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Bureaucratic process as morris dance: an ethnographic approach to the culture of bureaucracy in Australian aboriginal affairs administration

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An ethnographic approach to the culture of bureaucracy in Australian aboriginal affairs administration

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Abstract

Purpose – Development of Aboriginal communities, particularly in remote Australia is notoriously difficult. Despite formal equality Aborigines in Australia remain materially deprived and suffer ill health, premature mortality and high rates of imprisonment. This paper seeks to explain one aspect of development failure in examining the organisational dynamics of the bureaucracy charged with Aboriginal affairs administration.

Design/methodology/approach – This is an ethnographic study of bureaucracy. It uses the anthropological technique of participant observation through the author's own engagement as an employee of the Australian Public Service (APS). It also draws on observation of other APS employees in the course of fieldwork with Aboriginal communities and organisations. This is supplemented by examination of APS documents from an ethnographic perspective.

Findings – The study finds that bureaucratic culture and Aboriginal culture are not overlapping but separate domains. Rather, they both perform within the same social field in which Aboriginal people become symbolic capital in patterns of action determined by the bureaucratic imagination. While the public sector has consistent procedures for both internal and external performance assessment, there is considerable space for the reinterpretation of information so that all requirements may appear to be met. In the new and complex policy environment of Australian Aboriginal affairs since 2004, the path to effective implementation is less clear than the path to the creation and elaboration of policy itself. This encourages bureaucratic involution.

Originality/value – There has been little ethnographic study of public administration, and none of Aboriginal affairs administration in Australia. The value lies in understanding the dynamics of the interaction of functionaries in the public sector in this field.

Keywords Australian aboriginals, Ethnic groups, Bureaucracy, Ethnography, Government policy

Paper type General review

Introduction

In 1967, the people of Australia voted for an amendment to the constitution that gave power to legislate for Aboriginal people to the federal government. This set off a process of enfranchisement, emancipation and engagement with settler Australia. While Aborigines continue to live mostly in remote or rural settlements and urban enclaves, in the four decades since emancipation they have become increasingly enmeshed with the wider Australian administration for their welfare, benefit and, concomitantly, their regulation and control. Anthropology in Australia has been slow to recognise this.

Australian Aboriginal anthropology is usually carried out in the footsteps of recent and raw colonialism. It is now most frequently undertaken in order to establish autochthonous rights. It has required little re-crafting to do this since both colonial



exclusion and contemporary recognition of rights require the construction of Aboriginal societies as separate, distinct, classical and primordial. Yet, Aboriginal people are enmeshed in processes of modernity, most intrusively as subjects of bureaucracy. While anthropology is much concerned with representing the Aborigines to the settler society, it has so far barely begun to turn its gaze on the cultures of administration nearer to home (Sullivan, 1996a, pp. 43-69; Lea, 2002). Yet, this paper argues, not to do so ignores the major partner in the intercultural equation of Aboriginal development. Aboriginal life is almost entirely supported by grant and welfare regimes, and therefore by public sector administration and by Aboriginal community sector service delivery.

This paper is about the development of bureaucratic culture and its influence in Aboriginal affairs where it interacts with Aboriginal communities and organisations. While this is an intercultural interaction, it does not occur through the overlapping of separate domains, but rather through the sharing of an intercultural field (Sullivan, 2005; Merlan, 2006; Weiner, 2006) wherein Aboriginal people are sucked into patterns of action determined by the bureaucratic imagination; where they themselves populate bureaucracies more or less compliant with its demands; and they provide the raw material of bureaucratic industry for those who, in many cases, will never know anything but over-mediated representations of Aboriginal life. This complex intercultural field where local experience is embedded within national and transnational representations, and which is permeated by both politics and policy, invites anthropological examination, since it is a privileged site for analysis of aspects of contemporary culture which are no longer bifurcated by the categories native/non-native (and therefore encultured/cultureless).

At the outset, it is necessary to deal with an unhelpful distinction between the practical and the cultural. To analyse bureaucratic activity as intensely cultural is not to deny that it has practical effects. It does, however, question the naturalness of the production of these effects and also suggest that they are embedded in practices that have other than practical motivations. The approach to policy formation adopted here follows Mosse, a development anthropologist, who shows deep scepticism about the claims of policy, while also concluding that policy is more important than we think because it operates at levels of power and influence which are driven by other forms of motivation than its ostensible object, good development practice. He outlines five propositions based on his observations of policy making and implementation and illustrates these with examples from his field experience (Mosse, 2004, pp. 648-62)[1].

Mosse situates himself apart from the two major interpretations of the role of policy in development studies. These are the instrumental view, which tends to see policy in its own terms as the rational construction of best practice which is then communicated to the field, supervised and monitored to ensure a fit between policy and practice. Alternatively, the critical approach uncovers hidden agendas of neo-colonial control, economic exploitation, and the export of western ideologies. Both, he says:

[...] divert attention away from the complexity of policy as institutional practice, from the social life of projects, organisations and professionals and the diversity of interests behind policy models and the perspectives of actors themselves (Mosse, 2004, p. 644).

His first two propositions can be read together. In abbreviated form, they are that policy functions to mobilise political support and legitimate practice; while development interventions are driven instead by the exigencies of organisations and relationships.

Here, he sets up a theme common in much of the literature he cites: development workers do what is required according to local demands, policy makers focus on political alliances. When policy works well it is because local players are able to reinterpret their practical activities to be expressions of policy, and policy makers are able to present as policy successes the results of local action (Mosse, 2004, pp. 648-54). This leads to his third proposition, that an essential part of development work is maintaining this overall system of representation, not just technical and operational matters (Mosse, 2004, pp. 654-58). When projects fail, his fourth proposition says, it is because policy has failed them. Changes in policy alter the terms of the discourse so that what was previously successful is now, by externally imposed definition, a failure, while the facts on the ground remain the same (Mosse, 2004, pp. 658-61). Fifthly, he says, success and failure are measured against policy, which obscures the effects of actual projects (Mosse, 2004, p. 662).

In the end, policy making, unlike project management, escapes accountability. Since new policy is future orientated, it does not have to demonstrate efficacy, while old policy is, by definition, wrong. It is accountability that Mosse hopes to eventually foster when he concludes:

[. . .] my argument is that policy is more not less important than we imagined; and important in more ways than we realized. But most agencies are bound to a managerial view of policy which makes them resolutely simplistic about (or ignorant of) the social and political life of their ideas[. . .] perhaps good policy is not implementable, but it is absolutely central to what happens in arenas of development, and it is important to know how (Mosse, 2004, p. 667).

This paper takes a similar stance. Policy making is not inconsequential, as the morris dance metaphor of the title might imply, but neither is its relationship to development outcomes as straightforward as either the instrumental or the critical view of development would argue. Rather, it is to some extent self-referring, with its own rules, forms and conventions, as well as reaching out beyond this formative environment to have an effect in the world. It can also pursue tangential aims that are sometimes more important than those in its direct line of endeavour. In doing so, the policy makers, out of the bureaucratic milieu in which they work, institute their culture. The symbols and myths of this culture rely on a base construct "the Aborigines". It is of less relevance than would be imagined that there really are "Aborigines" in the world, since the bureaucratic culture that plans for and administers them largely does not deal with them. It deals with their representation in meetings, plans, reports and media statements. So, the metaphor of the morris dance is introduced to picture the cultural context in which policy is produced and its effects monitored and assessed.

The policy context

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) initiative, the National Commitment to Improved Outcomes in the Delivery of Programs and Services for Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islanders (National Commitment) was endorsed by COAG on 7 December 1992. This statement was based on national consultation by the Commonwealth/State Relations Secretariat (Sullivan, 1996a, pp. 66-7) and was the first step in establishing whole of government development programmes in Aboriginal affairs. It had progressed very little, however, by the November 2000 meeting of COAG which introduced the principle of shared responsibility between the development agency and the client community and also re-iterated the need for inter-governmental cooperation. It was largely out of frustration

with the slow pace of improvement that, in April 2002, COAG announced it would sponsor ten whole of government trial sites throughout the country and in November, ten years after the initial National Commitment, released its National Framework of Principles for Delivering Services to Indigenous Australians (Humpage, 2005)[2]. By any measure, this is extremely slow progress. In the end eight sites were chosen. Work had barely got underway on these trials when, in April 2004, the government announced its intention to introduce whole of government service delivery through mainstream departments and shared responsibility agreements across the board in Indigenous affairs. The representative service coordination structure of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was abolished. The existing governance arrangements for the COAG trials took on this new responsibility while the newly established Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination administered it. The new hierarchy of public administration of whole of government service delivery in Indigenous affairs begins with a Ministerial Task Force (effectively a sub-committee of cabinet), descends to a committee of Australian Public Service (APS) heads of department, the Secretaries Group, devolves from this to a huddle of their Senior Executive Service (SES) management and comes to rest, as far as government is concerned, with the regional Indigenous Coordination Centres, which group Commonwealth government staff from a variety of departments under a single roof and the coordination of a regional manager.

It is clear that this is important activity because of the involvement of serious people from the highest councils in the land and commensurate cost. Yet, if it is to be distinguished in kind from the hanky waving, clacking sticks and bell jingling of a morris dance it must be seen to have an effect, other than to stimulate more dancing. However, there is little evidence that the necessary conceptual and organisational tools are available to the subordinate reaches of the bureaucracy charged with putting policy into effect. Consensus about how to do whole of government service delivery is, so far, largely lacking in Australia. The Connecting Government report was a survey of the potential of a whole of government approach in Australian administration generally, and reached no firm conclusions on whether it was unilaterally desirable, nor how to do it. Uniquely, Australian literature since is remarkably undeveloped. One paper points to the difficulty of using standard evaluation techniques in a whole of government regime (Wilkins, 2002); a graduate student Discussion Paper reports on the experience of bureaucrats in the Dept of Health and Ageing in this area (Hunt, 2005); the APS itself has produced a three-page document called Working Together, (MAC, 2005), which concentrates on inter-departmental task forces and joint committees, and the Australian National Audit Office has addressed the question of appropriate accountability structures by recommending the establishment of quasi-departmental institutions of temporary duration (ANAO, 2003). Although the head of the public service has called for the development of a "culture of collegiality" (Shergold, 2004) rather than structural adaptation as the prerequisite for success, none of the work done to date has addressed the cultural and processural aspects of the bureaucracy as an inhibitor of successful development.

Whole of government service delivery is the flagship of the "quiet revolution" (Gray and Sanders, 2006), the mainstreaming of indigenous programmes into other Commonwealth agencies is the flotilla. Yet, there is a clear tension between these two manifestations of policy, mainstreaming and whole of government, since mainstreaming precisely means fragmenting service delivery among the various

departments and governance jurisdictions responsible for particular aspects of it. Of the two contradictory elements of recent Australian policy, Aboriginal groups tend to embrace whole of government (which has not been delivered) and reject mainstreaming (which has). However, mainstreaming in an intercultural context is not necessarily an unmitigated evil. While it brings indigenous people into existing regimes of administrative rationality, and links them to the career paths of people they will never know, there is nevertheless an advantage in the disciplinary or professional expertise brought to bear when a programme is administered from a department with a single focus. It was one of the disadvantages of ATSIC, and of the Dept of Aboriginal Affairs before it, that it did not have many experts, only generalists. Weighed against this advantage, however, must be the lack of any background in specifically Aboriginal issues in many mainstream agencies.

Positions in the APS are now quite insecure, and consequently highly susceptible to direct political control. This is a deliberate result of policies introduced in the 1980s which mirror similar reviews of public administration in the USA and the UK (Head, 2005, pp. 45-6; du Gay, 2007, pp. 119-24, 145-57). The last major change in indigenous affairs, in 1989/1990 when ATSIC was instituted, was also a time of major changes to the structure of the APS with the progressive introduction of commercial accounting standards for public administration (Potter, 2002), new administrative laws and changes in the internal organisation of the APS itself which culminated in the APS Act 1999 (Woodhouse, 1997, pp. 197-8; Barker, 2007, pp. 124-5, 139-43). The renovation of the public service has led to greater centralisation of power over policy in the office of the minister, greater ministerial control over the public service, and greater reliance by a minister on advice from outside the APS. This was driven by a range of intentions. The need to be more responsive to citizens was certainly one of these, but also, and to some extent as an interpretation of this, the need for public servants to be more responsive to the direct control of ministers was a major concern (Woodhouse, 1997, pp. 197-8; Barker, 2007, pp. 139-43). New processes of accountability were introduced into the public service with the establishment of work level standards and regular formal performance assessment. The end of the accountability line, according to the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) is the responsible minister who, the APSC states, is accountable to the people through the electoral process. The open advertising of senior public service positions, better remuneration and greater flexibility for ministers to remove or redeploy heads of departments (Woodhouse, 1997, p. 197), has led to more volatile public service careerism. Senior public servants are more attuned to direct ministerial control over the formulation and implementation of policy.

As with all systems of organisational complexity, there have been some emergent constellations of power that were not explicitly intended. Most importantly, Australia now has the highest ratio of ministerial advisers to ministers of most comparable countries, at more than 8 to 1. Numbers are difficult to calculate since ministerial staff may not all be advisers in a political sense, yet recent estimates indicate the number of Commonwealth staffers doubled between 1971 and 2001, standing at more than 520 in 2005 (Barker, 2007, p. 126). So, there are now two quite distinct sites of policy production. One is relatively rapid, commensurately ill-considered, and taps directly into ministerial power. This is the line populated by favoured intellectuals and their think tanks, the advisory staff and the minister. The other line, though considerably less sclerotic than in the past, is more cumbersome. It works its way through consensual forums such as COAG,

parliamentary committees, ministerial councils, and bureaucratic meetings leading to position papers and briefings. Working in a context where highly complex and far reaching policy decisions (such as the 2007 take over of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory) are not discussed by Cabinet let alone the Parliament, bureaucrats can become demoralised and confused. They tend to react by retreating into bureaucratic involution where real world Aborigines and real world development programmes become symbolic capital in internal bureaucratic cultural exchanges. This occurs in the interstices, even against the grain, of a rational and instrumental organisational structure.

Organisational culture of bureaucracy

Governmental organisations have a formal distribution of authority reflected in the agency flow-chart. They have formal mission statements elaborated into strategic plans and operationalised through business plans. They have agency policies which promote activities directed through these plans and implemented through the structure with, additionally, requirements for reporting, monitoring, assessment and accountability. In the APS military idiom is frequently borrowed. Staff are “posted” or hold a “post” more often than a position or a job. The job title is often that of an “officer” as in “Research Officer, Publications Officer”, and staff take “leave” rather than go on holidays or take vacations. They are frequently “deployed”. They formulate “strategic interventions”. They assume, without any overt examination, the verbal paraphernalia of the military. Routinely, they set themselves the task of improving indigenous disadvantage in their area of intervention, and routinely they fail to do so, or fail to do so very significantly. Nevertheless, impeccable procedures are followed through standard institutional structures and these allow for reporting that all is well, with the organisation and its officers at least, despite its lack of impact in the world. It is common in Aboriginal circles to attribute this to a lack of care, bad faith or incompetence, but this is unfair and simplistic. If we accept that Aboriginal development programmes have been undertaken for the last 40 years by motivated, skilled and intelligent people in organisations with world “best practice” standards in terms of administrative arrangements, we clearly must look elsewhere for their lack of success.

Field matrix for an ethnography of bureaucracy

Shergold, the effective head of the APS, and the major architect of current changes in indigenous affairs policy, has proposed that reducing bottlenecks and breaking down departmental barriers requires the encouragement of cultural change within the bureaucracy, a culture of collegiality (Shergold, 2004; Shergold, 2005). To an organisational anthropologist, culture is produced through the interoperation of structure and process, both formal and informal. While the head of the APS has said that he wants to encourage a culture of collegiality to break down the silos of public administration, this analysis finds that existing collegialities are precisely the problem since they are inner-directed rather than outward-looking. There is a need for cultural change, but it is one in which bureaucrats begin to see themselves as implicated within their field of endeavour, rather than administering it from without.

The officials charged with Aboriginal development spend their days interacting with each other, producing material for each other, discussing this material with each other. Indeed, they see this as acting upon the subject. In the process of this activity, they create their sociability out of the interplay of their ambitions, aspirations and desires.

These are consistent behaviours and unarticulated values that form an organisation or agency's culture. Newcomers are inducted into the culture as "the way we do things here" through both formal and informal means. Advancement depends to a significant extent on absorption and reflection of the culture, and when employees move on or cross to other agencies one of their first tasks of adjustment is to jettison the old culture and absorb a new one, or, if senior enough, reinstitute the culture they are familiar with. The rationality of bureaucratic process can impinge upon the cultures thus instituted in often unexpected and unmanageable ways. Where formality becomes attenuated or poorly understood in times of restructure, particularly when moving towards greater cross-agency cooperation and coordination in the pursuit of whole-of-government policy, the potential for cultural resistance is great.

The contemporary employment flexibility or lack of security, of the public servants at senior levels exacerbates this. The mobility of officers whose only claim to knowledge is how to do bureaucracy exists in a curious tension, not always productive, with a department claiming sole control of its disciplinary territory, in this case Aboriginal development. So does the tendency to perpetual re-structure that is at least partially related to this mobility. Mobile senior staff carrying with them their particular career attributes, the accretions of their experiences encourage a restructuring around these to maximize their contribution wherever they find themselves. They tend also to re-structure along the lines of their prejudices brought with them from previous placements. They also, if we face the facts, negotiate re-structure for personal strategic reasons and to deal with their competitors. Mobility and general expertise, the possession of good bureaucratic judgment, are more highly valued than either expertise in a field of administration or a particular discipline. Aboriginal people, then, find themselves caught up as integers in equations not only beyond their control, but which are also descriptive of different order of reality, the dominant culture of modernity.

One methodological approach to an ethnography of bureaucracy is to assess the subject with a fieldwork tool, a matrix of significant practices that can be described separately but which are in fact interdependent. Such a field matrix could describe the cultures that emerge from within bureaucratic structures as deriving from the interplay of three significant sets of practices:

- (1) hierarchy and the distribution of authority;
- (2) the control and dissemination of information; and
- (3) and regimes and rituals of accountability, which mediate between both of these practices.

This analysis will deal with these in turn.

Hierarchy, authority and personhood

Notwithstanding, New Public Management rhetoric about the need to model the public service on the commercial sector (Waldegrave, cited in Rowe, 1999, p. 92), the APS is more rigidly hierarchical than any commercial organization can afford to be. The APS takes a technical scientific approach to its personnel, dividing them into three categories, the SES (three-levels), the executive (two-levels), and the APS classifications (six-levels). The director of any entity subject to the Public Service Act is required by regulation to classify all personnel along these lines, and stipulate relative pay scales and conditions[3]. Similarly, each agency is required to describe a set of "competencies"

or work level standards for each classification. This introduces apparent conformity across the APS which is actually misleading. These classifications are much more about status and personhood, and therefore who relates to whom, than about establishing interchangeable and impersonal offices. This is simply because each agency decides for itself what competencies, standards and pay rates apply to their classifications. Though the classifications are standard, in practice their attributes are not. Normally, pay rates will be the same for each classification within a single agency, though not between agencies, but even this may vary. For example, under the exceptional circumstances of the government intervention in northern territory aboriginal communities, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) advertised in September 2007 APS 6 positions at \$114,920 pa, EL1s at \$137,800 pa and EL2s at \$159,470 (*Canberra Times*, 2008). At the same time, DEWR was advertising for an APS6 at \$89,370 and an Assistant Director at EL2 for \$112,250[4]. In another agency, at the same time, the top rate for an APS6 was in the region of \$ 74,214, an EL1 \$ 89,321, and EL2 \$108,125[5].

APS classifications, then, do not reflect standard levels of remuneration. Nor do they require similar types of skills and abilities. Work level standards for each classification are determined by each department or agency. So, it is conceivable that an APS 6 in one agency would be required to perform to the standard of an EL2 in another[6]. In practice, devising work level standards is so time consuming that agencies tend to borrow templates from each other and introduce relative *de facto* conformity by the back door. The work level standards for an organisation consist of a listing of work level characteristics for each classification. The characteristics typically are divided into categories such as:

- knowledge and skills;
- requirement of tasks;
- managing interaction and communication;
- managing information and decision making;
- managing self; and
- educational or specialist skill requirements.

These broad characteristics are broken down into specifics under each heading. They typically begin with quite easily identified requirements at the lower classifications becoming more abstract and vague at the higher reaches. For example, an APS 3 may have to “undertake a range of word processing, spreadsheets and other software application work” as part of their “knowledge and skills” category. The requirements of this type of activity are fairly easy to understand and assess. An EL2, on the other hand, may need to “initiate plans to achieve outcomes in cross-functional projects/work areas” and to “manage [the Agency’s] resources in an equitable, fair and consistent manner”[7].

Consequently, there is a tendency ranging across the ranks of the organisation from emphasis on the ability to perform particular tasks to emphasis on the possession of certain qualities or inherent capabilities. This tendency reaches its highest form of expression in the senior executive leadership capability framework for SES level personnel (www.apsc.gov.au/selc/index.html). This framework embraces five criteria that slot together, according to the graphic that accompanies their description,

like pieces of a jig-saw puzzle (Figure 1). They are Confucian in their conflation of qualities with abilities. The righteous public servant:

- shapes strategic thinking;
- achieves results;
- cultivates productive working relationships;
- communicates with influence; and
- exemplifies personal drive and integrity.

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It is worth contemplating for a moment the amount of workshopping, planning, drafting, checking, tweaking, consensus-building and finally visual designing that has gone into producing this beautiful representation of the ideal of the perfect senior functionary. They are used as selection criteria for employment or promotion opportunities where they serve as a code, the mastery of which identifies the applicant as the “right sort” for the job. Nevertheless, if there is no requirement for consistency in

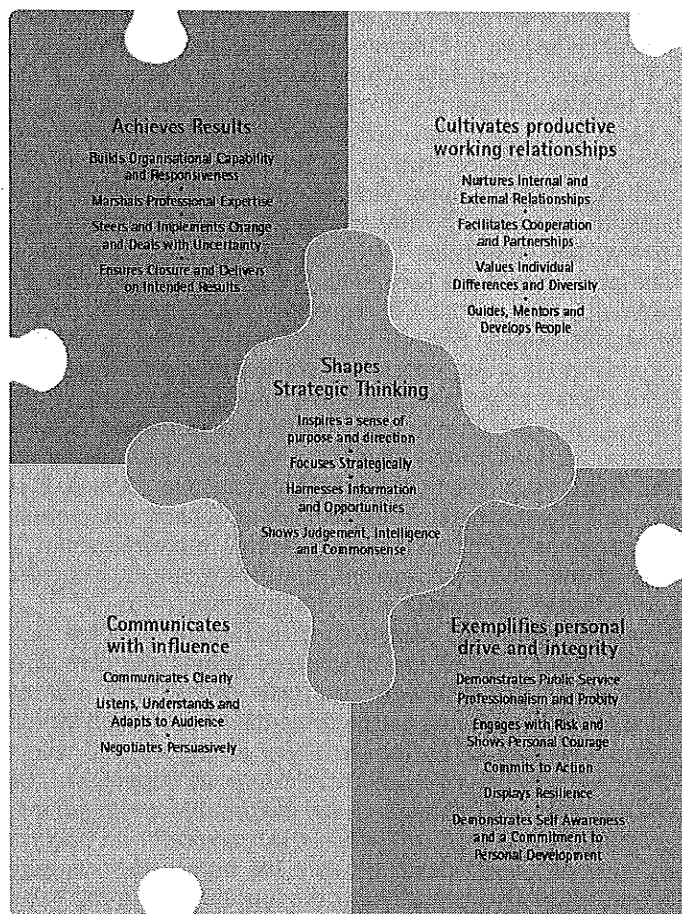


Figure 1.
The senior executive
leadership capability
framework

remuneration and performance for each classification across agencies it is relevant to ask what these classifications are for. They serve precisely to disguise diversity and prescribe relationships. They elide the operational capabilities of an individual into that person's personal characteristics, and establish their status in relation to others both within the organisation, and, just as importantly, across organizations. Rather sadly, they serve to express a person's "worth". Indeed, the link between innate capability, personal worth and job capacity is often made explicit when individuals are referred to in such terms as: "a Three", "not really a Six" or "frankly, I don't see her as an EL1"[8].

Functional status translates to social status not only by classifying what a person "is", but by confining certain types of information to that class of persons. This is the second element in my field matrix for an ethnography of bureaucracy.

Control and dissemination of information

Information is at its freest when shared laterally. When shared upwards, it most commonly takes the form of reports, where it is necessarily structured and filtered, sometimes by the rigid requirement of the form of report. Information is rarely shared downwards, except in the form of bulletins, morale building exhortations, or embedded in directives. It is most commonly shared laterally not because of trust in one's colleagues, but because of mistrust in others. Information proper to the SES, for example, may be very volatile if conveyed to lower ranks, since they are not subject to the same reprisals if it is misused, they do not have the same understanding of nuance or context, and they can blatantly blunder over their superiors' plans. Sharing necessarily undermines authority since possession of information is not simply an attribute of power, but constitutes the powerful in their groupings, the two are inseparable. The group constitutes itself in the act of producing information pertaining to and characterising the group. Consequently, public service officers are only comfortable when SES talks to SES, EL1 to EL1, regardless of technical competence, expertise or experience. It is not uncommon for a senior person requiring technical information from a more junior person to have this filtered through a manager who does not understand it, but is able to retain control of the context. However, the very fact of tight control of information introduces the conditions for its corruption as information. As it circulates among a cohort, several things happen. It suffers some inevitable decay as it is exchanged, in the manner of Chinese whispers. It enters into strategies of competition within and between agencies. It coalesces into "groupthink" resistant to review from above or renewal from below; and it is reinterpreted and reformulated according to the exigencies of the situation.

As information filters down the chain of command and reports pass back up, in both of these directions policy information is wrapped around the bare direction to do something or the report that something has been done. Policy information is the necessary context of why something has occurred/must occur, what attitude to take to it, whether it is at the core or on the periphery of endeavours, who thinks it is important, in short – its quality. Here, information loses its trappings of "the facts" and becomes more susceptible to interpretation, and multiple re-interpretations of the facts. So all information, though here we are particularly concerned with policy information, is transformed as it is filtered down through the bureaucracy, engages with the world beyond, and filters back up through the bureaucracy in the form of reports.

This allows for considerably more manoeuvrability on the part of the persons inhabiting the classifications of the bureaucratic structure than the organizational chart envisages. As Lipsky says, street level bureaucrats operate in an environment of unlimited demand which, by definition, is met with limited resources. They therefore are always in the position to influence allocation whatever the constraints placed upon them by policy (Lipsky, 1980). Nor are these constraints as strong as they seem since. Referring once more to Mosse (2004, pp. 650-1), the contested political nature of policy formation itself inevitably means its verbal expression is vague and ambiguous as a result of compromises. It is therefore open to interpretation and re-interpretation. The apparently hard accountability within the bureaucracy softens at this point, since what was intended, what was achieved, at what cost and to whose credit, is subject to review and revision in the reporting process. Accountability is the third element of my field matrix for an ethnography of bureaucracy.

Accountability

The manipulation of information as it flows through the system is structured by, and informs, the system of accountability, broadly as the need to render an account and more narrowly as the need to account for oneself to another person or body. A simple definition of accountability is:

[...] a relationship in which one party, the holder of accountability, has the right to seek information about, to investigate and to scrutinise the actions of another party, the giver of accountability (Mulgan, 2002, p. 3).

But this is too simple, not only because it assumes simple relationships of hierarchy and authority that this paper has suggested are far more complex, but mainly because any situation has a number of such "right holders" who may demand an account, and the account may be in many forms and subject to many conditions. So, an extended concept of accountability is required. Accountability is the activity of rendering an account within a group and between groups so that the actors negotiate their identity, obligations and commitments in relation to each other.

Accountability processes bring together the two other elements of my matrix by responding to the institutional hierarchy through the manipulation of information in reports. While accountability in society at large is continual, contextual and reciprocal, in the APS it is unilinear and limited to formal reports. Bureaucratic regimes of accountability are reflexive. Those taking account must also render account. Through taking account and rendering account the cultures of the public service interact formally with external organisations such as those in the Aboriginal community sector. This is not, however, an equal exchange. The differentials in power are reflected in differences of attention. Lacking much intimate engagement with community sector personnel, still less the communities they serve, the bureaucracy looks inward. Feeding itself, it requires an unnecessarily detailed multiplicity of reports to exchange among its members and to protect them in their own matrices of accountability. Performance reporting links the various rungs of the APS to the outside world. Policy implementation is not always carried out by street level bureaucrats, very often it is contracted to community sector or commercial organisations. It is almost exclusively delivered at the local level by Aboriginal community controlled organisations. For these organisations, community activity is the focus of their endeavour. For the Aboriginal affairs functionary, it is the

report of the community activity that is the focus. This is the source of continual tension in the relationship between the public and community sectors. It is of vital importance to the wellbeing of the soul of the bureaucrat to control the elements of the report – self-esteem, advancement, relations within the culture, their personhood, depends upon it. Hence, community organisations are swamped with reporting at the expense of doing (Sullivan, 2008).

Complexity in accountability increases when cooperation is required across agencies. Multiple lines of authority or influence are tied to control over resources and levels of responsibility for the results of their rational application. No one in a government agency is happy about redirecting “their” resources to another’s project; even less so when they may be required to share responsibility without commensurate control. Despite formal positions of authority, the power to direct any individual or section is attenuated by the subordinates’ power to resist, resile or reinterpret. Conflicting aims and needs come into play as well as conflicting assessments of what is required. Any individual is responsive to a range of motivating forces, positive or negative. Directing an individual to take risk without protection for failure produces resistance, although the person directing may not be able to credibly offer such a guarantee. A common means of dealing with multiple pressures is to re-interpret the goal such that it seems to meet all requirements. So, a clear intention at one level of the organisation is implemented in an unforeseen manner at another. This can often be a benign humanisation of policy meeting practical contingencies where scarce time and resources allows the implementers substantial discretion (Lipsky, 1980). (Re)-interpretation by street-level bureaucrats may require a raft of contracted enablers intervening to skill up bureaucrats in understanding and implementing policy, which itself, because policy is necessarily often expressed in generalisations, can be creative (Hill, 2003). Alternatively, bureaucratic implementers may be partial, prejudiced and coercive, reinstating social divisions by their “commonsense” interpretations about who the policy should really benefit (Rowe, 1999). Mosse points out that policy is necessarily vaguely formulated because of the political alchemy of the crucible it is forged within, and because generality is required in order to cover the diversity of implementation agents (Mosse, 2004, pp. 650-1). Often, the least powerful in such an interaction is the client, leaving the service personnel able to sign off on an achievement, variously reinterpreted at all levels, while the client is no better off.

The activity of continual audit is not practical but cultural; it reflects and mediates relations of authority within a work-centre, and between that group and wider political alignments. In doing so, audit activity constructs and articulates the nature of the group – who we essentially are, our values, our aims, which achievements we consider central to our social reproduction and which are peripheral. Audit differentiates activity from simple non-active doing. In this way audit, that is the counting, collating, presenting and representing of our activities, takes the place of the myth and ritual we observe in non-modern societies. Indeed, it is mythic and ritualistic (Strathern, 2000). The need for internal accountability drives demands on development NGOs who are required to produce frequent and detailed reports as fodder for the bureaucratic beast as it expands, involutes and deals more and more with itself and its representations of the world, leaving the development implementers to fail on its behalf.

Conclusion

Bureaucrats share common cultures created by the structure and the processes of the organisation of administration itself. This is above all, according to Weber, a culture of

practical rationality (Whimster, 2004, pp. 245-56; Sullivan 1996a, pp. 43-70). One of its foundational cultural assumptions is that the world responds best to intervention by hierarchical systems of ordered authority and responsibility. Everything can be measured or assessed, and, being accounted for, administered and controlled. It is a culture that increasingly spreads into every facet of life, instituting Power's (1997) audit society, visiting modernity upon the natives. Development intervention in Aboriginal communities requires cooperation between politicians, government agencies, Aboriginal NGOs and the communities themselves. Culture conflicts across agencies, and between government agencies and NGOs, conflicts that arise from the interaction of hierarchy, information flows and accountability, are a significant barrier to service delivery and community development. Organisational cultures are not homogenous, they are interleaved with wider cultural processes, and they harbour schisms, sub-strata, rebellion and revisionism within. More yet, in Aboriginal affairs they interact with cultural processes developed far from the modernist bureaucratic imagination. Development, then, occurs within a complex social field. It is not an intercultural endeavour in the sense of something that occurs "between" cultures, it is intercultural in the sense of something that occurs "among" actors of different provenance (Merlan, 2005, pp. 168-70).

The solution to bureaucratic involution has been proposed by the head of the public service as encouraging a culture of collegiality within a whole of government policy framework (Shergold, 2004). Whole of government policy envisages forging linkages across the silos of government agencies. However, this emphasis is misplaced. We think of silos as typically tall and isolated. It is their height rather than their isolation we should turn our attention to. Linkages at the local level can be forged more effectively if there is also a corresponding reduction in the length of the chain of command. The greater the levels, the more distance between the ground and the clouds, the more opportunity is given for ritualistic, inner-directed, morris dance behaviour. Regionalisation of policy would both shorten the chain and widen its scope so that, at the least, bureaucratically induced cultural activity would occur among those who share a community of interest.

Notes

1. Mosse's propositions are abbreviated and summarised here. In the paper, "Is good policy unimplementable?" (Mosse, 2004) they are elaborated and illustrated with case material. The paper prefigures his book, *Cultivating Development* (Mosse, 2005) where it is reproduced as the introduction and the case material makes up the following chapters in greater detail.
2. The difference in terminology between these two declarations denotes a significant shift in political alignments over the ten year period between them, if not in policy itself. The use of the word "Aboriginal peoples" in the first declaration, takes a position within international human rights debates (see Sullivan, 1996b). The use of "Indigenous Australians" in the second declaration is more conservative and an indication of how even apparently banal bureaucratic procedures are labeled with sensitivity to political nuance.
3. Public Service Classification Rules 2000 made under Subsection 23(1) of the Public Service Act 1999.
4. These are package figures, they include employer superannuation contribution and performance bonus. Since superannuation contribution is likely to be paid at the same rate within this agency we can assume the source of the difference is in the performance bonus.

5. Includes approximation of 15 per cent employer superannuation contribution. This agency does not pay performance bonus at these levels.
6. In fact, this is a real problem in Indigenous Coordination Centres where personnel from different departments, applying different pay rates and standards of seniority to the same classifications, are required to work together under a single manager.
7. To protect the confidentiality of employees the agency that applies these work level standards has not been identified.
8. For example, a recent APSC e-mail offered "an exciting opportunity for you as an EL2 to attend an SES breakfast". Apparently undersubscribed by the SES personnel it was intended for, the registration form required tick box selection of one of the three SES band levels. Whether this was to ensure integration or separation is unclear.

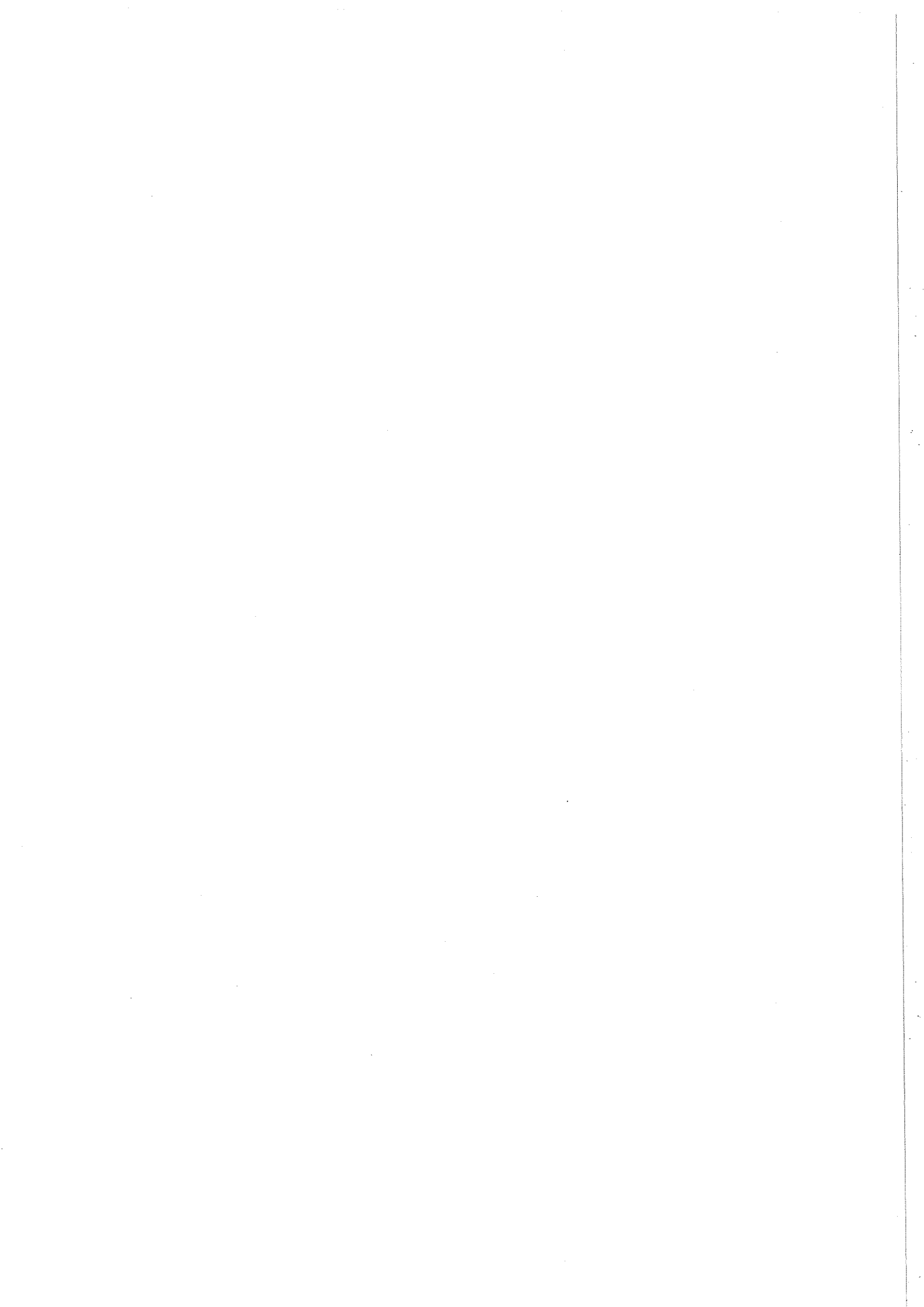
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About the author

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