


# Social Workers' Experiences of Bureaucracy: A Systematic Synthesis of Qualitative Studies

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## Abstract

Since the 1990s managerialism has spread across the public sector, implementing private sector practices targeting greater efficiency in public services. Consequently, reforms focusing on risk management, standardisation, fragmentation and accountability have increased demands for paperwork and procedure compliance from street-level bureaucrats (SLBs). Focusing specifically on the impact on social work, this paper presents the findings of a systematic literature review synthesising social workers experience of bureaucracy across thirty-nine published qualitative studies. Despite warnings being voiced about the risks associated with enforcing highly bureaucratic and managerial cultures in social work, evidence reinforces the consequences predicted over two decades prior. Major themes from the systematic synthesis include negative effects on social workers and service users, social workers' resistance to bureaucratic structures and the coping strategies they employed. Although the review found some positive perspectives, this was sporadic and only reported in a minority of studies. As SLBs, social workers face an important question: What should be prioritised in the delivery of social services? Managing procedures, administration and documentation or pursuing sustainable change through meaningful engagement with service users?

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## Introduction

When Max Weber wrote about bureaucracy at the turn of the twentieth century, the mechanics of bureaucratic governance we described through: specialisation, hierarchical structures of authority, rules and regulation, formal processes of employment and an impersonal, uniform application of procedures (Coulshed and Mulleder, 2006; Hughes and Wearing, 2013). As a sociologist and historian, Weber argued bureaucracy offered the potential to establish equitable governance (Weber, 1988). Yet, the potential benefits of bureaucratic governance were linked to a pure bureaucracy, free from the complexities of the real world and the flexibility it demands.

A century later, amidst significant technological and scientific advancement, we see a resurgence of the bureaucratic method. An environment of regulation and control has expanded across social services in western and westernised countries through the rise of managerialism (Parton, 2006; Burton and van den Broek, 2009). Driven by New Public Management reforms which sought to transform the public sector through implementing private sector performance criteria and practices in the pursuit of efficiency and economy (Lapsley, 2009), managerialism focuses on risk management, control, fragmentation of services and accountability, consequently increasing demands for paperwork and procedure compliance from street-level bureaucrats (SLBs). The nature of this resurgence warrants attention to question the impact on service delivery and public servants. The current systematic review shines a light upon its effect on social work practice by synthesising social workers experience of bureaucracy as presented in published qualitative studies.

## Systematic literature searching

Following the steps proposed by McGinn *et al.* (2016) to appraise database precision and search functions, nine bibliographic databases were selected for the study (Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), Child and Adolescent Development, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, PsycINFO, Social Care Online, Sociology database, Sociological Abstracts, Social Science Citation Index, Social Science Abstracts). Because databases differ in their schedules for indexing literature (Shek, 2008) the 30th April 2020 was set two weeks prior to the first database search to reduce access bias.

Table 1 presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to each citation retrieved. No studies were excluded based on quality, but it was

**Table 1.** Summary of inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Reporting frontline social worker's perspectives and/or experiences of bureaucracy and/or managerialism	Papers focused exclusively on managers, funders, service users or their families
Empirical qualitative research	Theoretical debates, critical commentaries, book reviews and editorial notes
Peer-review journal articles only	Grey literature and thesis excluded
Full text availability	Papers excluded if retrieval of full text through interlibrary loans required more than six weeks of processing
Participants must be clearly identified as social workers	
Where research incorporates several professional groups, inclusion is restricted to studies which disaggregate results by professional identity	
Written in English	
Published between 1 January 1990 and 30 April 2020	

noted that only two of the thirty-nine articles reported researcher positionality and reflexivity, a key method for navigating potential bias (for further detail, see [Pascoe \*et al.\*, 2021](#); [Pascoe, 2022](#)).

## Search strategy

A draft search strategy to address the research question was developed and tested on ASSIA to assess the appropriateness of selected terms. Following the test, the term 'audit' was removed to improve precision. The following strategy was adopted.

('Social work' OR 'social service' OR 'case management' OR 'care management' OR 'casework' OR 'human services') AND (Experience OR perspective OR belie\* OR response OR reaction OR perception OR opinion) AND (bureaucra\* OR managerialism OR 'new public management' OR 'performance management' OR 'paperwork' OR 'form-talk')

Additionally, a thesaurus function was employed with PsycINFO to map terms onto subject headings. In total, 1,137 citations were retrieved. After removing duplicates, 509 titles and abstracts were assessed by the first author. In instances of ambiguity, articles were discussed with the research team to determine inclusion/exclusion. Thirty-nine articles meet the inclusion criteria. An overview of this process is detailed in [Figure 1](#); however, for comprehensive detail of the search method, see [Pascoe \*et al.\* \(2021\)](#).

## Methodology

Primary study report findings were synthesised using a thematic synthesis methodology ([Thomas and Harden, 2008](#); [Barnett-Page and Thomas, 2009](#)). Harnessing Nvivo (version 12), initial open codes were constructed inductively through line-by-line coding of findings reported in each article, identified as text labelled 'results' or 'findings' ([Thomas](#)

**Table 2.** Characteristics of included studies ( $n = 39$ ).

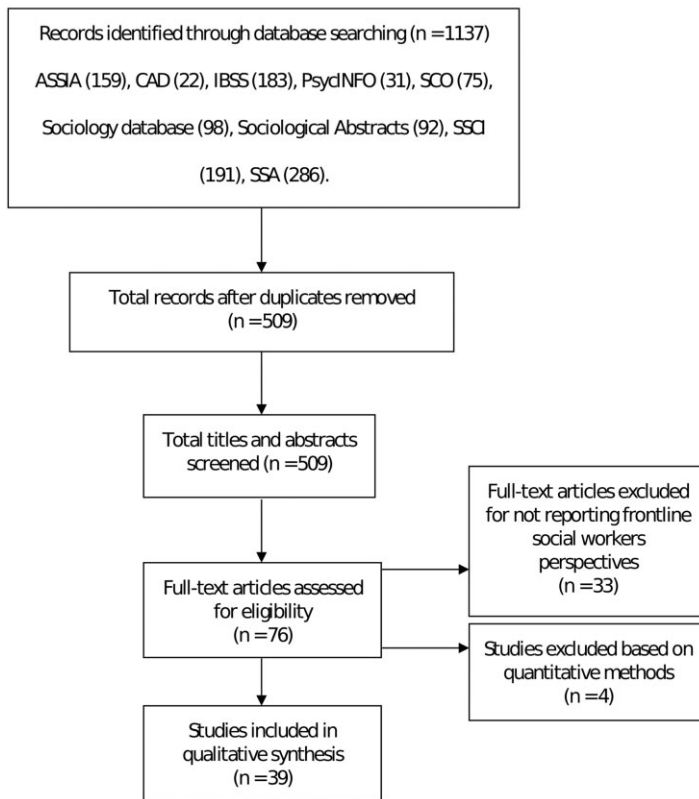
Period of publication	Number of studies
2016–2020	15
2011–2015	12
2006–2010	6
2001–2005	4
1996–2000	2
1990–1995	0
Region of study	
UK	17
Europe	9
Middle East	4
Asia	2
Australasia	2
North America	2
South Africa	1
Transnational	2
Method of data collection	
Interviews	20
Focus groups	2
Interviews and focus groups	3
Survey	5
Observational research	1
Other mixed qualitative methods	6
Mixed methods qual + quan	1
Unclear	1

and Harden, 2008). Each code was clearly defined, and extracts were linked to multiple codes where appropriate. The open codes and relevant extracts were reviewed after analysing half of the articles and again upon completion to ensure consistency. In total, sixty-three open codes were created. These were then organised into second-level codes known as descriptive themes, grouping similarities and identifying differences. The final step was a process of deeper analysis, interrogating the relationships between codes to develop the analytical themes presented here (Thomas and Harden, 2008; Barnett-Page and Thomas, 2009).

## Findings

As seen in Table 2, more than two-thirds of the articles were published between January 2011 and April 2020, indicating a growing interest in the effects of bureaucracy and managerialism on social workers and their practice. The articles were published across twenty-four different journals. Although the *British Journal of Social Work* represented the largest proportion of publications (eleven out of thirty-nine) reflecting the dominance of the UK research context, the diverse journal coverage reveals the interdisciplinary nature of social work. Journals not typically considered social work specific were evident including *Time & Society*, *Public Administration and Organisation*, emphasising the importance of including a broad range of sources to increase the sensitivity of systematic literature reviews.

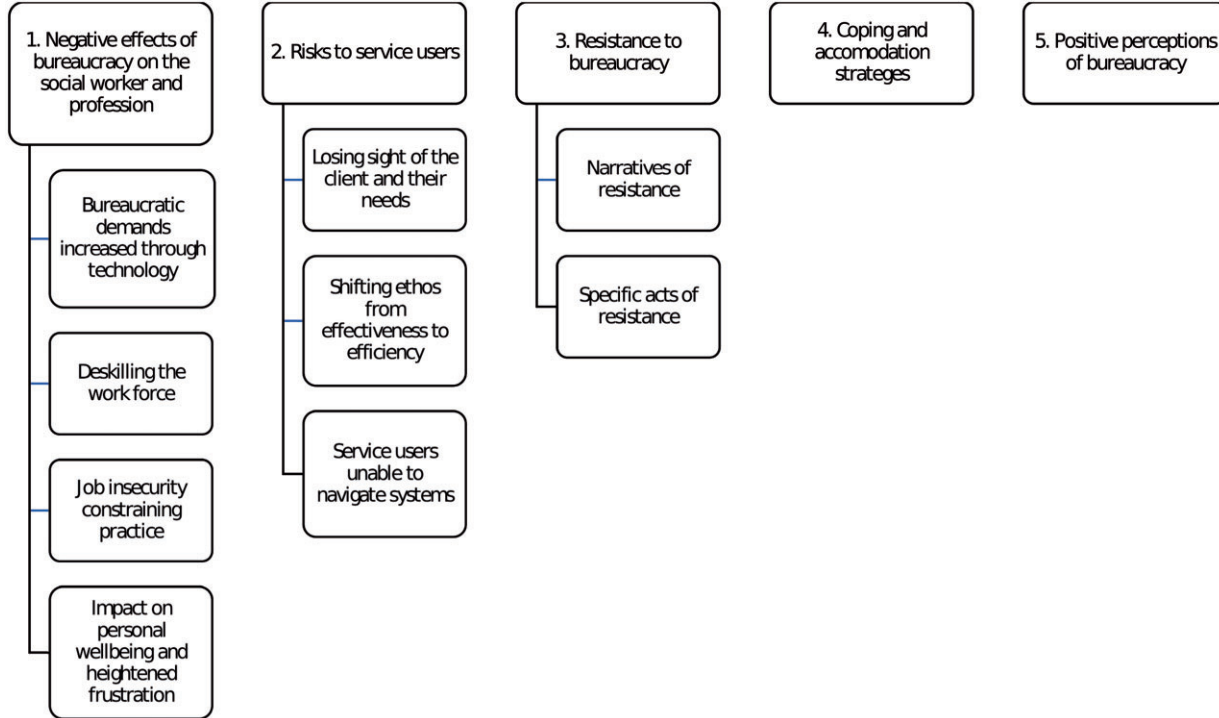
Diagram one: Systematic literature search overview

**Figure 1:** Systematic literature search overview.

The fields of practice varied significantly, including child protection, social work in schools, palliative care, social welfare, rural social work, mental health, criminal justice and disability. No individual field dominated the literature, and many studies drew on participants from multiple organisations and a mixture of sectors.

## Thematic synthesis

The thematic synthesis identified a range of negative impacts of bureaucracy and managerialism, both on social workers and service users. A narrative of resistance to bureaucracy dominated, and several coping strategies to work within a paperwork-dominated culture were explored. However, a minority of participants expressed positive perspectives regarding the impact of bureaucracy on social work practice. The themes and subthemes are displayed in [Figure 2](#).



**Figure 2:** Overview of themes and subthemes.

## Theme 1: Negative effects of bureaucracy on the social worker and profession

Overwhelmingly, the most common theme evident in the systematic synthesis was the negative effects of bureaucracy on social work and social workers. Participants discussed how the introduction of standardised assessments, output measures, fragmented practice, increased recording procedures and rigid protocols have contributed to a shift in service delivery and organisational priorities, reinforcing a compliance and paperwork-oriented culture. The subthemes illustrate the role of technology in exacerbating the dominance of bureaucracy, deskilling of the workforce and increased job insecurity, ultimately contributing to significant threats to the personal well-being of social workers and increased frustration.

### Subtheme: Bureaucratic demands increased through technology

Whilst information technology (IT) systems initially sparked hope for streamlining processes and decreasing administrative burdens, studies have highlighted an increased sense of control and monitoring over practice. Social workers reported how IT systems recorded and time stamped each action for auditing (Disney *et al.*, 2019), doubled administrative demands with additional recording requirements (Mayer, 2001; Postle, 2002), undermined collaboration with fragmented interfaces and automated case allocations (Ellis *et al.*, 1999) and restricted what was considered reliable sources of knowledge for assessments (De Corte *et al.*, 2019).

We spend 80% of our time inputting data into the various IT interfaces we have to utilise to maintain records, to undertake formal risk assessments and to record key performance indicators in order that our funding can be justified/secured. (Fenton and Kelly, 2017, p. 468) [Criminal Justice, Scotland]<sup>1</sup>

... computer programs had been introduced to assist in the formulation of care packages. Some care managers felt that technology had contributed to their de-professionalization in that they were now 'basically glorified data-inputters'. (Dustin, 2006, p. 301) [Statutory Social Service Departments, England]

### Subtheme: Deskilling the work force

A general lack of satisfaction with supervision was expressed across the articles. Participants detailed how the purpose of supervision had shifted

1 The field of practice and research context is declared with each quote if details were reported in the literature.

from a space of learning, problem solving and critical reflection, to a process for implementing checks and balances, ensuring accurate and timely paperwork completion, and assessing whether organisational targets were being met (Mayer, 2001; McNeill, 2001; Postle, 2002; Carey, 2009; Gregory, 2010; Yalli and Albrithen, 2011; Dixon, 2013; Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015; Laird *et al.*, 2018). This trend was not limited to a particular field of practice or country context, with studies reporting on the administrative focus of supervision coming from rural social work in Australia, hospital social work in Saudi Arabia and criminal justice social work in Scotland.

... Supervision is [now] more about checking you have completed your paperwork correctly, and on time. (Carey, 2009, p. 513) [Elder care and Disability, England]

... there was a consensus that supervision was irregular, often cancelled or interrupted, overly focussed on caseload management and monitoring, superficial rather than analytical, and inattentive to professional development. (McNeill, 2001, p. 681) [Probation, Scotland]

Social workers also reported how training opportunities had been co-opted to implement bureaucratic structures, further deskilling the professional workforce and undermining social work theory. Practitioners stated how formal training opportunities were limited to IT and administrative skills, not addressing up-to-date strategies, clinical interventions, theory or critical reflection (Yalli and Albrithen, 2011).

We get more training on how to accurately fill out forms than on treatment needs. Human service is an after-thought. (Abramovitz and Zelnick, 2015, p. 281) [United States of America]

### Subtheme: Job insecurity constraining practice

The rise of managerialism has seen the introduction of short-term contracts, periodical funding based on performance indicators and outsourcing services. Although only discussed in-depth in one study (Harmon and Garrett, 2015), and addressed in three others (Yalli and Albrithen, 2011; Groves *et al.*, 2016; Marti-Garcia *et al.*, 2019) the changes to employment terms and working conditions have reportedly contributed to feelings of instability in the profession and has negatively impacted the ability to challenge perceived discriminatory or contradictory systems. With growing job insecurity and threats to career development, challenging the status quo or refusing to meet targets can risk employment, further limiting the scope of practice by self-monitoring behaviour.

I'm quite careful about who I approach. I know who not to approach, who not to annoy... That is something you're very conscious of, the fact



you're not permanent, and if something comes up against you, a complaint is made, and it could potentially impact another contract coming down the line. (Harmon and Garrett, 2015, p. 45) [Housing, Ireland]

### Subtheme: Impact on personal well-being and heightened frustration

The cumulative effects of bureaucracy have been detrimental to social workers' well-being. This is seen through social workers reporting experiences of burnout, anxiety and distress as work permeated their personal spheres (Abramovitz and Zelnick, 2015; Yuill and Gordon, 2018; Disney *et al.*, 2019; Yuill and Mueller-Hirth, 2019). Respondents also reported experiences of ethical stress when having to navigate the conflict between social work values and organisational priorities (Postle, 2002; Kjorstad, 2005; Bertotti, 2010; Gregory, 2010, 2011; Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015; Fenton and Kelly, 2017; Hultman *et al.*, 2018). Such concerns over personal well-being were also linked to individuals seeking early retirement (Yuill and Mueller-Hirth, 2019).

I often experience anxiety over the amount of paperwork and getting written up if it is not done. Yet I am also expected to do a million other things that take me away from the paperwork. I feel I am on my way to burning out. (Abramovitz and Zelnick, 2015, p. 290) [United States of America]

As much as social workers may want to do justice to their clients ... it is not possible because they don't have such powers. I sometimes feel like an ant in this department. Social workers also almost have the same problems that are faced by their clients; justice is not done to them. Even their human rights are violated. To say it clearly ... social workers are as oppressed as their clients are by those above them. (Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015, p. 472) [Department of Social Development, South Africa]

Social workers repeatedly expressed frustration with bureaucratic structures. Descriptors such as being chained to the desk, banging one's head against a wall, fighting against an organisation, the death of social work or attacks to the professional identity were evident throughout the literature (Ellis *et al.*, 1999; Leung, 2006; Carey, 2009; Evans, 2011; Horwath, 2011; Harmon and Garrett, 2015; Baum *et al.*, 2016; Roets *et al.*, 2016).

This paperwork is too much, it's ridiculous... You don't stop. This is crazy, this is ridiculous. Look at all these forms, look at the length of all these forms, they're repetitive. Some of this care plan is irrelevant to what we provide now, eligibility criteria, for example. For me it doesn't really change things for the better as far as I can see. (Yuill and Gordon, 2018, p. 283) [Britain]

Every system has another system and every piece of paper has three forms to achieve a task and you're accountable for everything and there

are reports required and everything's audited. What could be simple becomes incredibly complex at times and I often struggle with that. (Beddoe and Fouche, 2014, p. 202) [Children and Adult Services, International]

## Theme 2: Risks to service users

In addition to the widely experienced negative effects of bureaucracy on practice and social workers well-being, so too has bureaucracy increased risks for service users.

### Subtheme: Losing sight of the client and their needs

Research participants commonly expressed concerns about the rigidity of policies increasing the likelihood of services losing sight of the needs and priorities of service users, children and families (Ellis *et al.*, 1999; Horwath, 2011; Roysum, 2013; Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015; Harmon and Garrett, 2015; Roets *et al.*, 2016; Weinberg, 2016; Fenton and Kelly, 2017; Yuill and Gordon, 2018).

... one of the more telling remarks about the dominance of paperwork and bureaucracy, and how it shaped their working lives, was Frances's reply when asked about the clients or service users in her daily work as she had not mentioned them that much in the interview, referring in the main to paperwork and tight budgets: "They got lost", she replied. (Yuill and Gordon, 2018, p. 284) [Britain]

If the majority of your time is being spent collecting information, something is missing; something is being lost and it is that relationship ... We should be thinking to minimise the bureaucratic burden as much as possible. (Sarwar and Harris, 2019, p. 678) [Child Protection, England and Wales]

The fragmentation of services was also linked to rigid eligibility criteria and extensive procedures. Continuously referring people onwards because their needs fall outside of a specific remit creates barriers to accessing appropriate services and increases the likelihood of people falling through the cracks. Consequences to service users included a deterioration of circumstances due to delayed or denied support, a growing distrust in social work preventing future help-seeking behaviours and an inability to develop meaningful helping relationships (Postle, 2001; Dustin, 2006; Carey, 2009; Bertotti, 2010; Horwath, 2011; Roysum, 2013; Harmon and Garrett, 2015; Roets *et al.*, 2016; Weinberg, 2016; Hultman *et al.*, 2018; De Corte *et al.*, 2019).

(...) by restricting intervention to tightly defined criteria and ignoring the importance of preventative work, social workers noted the potential

that rejecting those seeking support can escalate challenges, with one study highlighting how continuously denying supports could see an increase in permanent placements of children in care institutions. (Hultman *et al.*, 2018, p. 924) [Child disability, Sweden]

Families have to tell their story over and over again, and the only answer they get is a referral to another social worker. Of course, they start to distrust social work. (Roets *et al.*, 2016, p. 316) [Children and Family Services, Belgium]

With organisations and systems prioritising the completion of paperwork, participants felt robbed of their ability to practice 'real social work and to have an impact on lives' (Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015, p. 472). Meaningful contact with service users has been constrained by bureaucratic burdens and a form filling, tick-box and timescale focused culture, reportedly increasing the chance of missing key information, reducing time with service users, conducting inaccurate assessments, employing stereotypes or providing inappropriate interventions (Parry-Jones *et al.*, 1998; Ellis *et al.*, 1999; Postle, 2002; Carey, 2009; Gregory, 2011; Horwath, 2011; Dixon, 2013; Abramovitz and Zelnick, 2015; Groves *et al.*, 2016; Fenton and Kelly, 2017; Yuill and Gordon, 2018; Disney *et al.*, 2019; Marti-Garcia *et al.*, 2019; Sarwar and Harris, 2019; Yuill and Mueller-Hirth, 2019).

... it was not unusual for the initial stages of assessment on some of the teams included in our study to be carried out wholly or partially without the participation, or even the knowledge, of the person being 'assessed'. (Ellis *et al.*, 1999, p. 273) [Disability, England]

I went out on a case where somebody had done an assessment and all, everything was filled in right and what I had to do was let the mother speak for about five minutes and you knew that she was actually quite unwell in terms of her mental health .... I actually figured if you did sort of question answer, question answer, she might hold it together. (Horwath, 2011, p. 1080) [Child Protection, England and Wales]

### Subtheme: Shifting ethos from effectiveness to efficiency

Although the relationship is arguably the foundation for providing relevant support and enabling sustainable change (Trevithick, 2003; Ruch, 2005, 2013; Ingram and Smith, 2018), participants repeatedly highlighted a shifting ethos which values outputs and efficiency over effectiveness or client outcomes, commenting on cost-cutting reforms and pressure to deliver services on the basis of organisational targets not service user needs (Ellis *et al.*, 1999; McNeill, 2001; Carey, 2009; Gregory, 2010, 2011; Evans, 2011; Horwath, 2011; Dixon, 2013; Abramovitz and Zelnick, 2015; Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015; Groves *et al.*, 2016; Weinberg, 2016; Fenton and Kelly, 2017; Hultman *et al.*, 2018; Lavee and Strier, 2019;

[Marti-Garcia et al., 2019](#)). The literature explores how, when service delivery is not adapted to individual circumstances, there is a risk of providing inappropriate or insufficient support which overlooks the complexities of challenges faced. Prioritising outputs was highlighted as impeding the ability to enable sustainable, positive change.

When I first came into social work, we were encouraged to look at the whole person. .... more recent years have seen a major emphasis on risk instead and we are all about achieving targets. ([Fenton and Kelly, 2017](#), p. 11) [Criminal Justice, Scotland]

They [Social workers] reported a mission drift from providing personalised care to cost-cutting and efficiency. ([Groves et al., 2016](#)) [Hong Kong]

### Subtheme: Service users unable to navigate systems

With constantly changing regulations and complex systems, service users are less likely to understand eligibility requirements, and risk automatically being denied access to needed resources and services. The dominance of forms and written documents, and a lack of flexibility to accommodate diverse education levels, language and abilities have reportedly decreased service users' abilities to navigate bureaucratic systems ([Horwath, 2011](#); [Harmon and Garrett, 2015](#); [Baum et al., 2016](#)).

... lower SES patients may have great difficulty accessing the benefits. They do not always know what their entitlements are; they may not be able to read or understand instructions and fill in the forms to file for their entitlements; and they may have difficulty presenting themselves convincingly before the committees that vet and authorise the benefits. ([Baum et al., 2016](#), p. 609) [Healthcare, Israel]

### Theme 3: Resistance to bureaucracy

Despite the increased monitoring and control over practice, standardised procedures, impact on well-being and increased risks to service users, social workers reported a narrative of resistance and acts of discretion that push back against bureaucratic structures. Resistance was present in thirty articles.

#### Subtheme: Narratives of resistance

Social workers repeatedly demanded greater autonomy, more time with service users and recognition of the professional knowledge and skills they bring to their roles. Additionally, social workers clearly articulated how bureaucratic structures were acting as barriers to adequate or effective care. These narratives evidence that social workers have not uniformly been indoctrinated into a bureaucratic culture, nor has the profession

internalised notions of managerialism (Ellis *et al.*, 1999; McNeill, 2001; Postle, 2002; Kjorstad, 2005; Dustin, 2006; Carey, 2009; Bertotti, 2010; Gregory, 2010, 2011; Horwath, 2011; Evans, 2011, 2013; Yalli and Albrithen, 2011; Lee, 2012; Dixon, 2013; Evans, 2013, 2011; Abramovitz and Zelnick, 2015; Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015; Harmon and Garrett, 2015; Groves *et al.*, 2016; Roets *et al.*, 2016; Weinberg, 2016; Fenton and Kelly, 2017; Hultman *et al.*, 2018; Yuill and Gordon, 2018; De Corte *et al.*, 2019; Lavee and Strier, 2019; Marti-Garcia *et al.*, 2019; Sarwar and Harris, 2019; Yuill and Mueller-Hirth, 2019; Juujarvi *et al.*, 2020).

... they felt that procedures should not be so detailed as to negate the role of professional judgement: where they identified problems with the rules, the authority should listen to their concerns. (Evans, 2013, p. 749) [Adult social work, England]

The following social worker, like many other practitioners we surveyed, independently used the term 'cookie cutter' to describe their agency's overly standardized and lack of comprehensive service provision. 'We're here to help people with various issues, whether it's housing, health, mental health or domestic violence. They're people, and you can't "cookie-cutter" them.' (Abramovitz and Zelnick, 2015, p. 288) [United States of America]

Put me in front a computer screen and suddenly everything needs to be divided into pieces, but we are working with human beings. Their story is one story and all pieces are interconnected with each other. (De Corte *et al.*, 2019, p. 1326) [Child Welfare and Protection, Belgium]

### Subtheme: Specific acts of resistance

Acts of resistance included advocating for client eligibility against strict criteria, the use of self-disclosure to build trust, delaying sanctions for welfare recipients and working around information systems to ensure the inclusion of relevant information that did not fit pre-set categories (Postle, 2002; Kjorstad, 2005; Carey, 2009; Gregory, 2010, 2011; Evans, 2013; Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015; Harmon and Garrett, 2015; Groves *et al.*, 2016; Roets *et al.*, 2016; Weinberg, 2016; De Corte *et al.*, 2019; Juujarvi *et al.*, 2020). The examples that follow highlight how social workers are creative in finding opportunities for small scale, overt acts that disrupt bureaucracy to achieve better outcomes for service users.

Lisa reported that she engaged in activity that could be viewed 'deviant' in that she chose not to let the community welfare officer know that family members, were staying in an apartment funded by social welfare even though they were not legally entitled to under the HRC: 'I turned a blind eye to the younger generations being in that family household, even though they weren't supposed to be.' (Harmon and Garrett, 2015, p 45) [Housing, Republic of Ireland]

Very often, mothers ask me how to deal with their mass of paperwork. In that case, I just do it off the cuff. I refuse to refer them to other social workers. I think they'd better think about making their practice accessible rather than blaming mothers for not doing their paperwork. (Roets *et al.*, 2016, p. 317) [Child Welfare and Protection, Belgium]

Resistance was also reportedly dependant on the relationship with managers (Carey, 2009), and linked to individual confidence to question decisions, systems and managers (Gregory, 2011; Juujarvi *et al.*, 2020).

#### Theme 4: Coping and accommodation strategies

Although most studies reported on the negative effects of bureaucracy and managerialism, it was evident that not all social workers were actively resistant or working to provoke change. Instead, several coping strategies were identified for managing work within their restrictive settings. This included contextualising the impact of bureaucracy by identifying more pressing concerns to practice and service users, such as a lack of resources (Parry-Jones *et al.*, 1998; Mayer, 2001; Postle, 2002; Gregory, 2010; Yalli and Albrithen, 2011; Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015; Yuill and Gordon, 2018; Lavee and Strier, 2019; Marti-Garcia *et al.*, 2019). Although only present in five articles, formal and informal peer support was highly valued by participants, offering solidarity and a safe space to express concerns and insecurities about their work (Mayer, 2001; Gregory, 2011; Yalli and Albrithen, 2011; Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015; Groves *et al.*, 2016).

Social workers also reported a range of practical strategies to manage competing demands such as using personal computers to work from home out of hours (Disney *et al.*, 2019; Sarwar and Harris, 2019), reducing their advocacy role and remaining quiet to persevere when no achievable solution could be seen (Dlamini and Sewpaul, 2015; Weinberg, 2016), and creative practices to manage deadlines for initial assessments such as 'starting the clock once they had made contact with the family' (Horwath, 2011, p. 1078).

#### Theme 5: Positive perceptions of bureaucracy

Not all social workers perceived bureaucracy and managerialism as a barrier to effective practice. Rather than being viewed as a form of control, a minority of social workers found conformity with technical procedures a source of job satisfaction by directing their attention and increasing the rate of case processing to prevent a backlog in the system (Ellis *et al.*, 1999; Dixon, 2013; Sarwar and Harris, 2019). The added layers of accountability through hierarchical structures and strict

reporting procedures were also regarded as a positive by reducing individual liability and offering legitimacy in decision making by referring to policy documents (Beddoe and Fouche, 2014; Fenton and Kelly, 2017; Hultman *et al.*, 2018; Sarwar and Harris, 2019; Juujarvi *et al.*, 2020).

A minority of participants also associated bureaucracy and managerialism with maintaining professional status (Evans, 2013; Beddoe and Fouche, 2014; Fenton and Kelly, 2017).

Rules are actually there for a very good reason and it's to promote equality. Never, ever, ever bend the rules. Because if you do you start slipping in terms of your own professionalism. (Evans, 2013, p. 748)  
[Adult Social Work, England]

Lastly, the use of clear forms and guides was perceived to streamline processes for conducting assessments and offered reassurance that the correct questions were asked, and necessary information was recorded (Horwath, 2011; Fenton and Kelly, 2017; Hultman *et al.*, 2018; Sarwar and Harris, 2019). No study exclusively reported positive perspectives and there was no association with a specific field of practice or journal.

## Discussion

There are opposing views on the use of discretion and whether it is used by SLBs to make their job easier and manageable, or whether discretion is based on their relationships with individuals and their professional judgement of need (see Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2000). In response to serious case reviews which seek to improve practice by reducing uncertainty, the increase of bureaucracy through proceduralism and recording has reduced the role of discretion through prescription. Such developments have obscured the centrality of relationships and attention has been focused on doing things right, not doing the right thing (Parton, 2006; Munro, 2011).

Frustration with control over practice, constrained discretion and ongoing monitoring is not a new phenomenon. In their critical commentary about managerialism, Tsui and Cheung (2004) emphasised how shifting power from front line social workers to service managers would result in de-professionalising social work, reducing autonomy and denying social workers' expertise. In discussing the features of managerialism, Tsui and Cheung (2004, p. 439) warned that professional practitioners could feel like 'alienated bureaucrats' when employed in a managerial organisational context. In the same year, Munro (2004) critiqued existing systems of auditing, arguing that a focus on outputs and paperwork does not account for the intricate interpersonal skills necessary for effective social work practice. It was cautioned that rigid frameworks would significantly reduce discretion, eliminating the ability to provide a personalised

service and respond to individual circumstances. Despite such warnings, this literature review and thematic synthesis demonstrates a continued dominance of bureaucratic structures and managerialist policies, confirming the predicted sense of alienation and frustration in social work practice. Once a 'bedrock of successful support and treatment' (Howe, 1996, p. 93), the synthesis demonstrates how managerialism and bureaucracy devalues relationships by reducing time spent with service users, prioritising outputs, increasing paperwork and diminishing the sense of trust in the profession.

## Implications

The implications for social work are far reaching. The experiences of ethical stress and workload pressures demonstrate how current bureaucratic and managerial organisational systems have placed staff well-being on a precipice. Staff retention, recruitment and burnout have been a constant concern in the profession (Jones, 2001; Kim and Stoner, 2008; McFadden *et al.*, 2015). Yet, to reduce workplace stress and increase staff satisfaction, the synthesis reinforces the need to address organisational structures and managerial cultures, rather than focusing on individual resilience (Arches, 1991; Harlow, 2010).

Bureaucracy and the effects of managerialism have also placed service users at risk. With increased control over practice and rigid systems reducing discretion, the ability for social workers to tailor interventions to meet diverse needs and respond to broader systematic influences is eroded. Furthermore, research participants expressed concern over the (in)ability for service users to navigate systems, understand expectations and meet compliance requirements in an increasingly bureaucratic industry. Concerns, ultimately, highlight the risk of bureaucracy inhibiting access to services that individuals and families are entitled to.

Both narratives and acts of resistance indicate that social workers remain critical of the role and influence of bureaucracy and managerialism on social services. The ethical stress described and felt by social workers shows an awareness of how the values and principles of human services are fundamentally different from the market values that have driven managerial and bureaucratic change (Tsui and Cheung, 2004; Baines, 2006). Whilst it has been forewarned that SLBs are at risk of becoming preoccupied with procedures and standardisation over delivering quality service (Lapsley, 2009), this literature review suggests social workers are yet to adopt a strict compliance mentality.

Furthermore, the synthesis shows resistant acts are not large scale, radical interventions but occur at an individual level, whereby social workers are taking steps to enable positive outcomes for service users. Acts such as overruling automatic referrals and aiding families in completing



documentation evidence that there remains space for discretion (Evans and Harris, 2004), but not to the same extent first theorised by Lipsky's (1980) work on SLBs. Whilst organisational management, funders and monitoring bodies continue to implement bureaucratic systems and managerial principles, the space to adapt services to meet needs and opportunities to use professional discretion is threatened. The synthesis has shown that creative thinking is necessary to work in an enabling way within a disabling system (Baines, 2006), yet a system overhaul is required for social work to hold true to the professional values of human rights, social justice, empowerment and respect for diversity. It is not solely the responsibility of the individual social worker to deliver effective, person-centred services, however, as work conditions must be conducive to outcome focused, relationship-based practice. Team leaders, service managers, directors, governance boards and funders must partner with social workers to critically review the existing systems to reduce the administrative burdens and enable greater time for meaningful engagement with service users.

## Conclusion

Although risks have been identified since the 1990s (see Arches, 1991; Jones, 2001; Postle, 2001), literature shows social workers continue to experience negative effects of bureaucracy and managerialism, with little movement in organisational structures. With twenty-seven of the thirty-nine articles published since 2015, this review suggests bureaucracy not only persists but has expanded across the sector.

Although a minority of studies found bureaucracy offered something akin to peace of mind to a small number of practitioners, there remains little doubt that bureaucracy is inhibiting the delivery of person-centred relationship-based services that social workers are trained to deliver. The small acts of transgression against bureaucracy reported here underline how significantly service delivery models and organisational priorities have shifted. The ongoing fragmentation and 'tick box' approach is deconstructing social work, dividing practice into segmented tasks. Considering this evidence, the social work profession faces a juncture. Should this approach continue to dominate practice, how true to social work do these roles remain? Whilst this systematic literature review only included peer-reviewed academic journals, given that the literature is clear on these negative impacts, collective action and consideration of alternative platforms to harness research in the campaign for change is necessary.

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