is often the passage to the labor market. However, if the relationship between them and the welfare officials is tensed, problematic, and unproductive, the labor market is even more difficult to enter. Inevitably, the difficult bond between welfare officials and clients in one field has consequences for integration in other fields.
Elijah Anderson (1999; p. 310) recalls that the existence of welfare has encouraged dependency, “to be sure, but without jobs and income what other alternatives exists?”

This chapter’s title is derived from Godwin & Markham (1996).

The relationship between welfare officials and clients is binding and roughly reciprocal. Scholars emphasized the interactions, exchange and reciprocal relationship between officials and clients. For example, according to Bovens & Zouridis (2002; p. 175) the encounters involve individual transactions: citizens ask for a benefit, rent rebate, or a permit and they hand in their tax return or are ticketed now and again (ibid.). Welfare clients also ‘lose their own power over the direction these organizations may take’, since the welfare state bureaucracies are endowed with the authority to act on their behalf (Hasenfeld et al., 1987; p. 404-5). Vesting the bureaucracy with power in exchange for benefits underlies the contract between the individual and the organization (ibid.); the welfare client provides information and is restricted to bureaucratic rules. In return, s/he is given a benefit. In principle, the norm of reciprocity is at stake, and exchange does take place. Therefore the social exchange theories can be used to understand the interchange between client and official. According to the social exchange model, “each party in a social interaction setting tries to influence the other’s attitude, yielding a rewarding reciprocation. This view suggests that clients are more than passive entities” (Weimann, 1982; p. 137, see also Homans (1961) and Blau (1964)).

In the US-debate, the dichotomy between the deserving and the undeserving poor is prevalent (cf. Handler & Hollingsworth, 1971; Katz, 1990; Gans, 1996), and centers on the question as to whether the poor are eligible for assistance, and if they deserve governmental support. According to Hebert Gans, the poor have regularly been dichotomized “at least by critics of the poor, and formulators of the laws about poverty, into two groups. The first encompassed the sick and the old, as well as the working poor, and was considered good or worthy of help, while the second, able-bodied nonworking poor people, have been deemed unworthy” (Gans, 1996; p. 14).

The deserving and undeserving poor dichotomy is not clearly articulated in the Dutch discourse and is not often mentioned. Only in 2003 a Dutch journalist mentioned this dichotomy in a newspaper. He referred to the Dutch policy to reintegrate welfare recipients by curtailing their benefits. This, according to him, is based on deservininess. In Dutch: “Volgens De Geus doet de uitkeringsgerechtigde pas zijn best als hij het voelt in zijn portemonnee. Het is een terugkeer naar het idee van de undeserving poor. Niet onmacht, maar onwil is het grootste probleem in de sociale zekerheid.” De Volkskrant, September 15, 2003.

The terms deserving and undeserving are a pattern of cultural classification. This pattern of cultural classification has been documented in interviews (Halle, 1984; Hochschild, 1981; Lamont, 2000; Rieder, 1985, cited in Steensland, 2006; p. 1274).

Jarrett (1996; p. 369) refers to several studies (Jeffers, 1967; Rank 1994; Rogers-Dillon, 1995; Rosier &Corsaro, 1993; Stack, 1974; Valentine, 1978).

Zelizer (1994) describes how throughout the centuries the poor received charitable money. The money transfer – from the caritas to the poor – was not only meant to support the poor for their primary need. There was another objective. The poor needed to learn how to spend their money, to live economically, and to save what’s left of it. Therefore, the given money could convey a moral message: the poor were given cash, but with strings attached. Money was budgeted by strangers and therefore never entirely of their own (Zelizer, 1994; p. 169).
Laakso & Drevdahl (2006; p. 89) interviewed a 36-year-old African American mother who said: “they think it is their money. Caseworkers decide who gets what.” Another example: “It is the way they talk to you, they way they talk down at you that’s humiliating. They’re working for the government. You’re here to get something from the government, so I’ll talk down to you any way that I want to” (McPhee & Bronstein, 2003; p. 38).

According to Simmel: “Es ist zunächst eine Ergänzung der rechtlichen Ordnung, die die Dankbarkeit vollbringt. Aller verkehr der Menschen beruht auf dem Schema von Hingabe und Equivalent” (Simmel, 1958; p. 443).

Because of the five years welfare limit, the US-situation is more severe. Again, reading quotes from US-research, similarities are present. For example; Laakso & Drevdahl (2006; p. 89) interviewed a 43-year-old African American mother of five: “the welfare system is designed to humiliate you, basically. And they say they help you, but it is really humiliation.”

Hendrickson and Axelson (1985) found that many professionals who work with the poor do not think that the poor want to work (in: Gray, 2005).

See for example Garfinkel (1956).

According to Peillon (1998; p. 217-8) relief programs are based on investigatory and classificatory practices: policing the failure to maintain dependants, testing the availability for work or spying for undisclosed cohabitation illustrate such technologies of control.

Perlmutter and Bartle (2000) noted that, providing with inaccurate and inadequate information, recipients report being made to wait for long periods to see unsupportive and inflexible workers who are frequently openly hostile (in: McPhee & Bronstein, 2003; p. 39).

“We all have read Kafka and Orwell” (Katz & Danet, 1973; p. 3), and many respondents experience contemporary society as an Orwellian 1984. One of them [233] uses this book as a metaphor to describe his position: “I’m forced into a certain position. The state regulations are suffocating. These rules. People are dishonored as in the book I read from Orwell. It is a suffocating society.”

I underscore the argument of Scott (1998), because so much goes wrong during the encounters. According to Scott, the lumbering world of the bureaucracy sets off resistance: for the power of surveillance is often an almost clumsy power that miscasts the world and its people, overlooks vital points of information, and fuels its own resistance through its ongoing misunderstanding of knowledge.

She also suffered from discrimination and racism: minority ethnic groups tend to be disadvantaged within the welfare state. A number of factors are involved, including: rules that discriminate against first-generation immigrants; universal services that fail to accommodate cultural differences; racist attitudes among officials; and low take-up among minority ethnic communities (Platt, 2002; cited in Lister, 2004; p. 63).

How did the others take up employment? Some respondents do have jobs (N=34), however their regular income is insufficient to stay out of poverty. What’s the role of the welfare agency? How did they get a job? Six found a job via employment agencies, two found a job via an ad, five found a job via their social network, one is an entrepreneur, four were able to swap their voluntary work for regular work. We have no information on eleven persons. Only five respondents were activated by the welfare agency, and that is about 15% of the working poor (and thus approximately 2% of all the respondents).

Baines (2004) forms of unpaid work are seen as resistance against an increasingly alienating society, as well as a way to meet the needs of clients, relatives and friends.

Tilly (1998; p. 244-5) is also sceptical on affirmative action policies. He argues that these policies concentrate on the individual decisions of employers. Advocates of these policies have accepted “a narrow, individualistic view of inequality.” They should, instead, examine every organization as a collection of sites for exploitation, opportunity, hoarding,
emulation, and adaptation. Analysts should take the organizational *processes* into account, and less the individual *decisions*.

86 Other research noticed similar responses. One of McCormack’s respondents said: “I feel as though if we wasn’t on social service, they wouldn’t have a job either” (McCormack 2004; p. 377). McCormack describes this as a discursive reversal of the dominant understanding of welfare.

87 She refers to “gemeentelijke belastingen” collected by the municipalities.

88 Even welfare recipients tend to cope with the stigma of welfare by separating self from other through criticism of the motivations and commitment to work and family of other assistant recipients (Monroe & Tiller, 2001; p. 818).

89 The original text: “la résistance peut être aliénante et la soumission peut être libératrice. Tel est le paradoxe des dominés, et on n’en sort pas” (Bourdieu 1987, p. 183-4).