# CHAPTER 30

# Government Analytics Using Anthropological Methods

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## SUMMARY

This chapter aims to present an overview of how anthropologists study bureaucracy and why that approach has value to the World Bank and its interlocutors. Anthropologists are most commonly associated with immersive ethnographic methods, such as participatory observation. In this chapter, we describe those methods and their usefulness, but we also highlight the heterogeneity of the empirical materials that anthropologists draw upon. The chapter makes the case that, while the ethnographic approach of anthropologists might sometimes be perceived as "messy" or "unstructured," in fact, the efforts of anthropologists are motivated by an abiding concern with empirical rigor—a refusal to ignore any sort of data or to content oneself with a single view of such a multifarious thing as bureaucracy. This is to say that an anthropological approach is a holistic one, which envisions bureaucracy as a rich, multidimensional world.


## ANALYTICS IN PRACTICE

- Study the bureaucratic process or organization you are interested in holistically by observing all aspects of it: engage with the staff who are involved at every level of the organization, from senior officers to low-level staff and contractors, and with different demographic groups; study everyday documents; and watch how officials interact. Observe every part of what they do at work holistically, from their interactions in corridors and meetings to the protocols they observe in their relationships. Processes or organizational outcomes may be shaped by forces outside of those that the analyst presupposes.
- Develop relationships with a variety of people and have open-ended conversations about their work as well as about unrelated issues to understand their values and perspectives.

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- Engage in participatory observation by observing government activities in person as they unfold. This practice can capture activities that may be so routine that they go unnoticed by public officials and are not self-reported in surveys. Practitioners should talk with those involved in government processes, both public officials and clients, as they participate in them. When attending meetings, practitioners should examine them as a form of social engagement where formal and informal rules preside and the process of forming consensus is revealed. Practitioners should likewise examine not only the content of documents but how they are developed and circulated and how they seek to further broader policy goals.
- Aim to collect the widest practical range and amount of data, both qualitative and quantitative, even if it cannot be easily standardized. Data may be gleaned from studying aspects of everyday life: the way documents are read; meetings are run; and policies, media, and whatever else are perceived as relevant. There is a trade-off in all analyses between standardization and holistic measurement. Ensure a role for holistic measurement in your approach.
- Study the heuristics, interactions, scope for discretion, and microscopic decisions that affect the gap between stated policy goals and the actual work being carried out by public officials. Real-world manifestations of policy depend on the decisions of individual officials about how to interpret broader policy goals. Using the words and actions of officials, practitioners should aim to determine which factors contribute to how officials make decisions and prioritize tasks. In this process, consider that these decisions may result from learned behaviors and rationales that require extensive effort to change.
- Revise research questions and the focus of analysis as the study progresses. As observation and insight reveal new lines of inquiry, practitioners should be open to shifting their questions and methods. The initial research plan (including the research questions and methods) should be considered provisional.

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to present an overview of how anthropologists study bureaucracy and why this approach has value to the World Bank and its interlocutors. Anthropologists are most commonly associated with immersive ethnographic methods, such as participatory observation. In the pages that follow, we describe those methods and their usefulness, but we also highlight the heterogeneity of the empirical materials that anthropologists draw upon.

An anthropological analysis might include an ethnographic rendering of the sights, sounds, spatial organization, and everyday life of a bureaucratic workplace. But it might also include a discourse analysis of policies that emanate from the federal government or "head office," including the categories of persons and practices that those policies define, as well as a consideration of how such policies articulate with office life and bureaucrats' professional fears, aspirations, and values. It could include an analysis of documents and other artifacts produced through bureaucratic labor and how these documents move within and beyond political and bureaucratic sites, or of the social interactions that give shape to office life, such as meetings, performance reviews, and dealings with clients. The world outside of the bureaucracy—after-work gatherings, access brokers hanging around the main doors of the office, or an individual bureaucrat's living situation—might be as relevant to an anthropologist as the world within the office walls.

Anthropologists do not merely study bureaucratic activities at the "street level"; they examine practices from the bottom to the top of organizational hierarchies, as well as those who engage organizations from the outside. Anthropological work is especially attuned to the informal aspects of bureaucratic practices, but it also examines the surprising aspects and effects of formal policies and procedures.[1] This chapter makes the case that, while the ethnographic approach of anthropologists might sometimes be perceived as "messy" or "unstructured," in fact, the efforts of anthropologists are motivated by an abiding concern with empirical rigor—a refusal to ignore any sort of data or to content oneself with a single view of such a multifarious thing as bureaucracy. This is to say that an anthropological approach is a holistic one, which envisions bureaucracy as a rich, multidimensional world.

The chapter is organized around four topics that capture this multidimensional approach, and which have been of particular focus to anthropologists. The first section, by Colin Hoag, covers the *everyday life* of bureaucratic institutions, showing why attention to informal practices and the flow of office life can be critical to understanding the workings of formal organizations. Second, Kristin Asdal and Hilde Reinertsen discuss bureaucratic documents, followed by Colin Hoag and Matthew Hull describing the significance of meetings to bureaucratic life. Finally, Josiah Heyman describes the anthropological approach to policy. Throughout, the aim is not to offer an encyclopedic account or to describe the state of the field but rather to show how anthropologists approach bureaucracy and why such an approach has value to policy makers. We hope to show why anthropological sensibilities might offer a meaningful guide for World Bank policy making and for crafting goals and guidelines that are informed by culture, power, and everyday life.

## EVERYDAY LIFE

Anthropology's early interest in the exotic and non-Western has meant that anthropologists have been relatively quiet on the topic of bureaucracy when compared with sociologists and political scientists. This has changed dramatically in recent years, partly out of dissatisfaction with accounts of powerful institutions from the outside. Commenting on research about the state in Africa, for example, the anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2009, 39) explains, "It is easy to get the feeling that, for decades, journalists, politicians and many researchers, both Africans and Africanists, have been engaged in a relentless search for the 'essence' of the African state while neglecting to carry out a concrete analysis of the administrations, public services, bureaucratic system and relations between civil servants and the users of state services." His point is emblematic of a broader commitment among anthropologists of bureaucratic institutions to develop an empirical record of how such organizations function. Their approach seeks to understand bureaucracies as rich lifeworlds rather than organizational charts and protocols. Using anthropological methods of participant observation to understand how bureaucracies work leads to a fundamentally different picture of bureaucracy than is conventionally given by political scientists and public administrators.

A critical concept for anthropologists in general, and certainly for anthropologists of bureaucracy, is *everyday life*. The term refers to all those routine or unremarkable things that are so common they might even go unnoticed by bureaucrats, but which constitute the bulk of bureaucratic activity. Anthropology may have a reputation for caring about the exotic and about major cultural events, such as religious rituals. In fact, many anthropologists focus on the routine and quotidian aspects of culture. In the case of the civil service, anthropologists are likely to be less interested in the pronouncements of top administrators than the flow of ordinary events at the office.

These anthropologists could be said to work in the tradition of scholars of public administration and organizational ethnography from the early 20th century, such as Chester Barnard. Those scholars sought to explain the role of informal practices to the functioning of formal rules. What factors determine why bureaucracies work in the ways they do? Do bureaucrats determine institutional practice, or are they controlled by institutional rules and regulations? How do the effects of bureaucracies correspond to their stated aims? What factors other than formal rules and regulations (for example, institutional history or culture) influence bureaucrats? How do bureaucrats interpret or experience their work—the rules and reforms that guide them; the clients, bosses, or employees with whom they interact; and their own actions?

Accounting for this form of everyday life requires an immersive approach. Anthropologists employ participant observation, a method that entails joining bureaucrats in their work and recording what bureaucrats do, as opposed to simply relying on their verbal or written responses to questions on a survey or interview protocol. This shift of focus helps to remedy well-established problems associated with biased self-reporting.

Instead of recording what bureaucrats *say* they do, anthropologists attempt to record what they *actually* do. Participant observation can appear haphazard and time-consuming, and it indeed entails a substantial amount of simply "hanging around" the office. However, the method opens up an experiential understanding of bureaucracy while also allowing researchers to build rapport with the people they study.

Anthropologists seek to immerse themselves in bureaucratic worlds, aiming to understand what it feels like to do bureaucratic work, based on the assumption that this *feel*—this embodied sense of office life—shapes how the formal rules governing an organization take shape. Are the sights and sounds of an office taxing? For a bureaucrat making repetitive but consequential decisions, this might lead to inconsistency (or, by contrast, a lack of attention and nuance to a given decision). Such an approach also highlights the heterogeneity of office life, rather than presuming that *organizational culture* encompasses all social life. For example, bureaucrats' perceptions of different spaces within an institution might differ across lines of race, class, or gender.

Anthropological approaches through participant observation strive to provide this kind of texture to account for the institution as a heterogeneous place. An employee's career trajectory or dissatisfaction with their pay could determine how they appreciate a given policy reform. One employee interviewed during research at the Department of Home Affairs in South Africa, for example, was particularly sour after having been relegated to a position she disliked for a full year. When asked about how she viewed a departmentwide reform initiative called the "turnaround strategy," the official replied, "But why aren't they turning around our salaries?" In short, a policy reform that makes perfect sense in strictly public administration terms might fail if it does not account for these everyday factors.

Anthropological approaches might also extend outside the organization to conceive of how office life "spills over" into other social spaces, such as happy hours or holiday parties. By contrast, they might also be interested in describing how outside events, such as party politics, kinship structures, or even football allegiances, shape the lived experience of working at the institution. At the South African Department of Home Affairs (see Hoag 2014), the architecture and materiality of office spaces were important factors that shaped how clients accessed government services. Though rarely (if ever) referenced in government reports about reforms and service delivery, client perceptions of the opacity of the government bureaucracy owed at least partly to the fact that office counters were literally opaque: covered with taped signs and notifications. The loud din of the waiting room made it hard for them to hear the requests of the bureaucrat, and this was a source of frustration for bureaucrats. Instructions for applicants were poorly documented on department websites, meaning that applicants often required multiple trips to the office. Some solicited the support of *agents* or *immigration practitioners*, private citizens who specialized in advising applicants about the process. Bureaucrats had developed relationships with these agents, and those relationships sometimes led bureaucrats to treat applicants preferentially—for example, by excusing mistakes.

## DOCUMENTS

Curiously, among the often-overlooked parts of everyday office life are the materials with which bureaucrats work: bureaucratic *documents*.[2] Indeed, documents are everywhere, but despite their significance, we often speak of them in negative ways: as dusty and dull, piling up on a desk, put on a shelf, or placed in a drawer. Documents tend to symbolize inefficiency, inertia, and pointless bureaucracy. The word *paperwork* itself implies something that stands in contrast to real, hands-on, meaningful work. Yet if we dismiss documents in this way, we risk overlooking their fundamental importance. Not only are documents critical in our individual lives, paperwork is itself a defining feature of modern institutions (Asdal and Reinertsen 2022). Documents, be they physical or digital, are integral to organizational practices, shape organizational culture, and thoroughly shape and reshape our societies.[3]

Sometimes, documents are part of deep controversies. Just think of the reports from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). These comprehensive reports, their production process, and their reception and use are subject to intense public and political debate. But documents are also crucial in producing trust, consensus, and agreement. In fact, documents are often also, quite literally, agreements. Other documents, such as governmental budgets, have a perhaps less visible public role but are no less influential. A government budget organizes the political year and determines public spending on roads, schools, hospitals, and all other sectors in a given country. This attests to how documents take part in shaping society. We therefore benefit much from studying documents both *in* practice and *as* practice.

*Practice-based document analysis* (Asdal and Reinertsen 2022) has been developed precisely to capture the significance of documents, both in organizational settings and in society more broadly. This approach delineates six methodological moves for studying documents: document *sites*, document *tools*, document *work*, document *texts*, document *issues*, and document *movements*. These six methodological moves are also simultaneously analytical concepts. In adopting a practice-oriented approach, we see that intense power struggles are in fact taking place in and around documents: Who is allowed to write? Who is the document's sender? Who and what is mentioned in the document, and who and what is not? Who is the recipient, and who is allowed to handle the document? When is it important *not* to write, report, and make a document? Individuals, groups of actors, and issue components may be defined in and out of documents and the issues they concern and shape. Documents are sources of power; they provide opportunities and spaces of action. What is happening in and behind the documents? A practice-oriented document analysis aims at exploring these kinds of questions.

In the following, we will go through these six methodological moves and show how they compose a cohesive analytical framework. But just to make the point clear: even if these elements together make up a whole, this does not mean that they are the only elements or that they are always equally relevant. This depends on the object of analysis and on what one is interested in exploring and analyzing in a specific organizational setting. The different elements are partly overlapping, and they "speak" to one another. When we now go through them in sequence, we will do so by means of the recent case of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, to illustrate the many dimensions of documents this method allows us to explore.

As these pages were being written, governments across the globe were struggling to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. Continuously updated risk analyses, swiftly prepared emergency laws, and rapidly changing travel restrictions were but three of the many forms of documents deployed in the effort. The latter two were designed to manage us, as individual citizens, to ensure that we acted in a manner that helped contain rather than spread the virus. Yet newspapers also reported that fake negative COVID-19 test scores could be bought online, enabling individuals to escape quarantine restrictions (and risk being accused of document fraud). These are but a few examples of the many documents involved in the ongoing tracking and handling of the coronavirus. So how might we go about analyzing the coronavirus and the COVID-19 pandemic by way of documents? Indeed, if we start looking at how the pandemic unfolded in practice, we will soon see that documents were involved at every turn. In the following subsections, we analyze the coronavirus and the COVID-19 pandemic by way of the six methodological moves of the practice-oriented method (Asdal and Reinertsen 2022).[4] In short, this will enable us to analyze and demonstrate how documents made the virus governable.

## Document Sites

Documents always exist at specific sites—such as archives, websites, organizations, and bureaucratic offices—and it matters what kinds of sites these are. To understand how bureaucratic institutions have handled the COVID-19 pandemic, we can study what happens inside government offices. Yet we may also extend this site-oriented move to the documents as such. We can consider documents as sites in themselves: sites where medical facts and political decisions are formulated, negotiated, and decided upon. They are sites to which we may go, analytically speaking, to study the pandemic. This means to ask not only "What does this document tell us?" and "What is written here?" but also "What does this document do?" (that is, "What effects or force does it have?"), "What happens here?," and "What are the practices unfolding here?" In so doing, we can, in fact, think of document analysis as a form of fieldwork—a form of document ethnography.

## Document Tools

In a dramatic political situation, such as an unfolding pandemic, what becomes blatantly clear is that documents are tools: they are produced and used for specific reasons, and they are part of larger processes, cases, and institutions. They are written and printed and distributed with the intention that something can and should happen by means of them. Just consider the following three documents: maps displaying countries and regions as green, yellow, and red to signify which travel restrictions are in place; emergency laws equipping the government with extra measures to act in times of crisis; and economic stimulus packages undergoing hard negotiations in the legislature before channeling government funds to industries and public services across the country. Color-coded maps determine who may travel where, emergency laws enable the government to act more independently from the legislature, and stimulus packages help actors and institutions endure a dire economic situation. When we start thinking about documents as tools, we become "tuned in" to investigating what role documents play in a specific situation and how their particular properties affect how they are used and how they shape bureaucratic outcomes—and by extension, societal outcomes.

## Document Work

No document miraculously emerges in its finalized form. Producing and handling documents are, in themselves, forms of labor, craft, and expertise. Documents are always part of specific work practices, including writing, editing, circulating, reading, and use. We can study the various ways in which this work is done by getting close to the people working on and with them. Examples of such document work are the preparation of weekly governmental COVID-19 contamination reports and the updating of public guidelines online. This is often a matter of collective work within larger institutions and bureaucracies. Even though the public faces of a government's pandemic response are high-level politicians and agency leaders, a host of staffers have been involved across ministries, directorates, and agencies. Their concerted (albeit sometimes conflictual) document work, in which all are involved in drafting separate paragraphs, reports, and reviews, is what, in combination, enabled the full COVID-19 response citizens witnessed through the media.

## Document Texts

Clearly, it is essential to analyze documents as texts. This is the content, the very material, that document work concerns itself with. Paying attention to the document as text includes analyzing its genre—the textual, rhetorical, narrative, and visual properties that together make up the document in front of us. Think, for example, of the guidelines for quarantine and isolation that everyone was obliged to follow, and which have been critiqued for being hard to understand and easy to misinterpret. What rhetorical situation do the guidelines establish? How do they try to explain their topic and convince their readers? In analyzing guidelines as texts, we can look at their author, intended recipient, style, structure, layout, illustrations, graphs, numbers, and references. What are the combined effects of these elements? How do they seek to produce authority and trust? Why and how did they succeed, or not?

## Document Issues

Documents are sources of information about the specific issues in which we are interested, shaping how issues are understood and acted upon. To understand what the COVID-19 pandemic is about, we retrieve documents from the government, from researchers, and from the media. Yet documents also take an active part in forming the issue itself—as, for instance, a situation that is *under control* or *out of control*, as a *global* issue or a *national* question, as an issue that is *closed* or one which is *uncertain* and open for discussion. They act upon the issue and thus have a transformative capacity that we as analysts should not only acknowledge but actively investigate. In a special case such as the COVID-19 pandemic, this potential for intervention and transformation is readily visible. Yet in less tangible and acute issues as well, such as the implementation of environmental regulations or nature conservation, documents are key to how issues are rendered governable and regulated.

### Document Movements

Documents are seldom lying still. They are often "on the move," circulating within and across sites. In the case of the COVID-19 situation, this is true to the extent that new rules, regulations, stimulus packages, and the discussion thereof have moved throughout government bureaucracies ceaselessly. Moreover, the virus itself is made manageable by how it enters into documents; thus, this move into documents is what makes it accessible and "workable." Documents build upon one another, enabling the pandemic issue to move through the government into the public—and often back again, for new iterations of research and regulation. Furthermore, patterns of document movement reflect and even constitute the effective organization of bureaucratic institutions.

Both alone and in combination, these six methodological moves make it possible to analyze documents as valuable sources for understanding the workings of bureaucratic organizations and beyond. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, they may help open up the material to rich analyses by getting closer to the role of bureaucratic institutions in the situation. In drawing viruses and documents together, we may thus understand them both better. This is true for any issue in which documents are involved: by better understanding how documents operate and the effects they cause within and beyond bureaucracies, we are also better equipped to notice and appreciate their significance.

## MEETINGS

Meetings are crucial sites of bureaucratic social activity. Indeed, the projects of an organization are often constituted as systems of meetings (Brown and Green 2017). However, the mundane quality of meetings tends to obscure their cultural content. Meetings have been idealized as "the locus and embodiment of ideas of appropriate, transparent decision-making" (Brown, Reed, and Yarrow 2017, p.11), but anthropologists of bureaucracy approach meetings as cultural phenomena, with particular social rules, ritual qualities, spatial and temporal framings, and consequences (Schwartzman 1989).

While analysis of meetings might initially focus attention on the content that is decided at meetings, such as the consequences or the political content of the discussion, anthropologists also pay attention to the meeting itself as a form of social engagement. As a kind of event that requires the face-to-face presence of people, meetings are a form of social life difficult to study without ethnographic work. Anthropologists recognize that organizations are unstable, in spite of their projected coherence. Employees aspire toward promotions and come and go from the organization, and their roles are often contested. An organization's (or unit's) goals may be inconsistent or understood differently across the hierarchy, and technologies consistently reroute the ways that people report their work or interact socially with one another. Meetings are a key site where those ambiguities are stabilized and consensus is established or enforced, even if only temporarily.

In an analysis of National Science Foundation grant application reviews, for example, meetings serve as important sites for the collective socialization of reviewers regarding how to assess applications against guidelines (Brenneis 1999). That is, they serve to guide bureaucrats in what they should take note of and value. Meetings can also be a means to generate a shared understanding of which phenomena bureaucrats should overlook, as when meetings of Mexican environmental regulators produce official ignorance of burning and firewood cutting (Mathews 2011). Similarly, in European Union policy meetings, bureaucrats succeed in crafting policy from different national member states' interests by withholding and strategically concealing the political content of meetings (Thedvall 2013).

Because of the regularity of meetings, which often occur in specific locations at regular intervals and with predictable formats and ways of speaking, they should be understood as having a ritual quality that anthropology is well positioned to interpret. In some contexts, the performances of authority and agreement are more important than efforts to present information and establish common understanding. For example, at meetings in Lesotho between conservation bureaucrats and the rural people who were targets of their conservation efforts, bureaucrats' performance of authority and the public's performance of consent to regulation were as important as the actual transfer of information about a policy (Hoag 2022). Organizational meetings typically combine formal and informal aspects of organizations, opening in some moments to social conflict while containing it within the framework of normal business activity. Meetings often conclude with a mechanism for, if not the reconciliation of, conflict, the redirection of conflict into activities that might resolve it—often further meetings.

## POLICY

*Policy* is a governing statement by an organization, from a nation-state to a local clinic, shaping its actions in its environment, both social and biophysical.[5] Yet often public statements are abstract and ideal, far from actual conduct on the ground. Blame for this gap partly rests on the organization that enacts the policy. The bureaucracy fairly or unfairly takes the blame for any failure to fulfill official aspirations. Sometimes this finger-pointing holds some truth, but bureaucratic failure and limitations are by no means the only causes, and even when bureaucracy does play a role, this only raises questions of why and how it does so, and whether it might change.

It is important not to reduce issues of administration simply to questions of identifying and applying objective scientific management. While skillful management does matter, even the choice to manage for some priorities and not others is inherently a political decision. In Mexico, for example, COVID-19 vaccination has been provided first—and with great publicity—in small, rural, and often indigenous sites. This was in some ways a suboptimal decision—mass vaccination in large cities would have reached more people, more quickly, and at a lower cost. But it was explicitly a political decision to show concern for people and places that historically have been devalued and stigmatized, places that in the past, Mexican bureaucrats would have reached slowly, if at all. There is no unambiguous, scientifically right way for bureaucracies to choose their means and ends; decisions should always be understood as political.

Without delving deeply into the study of policy whys and wherefores, a few basic observations help. Even when overly ambitious or misleading, policy statements are performative and need to be understood as such. Such statements present an ideal to diverse publics (including the bureaucracy) about what should be, with the proviso that they may be taken in a wide range of ways. They may be accepted as legitimate aspirations, even if incompletely achieved. But often there is a glaring gap between formal statements of policy and the real thrusts of organizational action, covered by rhetorical adherence to the formalities of official policy.

In observations of the work of United States immigration and border officers at the US-Mexico border, officers consistently said their overriding policy goal was to interdict terrorists. But in their actual work, they never encountered potential terrorism, whereas their operations were aimed clearly at Latin American labor migrants and asylum seekers. The verbal performance of protecting the erstwhile vulnerable homeland against terror, a hard-to-question goal, justified morally debated and ambiguous duties in reality. Policy formalisms, then, have a complex relationship to actual activities on the ground.

While policy, in one regard, is those means and goals that are publicly announced, policy can also be considered as choices shaping what actually is carried out. What if the real-world implications of bureaucratic assignments and practice constitute well-understood and tacitly accepted policy that deviates from formal statements? The just-cited example of US policy at the US-Mexico border is a clear instance. This dual view of policy as rhetoric and policy as enacted requires observing the actual work routines and the accumulated choices—to do and, importantly, not to do—of bureaucrats in performance, not taking those features as failures but as social facts in themselves. To explore these phenomena, the notion of *street-level bureaucracy* is helpful. Street-level bureaucrats are officials who interact with the public directly or carry out the actual activities of the organization. Beyond the strict definition of *street-level*, we need also to consider lower levels of management in the organization who work in close proximity to such officers. Policy, whatever is declared, always passes through the hands of street-level bureaucrats and is enacted according to their ideas and actions.

Policies, rules, and the like are inevitably written in general terms. It would be hopeless to write them to cover all possible people and situations. Instead, officials must exercise discretion in when and how to apply actions. One person might be arrested, another ignored; one person might be awarded a valued document, another denied. Discretion is not just the arbitrary impulse of willful bureaucrats. It has specific political, social, and cultural features. For example, officials who award US temporary visiting visas to Mexicans at the US-Mexico border—a desired asset for shopping and family reunions—have guidelines that aim to prevent visa misuse for unauthorized residence or work. But general guidelines need to be applied to the circumstances of diverse applicants. Many different factors enter into judgment—for example, age, with older people deemed more trustworthy. A particularly important factor of discretionary favor is wealth because people with wealth are thought to be less likely to want to cross over from Mexico to work in the United States and are generally looked on as more worthy. They dress cleanly and neatly, present themselves in polite but relaxed ways, and often speak English. That is, they resemble US officers, even outclassing them. The idea that a wealthy person does not seek unauthorized residence or employment is often correct, but by no means always; there is a notable population of wealthy unauthorized residents inside the United States, especially in border communities. Discretion, then, deserves attention as a crucial leverage point in how policy is rendered into reality by a massive aggregation of rules of thumb, interactions, discretion, and microscopic decisions.

Woven into discretionary decisions, street-level bureaucrats often ration their efforts and outcomes, whether positive or negative. They rarely have sufficient resources (personnel, time, equipment, sites, goods and funds to distribute, and so on) to enact the entire policy in all cases, either the policy as formally stated or as tacitly understood. Rather, they prioritize action and (by implication) inaction. When all individual actions are aggregated, the allocation of rewards and punishments constitutes a de facto policy. The bases of this allocation are complex but discernible with close attention to the words and actions of officials. Often encountered are criteria of socially interpreted personal or moral worthiness and belonging to insider versus outsider groups. Also relevant, of course, is the cost of various actions to bureaucrats and organizations in terms of scarce time, resources, and so forth.

Bureaucrats do not act in such ways alone. Rather, they interact with a wide variety of counterparties: upper executives, political bosses, publics of varying degrees of influence and respect, other organizations, rivals or collaborators, biophysical organisms, processes and flows, and so forth. Alberto Arce and Norman Long (1993) observe in rural Mexico, revealingly, systematic maneuvers and misinterpretations in the interactions between an idealistic development project engineer and agropastoralists grounded in a local tradition of defiance, mistrust, and subterfuge. A negotiated appearance of collaboration on all sides finally breaks down in project failure. This actually reinforces the interpretations on both sides perfectly. Agency managers view the breakdown as evidence that the engineer's proposed peasant-oriented innovations were wrong all along, and peasant leaders view it as another instance of incompetence and failure by central authorities.

There are wider lessons in this specific case. First, understanding bureaucrats means not only learning about their internal ideas and routines but also seeing them as diverse toolkits for interacting with counterparts, from clients through outside visitors to funders and political bosses. Each kind of interaction, when encountered, provides only partial information about an organization, since the same bureaucrat might deal very differently with another kind of counterparty. This applies, not least, to outside development experts. Second, these webs of relations are suffused with power dynamics: some clients may be deferential supplicants, others well-wired operators with higher status and better connections than bureaucrats themselves. Policy on the ground, then, must be interpreted and enacted in this diverse and unequal web of relationships.

Interpretive judgments of people, situations, and action or inaction require human intelligence. Bureaucrats might seem rigid or unresponsive, and often they are, but they rely on learned thought routines that have worked adequately for current or past sociopolitical fields. Routines only change when those fields meaningfully alter and new work patterns are available to be learned. A well-socialized official also learns to justify their work routines, favoritism, lacunae, and approximations of and deviations from formal policy through the skilled use of rationales, labels, rhetoric, and other language games. The complete web of these learned behaviors, ideas, and words is an *organizational culture*. *Culture* is a tricky term, sometimes insightful but sometimes glib, neutering inquiry. Not all organizations have strong cultures (though some do), not every organization member shares an identical culture or shares it with equal intensity, and organizational cultures are not free-floating isolates but rather are part of wider webs of inequality and power. The best reason to introduce the term *organizational culture* is that, to understand the refraction of official policy into practice, we need to take seriously the everyday working frameworks of bureaucrats. To change policy into practice, then, external mandates or sporadic trainings are not enough—workable new frameworks and reasons to use them need to be introduced. That is a very long and hard process.

## CONCLUSION

Anthropological approaches to bureaucracy are diverse, but at their heart, they include certain commonalities. First, they are holistic, seeking to understand bureaucratic work from a variety of perspectives, including those of bureaucrats differently positioned within a workplace hierarchy and across lines of race, ethnicity, class, and gender, and of the publics who interact with the organization.

Second, they are immersive, leveraging the method of participant observation to understand the look and feel of bureaucratic life, including how outcomes of bureaucratic rules are configured by the process of their execution, as well as how informal practices correspond to formal rules.

Third, they envision bureaucracies as social worlds within which a bureaucratic practice is not merely a reflection of bureaucrats' self-interest or psychology but also their socialization into an organizational culture. Whether examining the factors that inform policy implementation, the role of documents in organizing bureaucratic work, or the social role of meetings in the workplace, anthropologists aim to develop a rich account of the multitude of factors that shape how bureaucratic work is understood and carried out.

## NOTES

The authors are grateful to Daniel Rogger and other World Bank staff for planning and editorial guidance. The documents section was written by Kristin Asdal and Hilde Reinertsen, and we are grateful to SAGE Publications for allowing us to reprint text from Asdal and Reinertsen's book, *Doing Document Analysis: A Practice-Oriented Method* (2022). The policy section was written by Josiah Heyman. The sections on everyday life and meetings were written by Colin Hoag.

1. For overviews of the anthropological literature on bureaucracies, see Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (2014, 2021); Heyman (2004); Hoag and Hull (2017). The following are some key anthropological studies of bureaucracy: Ferguson (1994); Gupta (2012); Hetherington (2011); Heyman (1995); Hull (2012a); Mathur (2016); Lea (2008).
2. This section was written by Kristin Asdal and Hilde Reinertsen and builds on chapters 1 and 7 of Asdal and Reinertsen (2022); see also Asdal (2015).
3. Other instructive anthropological studies of the role of documents in bureaucracies are Hetherington (2011); Hull (2012a); Mathur (2016); Riles (2000). For a review of the anthropological literature on bureaucratic documents, see Hull (2012b).
4. These sections are based on chapter 7 of Asdal and Reinertsen (2022).
5. This section was written by Josiah Heyman.

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