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Kafkaesque power and bureaucracy

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The metaphor of Kafkaesque bureaucracy has attracted the imagination of organization theorists for decades. While the critical and metaphorical approach offers vibrant insights about organizing, it has not been complemented by systematic empirical analysis. We take a step in that direction and conduct an inductive study of how people experience and deal with the Kafkaesque bureaucracy. We focus on the Kafkaesque organization as constructed in process and practice by those who experience its effects as citizens and clients. Data uncovered three major affordances of Kafkaesque bureaucracy: inactiveness, helplessness and meaninglessness. These combine in a mutually debilitating configuration that constitutes the Kafkaesque bureaucracy as an effortful everyday accomplishment.

Keywords: Kafka; organization; Kafkaesque organization; bureaucracy; vicious circle

Introduction

Max Weber (1864–1920) and Franz Kafka (1883–1924) were contemporaries. Each was fascinated by the industrial modernity of their times, and each in their own way had a deep understanding of bureaucracy. Kafka and Weber are among the most important twentieth-century writers on bureaucracy and organization. Despite these parallels, on most fronts the two are both different and similar – one was a successful academic, prolific writer and groundbreaking sociologist, albeit riven by neuroses, while the other was a novelist and short story writer who never saw success in his own lifetime but who was also depressive and sickly. Further, though each was concerned with bureaucracy, they approached the matter from radically different perspectives. While Weber suggests the inevitability of the technical superiority of bureaucratic forms and describes the attendant ‘iron cage’ that it produces, Kafka spoke from within this cage, telling dark and enigmatic stories of the ironic futility of bureaucratic life. While Weber told us about bureaucracy’s rationality, Kafka led us through its dark labyrinth. While Weber wrote about the impersonality of bureaucracy, Kafka vividly evoked the lived experience of its supplicants being constantly confounded by its machinations. In terms of the formal

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study of organizations, Weber's influence is uncontestedly significant. Organization studies as a discipline has a great debt to Weber and any intellectual discussion of organization tends to draw, either directly or indirectly on his ideas (Clegg 1990). This legacy has seen organizational scholars take as central concerns issues of power and authority, specialization and hierarchy, control and decision-making, rationality and rationalization and so forth – all themes that emanate from Weber's work.

In contrast to Weber, despite Kafka's influence in literary and social theory and his position as a seminal postmodern figure, he has been less often used by organization theory. Born as the son of a wealthy Prague businessman and spending most of his short adult life working in the Workers Accident Insurance Bureau in Prague, Kafka was an insider to the workings of bureaucracy. Kafka's fictional work preceded contemporary criticism of bureaucracy from management thinkers. While spending his days as an insurance clerk, at night Kafka became a compulsive writer. Part of Kafka's work focused on the nature of bureaucratic organization, featured in novels such as *The Trial* and *The Castle* (Kafka 1999, 2000), literary works that, posthumously, elevated their author to an exalted status not only in the Western literary canon (Bloom 1994, 2003) but also led Wasserman (2001) to count him as a 'key industrial reformer'.

Kafka's bureaucracy, unlike Weber's ideal type, is not one formed by rationality into an iron cage but is cast from irony, in which the expectation of rationality is confounded at every turn by the experience of being in organizations. In novels such as *The Trial* and *The Castle*, the reader is transported into the life of the character K and his experience of bureaucracy. In confronting legal (*The Trial*) and government (*The Castle*) organizations, K unfalteringly proceeds, almost as an 'ideal typist' (Clegg 1975), with the expectation that these organizations will behave in a way consistent with an orderly, predictable and rational system of rules and regulations mediated through a rigid organization of offices. He is seduced by the rational promise of bureaucracy. K's experience, however, is far from what he expects (although arguably he never gives up on his expectations). As Zizek (2001, p. 64) suggests of Kafka's *Castle*, it is 'sublime and majestic when first seen from afar, but then changing into a "paradise of filth", a gigantic pile of shit, as soon as one actually enters the city'. K's experience with bureaucracy is one that is, as the term goes, Kafkaesque – that is to say that it is fuelled by contradiction, irony, despair and futility, characterized by a dark enigmatic shadow cast such that nothing is ever what it seems to be yet what it might actually be is never revealed. Kafka offers an incisive perspective on modern society, a perspective from the dirty inside that asks troublesome questions about the effects of bureaucracy and rationality as the basis for modern society: a society with no promise of a better life nor dream of utopia to sustain it. Here, the ideal type of bureaucracy exists as a false and catastrophic promise, a delusion of reason, 'a symbol of K.'s doomed search for order through a "permanent resolution" of his case ... related to the modern desire for order ... for both philosophical and political frameworks that provide narratives or certainty' (Smith 2008, p. 8).

Based on Kafka's critical approach to bureaucracy, the adjective 'Kafkaesque' gained use as a way to describe a condition in which those subject to bureaucracy as citizens or clients typically feel trapped in a vicious circle created by bureaucratic rules that they can neither understand nor escape (Garud and Kumaraswamy 2005). As Warner (2007) explains, the adjective is used to describe dysfunctional encounters with bureaucracies. Kafkaesque bureaucracy thus represents a corruption of an organizational form that, in Weberian theory, should constitute a moral project (du Gay 2005).

While Kafkaesque bureaucracy has largely escaped systematic empirical scrutiny, despite the obvious centrality of its connections with organization studies, exceptions include work by Hodson and his co-authors (see Hodson, Martin *et al.* 2013, Hodson, Roscigno *et al.* 2013). Kafka's relation to power, as Balazs (2015, note 7, p. 101) explains, has been explored in the politics literature in terms that clearly connect with the concerns of organization studies, most explicitly in Bennett (1991), Corbella (2007) and Arneson (1988), more generally in Speirs and Sandberg (1997), Dodd (2002), and Zilcosky (2002). The most obvious point of reference is Foucault's (1977) analysis of the panopticon:

Not surprisingly, it is the Foucauldian approach that has been found the most congenial one to the conception and atmosphere of the novel ... One of Foucault's central concerns was the ubiquity of power, captured by the image of the Panopticon. There is indeed much gazing, observing, supervising in *The Castle*. For K., constant exposure to the eyes of others and the lack of a private sphere in the school where he is given a job as a janitor and is supposed to live, makes even the reader feel uncomfortable, sometimes claustrophobic. Another characteristically Foucauldian topic is the link between sexuality and power (Arneson 1988, Burke 1950), and Kafka does indeed strike, even shock, us by making it clear that the relation between castle and village is a twofold one in which the exclusively male officials provide administration for the village which in return provides female sexual services. This appears utterly perverse, for something inherently bad (administration with no purpose) is paid for by something inherently evil (making love without love and by order). Further, the ubiquity and all-pervasiveness of power in the Foucauldian perspective is echoed in the novel by the repeated omnipresence, omnicompetence, infallibility of The Castle authorities; yet, as Foucault also notes, power needs the free submission of its subjects ... it flows from them, to the point that it not only can endure their revolts but essentially feeds on them. As Bennett observes, *The Castle* is a timeless place, it has pre-modern and modern, feudal-familial and highly rationalized bureaucratic features, emphasizing the unchanging essence of power in every human society, as asserted by Foucault's historically so diverse studies. (Balazs 2015, p. 89, Bennett 1991)

The opportunities for organization studies to forge further links with Kafka are manifold. Franz Kafka's writings on bureaucracy afford a penetrating perspective on organizational life, one that is no less prescient today than was the case when Kafka was writing in the early twentieth century. Many critics would agree with Davis and Cobb (2010, p. 40) when they point out, 'Kafka is still the greatest chronicler of life in a bureaucracy'. In *The Castle*, K may be regarded as the quintessential Weickian (1995) sensemaker, constantly seeking to interpret the inscrutability, equivocality and confounding non-sense he finds himself mired in. Sensemaking practice is at the core of K's quest for interpretive understanding.

This study contributes to the Kafka canon not just a metaphor but with empirical work on the Kafkaesque organization as a set of practices. Grounded in first-hand individual experiences with bureaucracies, we approached the contents of Kafkaesque interactions inductively, with the goal of developing a close understanding of how people report the main features characterizing Kafkaesque experiences and what these descriptions tell us about the processes and practices making up Kafkaesque organization for citizens and clients.

Bureaucratic organization is as much one of the key universals of organization theory (Pugh and Hickson 1976) as Kafka is a staple of the modern literary consciousness. In literary terms, this is one of the reasons for the potential reach and diffusion of Kafkaesque notions of organizing and their relevance as an object of

study, as his novels can be found in translation in just about every corner of the world. The number of interpretations and studies based on Kafka's works is significant: indeed, the issues that Kafka explored remain at the heart of the debate about organizational society. The field of organizational theory has not excluded itself from this debate. With the use of literary sources (Czarniawska-Joerges and de Monthoux 1994, Rhodes 2001) in organization studies relating Kafka and his writings on bureaucracy to contemporary research is apposite. Having done so, Warner (2007) defends the view that Kafka depicted the reality of bureaucratic organizing rather than producing a surreal commentary in which people were trapped by the rituals, routines and rules of bureaucracy. Lost in a mechanism that they cannot comprehend, they experience senselessness, disorientation and helplessness, lacking any clear course of action with which to escape perceived injustice, organizational perversity, personal disorientation and power abuse.

Weber was not unaware of the pitfalls caused by human behaviour in a bureaucratic setting; rather, he proposed an ideal type model that condensed the features of actually occurring bureaucracies into an artificially accentuated model. Objective analysts could use such a model as a forensic tool for actual investigations. For Weber, being a bureaucrat is a vocation, one that demands an exemplary professional ethic. Weber's focus is concentrated on the mechanics and working of bureaucracy from the insider point of view of the ideal typical bureaucrat; Kafka looks at the bureaucratic subject from the experience of the outsider, from the perspective of the subject; his interest is in the phenomenology of power rather than issues of governance. Where Weber sees a character-forming ethic Kafka sees only doorkeepers, both in *The Trial* and in *The Castle*. For example,

I'm powerful. And I'm only the lowliest of all the doormen. But there's a doorkeeper for each of the rooms and each of them is more powerful than the last. It's more than I can stand just to look at the third one. (Kafka 2003, p. 153)

While for Weber, the bureaucracy is typified by its legal rationality for Kafka's outsiders the bureaucracy appears as a hegemon that is surrounded by myth and superstition. The clients and citizens that a Weberian bureaucracy deals with are cases to be treated in terms of the merits of their case, as adjudged against the rules, while for Kafka (2003, p. 46), these rules are far more parochial rather than universal: the visitor at the door of the castle is a 'stranger, a superfluous person getting in everyone's way, a man who is always causing trouble', rather than a client to be treated by a set of universal rules. These rules, in the Weberian bureaucracy, are codified and accessible in the bureau; in Kafka (2003, p. 161), even lowly bureaucrats dare not speak to anyone for fear of losing their job 'through some kind of unintentional infringement of unknown rules'. In a rational legal bureaucracy, authority is embedded in the rules and their sense of binding obligation; they serve no one in particular and everyone in general while in Kafka (2003), there are inscrutable, invisible, unknowable ultimate personal sources of authority. Finally, Weber's bureaucratic rules confer rights and obligations equally on the subjects of and those subject to bureaucracy; in Kafka, those subject to bureaucracy are reduced to supplicants:

'You're under arrest, aren't you.' 'But how can I be under arrest? And how come it's like this?' 'Now you're starting again,' said the policeman, dipping a piece of buttered bread in the honeypot. 'We don't answer questions like that.' 'You will have to answer them,' said K. 'Here are my identification papers, now show me yours and I

certainly want to see the arrest warrant.’ ‘Oh, my God!’ said the policeman. ‘In a position like yours, and you think you can start giving orders, do you?’ (Kafka 2003, p. 4)

In a nutshell, Weber offers an elite and informed view of the characteristics of bureaucracy as a moral project for those who conduct it while Kafka provides a street-level view (literally, in *The Castle*) of what it means to be an outsider, someone without appropriate sensemaking procedures with which to deal with its rules and routines. These outsider experiences contribute microfoundations as grounds from which to build theory. We will explore the practical nature of Kafkaesque bureaucracy. Studying experience of Kafkaesque bureaucracy as practice rather than as metaphor informs organization studies about the perceptions of microprocesses that create obstacles to change. Following Masuch (1985, p. 19), we can regard these perceptions as indicators of ‘suboptimality ... based on a stable vicious circle’.

Kafka, bureaucracy and organization

Research questions

Because references to the Kafkaesque organization are often metaphorical, we defined as our goal the study of actual, lived experiences with bureaucracies that, from the perspective of the client, contained some Kafkaesque component. Our research interests led us to ask simple questions: What are the attributes (cognitive, socio-material, emotional) of close encounters with bureaucracy? Why and how do these types of encounter unfold and with what consequences? In cases where these encounters correspond to organizational vicious circularity, what are the microfoundations of the bureaucratic vicious circle?

The research was conducted in Portugal during the deep economic and social crisis shaking Southern Europe since the advent of the Euro crisis in 2009. Debt became a burden as a result of a decade of low interest rates fuelling debt in both households and the financial sector. As the crisis deepened, unemployment and hardship increased the welfare bill, which deepened state expenditures just as tax receipts became shallower as a consequence of business recession and customers unable to access credit as financial institutions restricted lending in the face of their escalating debts. With the state expending more and receiving less, Portugal found itself in a similar position to other southern European states, a position that from the viewpoint of key European institutions such as the European Central Bank required immediate austerity. In such a climate, with the pressing need for austerity being demanded at every turn, the organizational processes of bureaucracy became increasingly questioned by those subject to them, especially as the rhetoric of market efficiency intensified. There is a need to understand how and what clients perceive as Kafkaesque in public and private sector bureaucracies’ service in these austere times.

Method

To answer our research questions, we conducted an inductive analysis of the topic. As the main data collection technique, we used retrospective interviewing (Langley 2009), asking our informants to reflect upon their close encounters with

'Kafkaesque' bureaucracy. We interviewed only those respondents that were able to identify what the notion meant in terms that signified bureaucratic dysfunctionality from the client perspective. Experiences were thus reported according to the informant's perspective, following an introductory line of inquiry: Can you recall for us any experience that you have had that revealed this negative side of the bureaucracy and its impact on you?

Data collection and analysis occurred via *in vivo* interviewing and followed the general precepts advanced by the Gioia methodology (Gioia *et al.* 2012). As a qualitative study, it was oriented towards discovery, not verification, as it intended to explore the essence of direct, first-hand experience rather than examining if it corresponded with some previously formed hypothesis. The main goal of the study was thus to explore the phenomenology of encounters deemed Kafkaesque so as to understand the process better by studying it from an external perspective. With this aim, our interviewees were given time to describe and reflect on their experience, as well as to share and advocate their ideas and points of view regarding the whole process through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions (Appendix 1). Data were sorted and included and excluded by discussion among the authors as trained organization scientists to overcome one potential limitation of the research method: the risk of co-created subjectivities and interpretations by interviewer and respondent (Ambert *et al.* 1995). Multiple discussion between multiple authors enhanced validity procedures, mitigating this limitation (some authors were closer and others more distant from the field process; see Langley 2009). Data collection followed a snowball sampling procedure (Goodman 1961): at the end of each interview, with the goal of randomizing the sample, the respondent was asked to help us identify a new informant that might be able to describe some further bureaucratic encounters.

Sample and procedures

We gathered data from 18 interviews. An initial e-mail, Facebook, mobile phone or personal contact, explaining the request and context of the proposed interview, preceded data collection. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, in a location selected by the interviewees, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (for technical reasons, one interview was not recorded; abundant notes were taken in real time). Respondents (half of them female) had experienced some situation labelled as 'Kafkaesque' as clients of public sector bureaucracies. Their age ranged from 17 to 77 (mean: 32). They represented a variety of professional activities in both the private and public sectors, including students and teachers, engineers and homemakers, psychologists and physicians. The sample was purposefully diverse, as we were interested in reaching a variety of experiences covering multiple facets of a Kafkaesque encounter.

Defining the sample size

As is usual in grounded theorizing (Charmaz 2006), the decision about the number of interviews to conduct was contingent on the progress of the interviews. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) observed, making theory-based judgments about saturation is not an exercise in objectivity (see also Morse 1995, Bowen 2008). It is theoretically based confidence in the saturation of the relevant categories that defines

the final number of interviews (Charmaz 2006). One withdraws from the field as the sense of returns become increasingly diminishing, when one finds that data are not disconfirming the emergent hypotheses; hence, as a sense of saturation emerged in collecting the data, when novelty in findings was greatly diminished, the decision was made to withdraw from the field and concentrate on analysis of the data collected. As major themes became apparent through a process of constant case-by-case comparison of the data, the inductive process stabilized on emergent first-order categories that seemed best to capture the variance and similarities in the data.

Data sorting and analysis

Semiotic clustering (Feldman 1995) was used to organize the data and build conceptual meaning. Key features characterizing a phenomenon of interest were identified through a three-step procedure. The first step consisted of identifying the features of the topic denoted by interviewees (Feldman 1995). These were then arranged tentatively in clusters of similarity and distinction. On the basis of what were now-emergent clusters, concepts were grouped with the relations between them leading to theoretical clustering on the basis of similarities, complementarities, paradoxes, oppositions or other forms of conceptual sensemaking. The process of research moved from the subjects' first-order data to second-order constructs, guided by conceptual meaning. These constructs resulted in a smaller number of concepts, as the first categories were organized into encompassing thematic categories. Finally, third-order abstract concepts resulted from further clustering of the concepts presented in the second-order column, providing a deeper characterization of the first-order data in meanings that formed the essential structure of the explanation.

In this type of analysis, the main assumption is that words on the surface, the signs of discourse, express a deep structure (Feldman 1995). Making this underlying structure explicit is thus the main goal, achieved by reducing a significant quantity of superficial information to its essential, non-visible and abstract deep core. These methodological steps are usually presented in a three-column figure, in order to facilitate ease of explanation of the process they subsume (Feldman 1995), allowing the emergence of relationships and characteristics that were not explicitly presented by informants but that formed an underlying 'grammar' for them. Information not initially accessible in the direct data can thus be uncovered when investigating the common themes across a process (Clark *et al.* 2010), as successive layers of meaning are articulated (Manning 1987) and transformed into a deeper, more abstract and encompassing conceptual order. During the process, analysis travels between the data, emergent concepts and the literature, in order to develop a set of theoretical ideas.

Findings

Original data (about 239 pages of outsider interview transcripts, approximately 71,758 words) were reduced to ten categories directly related to the interview data. These categories, represented in the left side of Figure 1, referred to a diversity of topics. A first group of categories synthesized the cognitions elicited by the Kafkaesque experience. It included the following aspects: the notion that the system produces a state of ignorance; that it is meaningless for an outsider; that it is

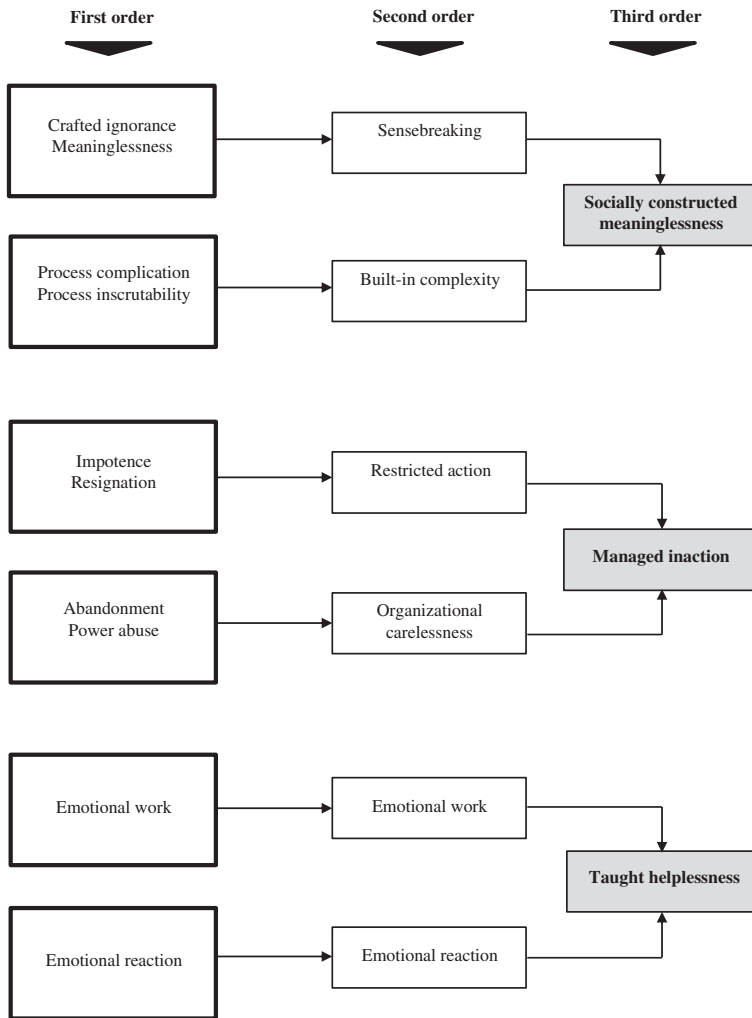


Figure 1. Data clustering and the resulting essence of a Kafkaesque experience.

unnecessarily complicated; that it is inscrutable. A second group of categories explained behavioural responses: the system produces restrictions to action; it stimulates a state of resignation in the face of its actions; people consider themselves abandoned by the system; it treats them in a careless, non-regarding manner. Finally, people mentioned emotionality: the way they responded emotionally on some occasions and their failure to do so in other occasions. Respondents explicitly mentioned all these points. Sorting these emergent concepts consisted in finding the best label and definition of what the interviewees mentioned. At this stage, the interpretive effort was still limited, but we were already travelling back and forth between the data and the emerging categories in order to arrange data in a conceptually elegant, but theoretically rigorous and meaningful way. First-order concepts are present in Appendix 2, together with illustrative quotes extracted from the interviews.

These data were subsequently organized into broader categories constructed to represent thematic consistency; in this, we generated second-order themes. The second step involved an element of analytic interpretation, in the sense that these more encompassing labels reflected a conceptual order that was not directly offered by the participants but that reorganized their existential concerns in a more reflexive set of categories, leading to the centre columns of Figure 1. We interpreted the informants as telling us that their experiences of bureaucracy were characterized by a lack of meaning or sensebreaking, conforming to representations of Kafkaesque organization. In a classic formulation, they experience something going on but they do not know what it is (Dylan 1965). Experiencing a lack of meaning, they regarded the organization as creating a form of purposeful complexity that restricted action and confounded understanding. The routines of the Kafkaesque organization were seen as careless; impersonality was interpreted as a lack of care. Dealing with this lack of regard involved both emotional work and emotional reaction. Hence, responding to the perception of a Kafkaesque organization entailed cognitive, behavioural and emotional responses by those subjected to it as clients.

These categories of intermediate conceptual abstractness led to the development of three final third-order themes. Third-order components signify the Kafkaesque organization as an active, purposeful social construction rather than as an organizational residue that resulted from the organization being unmanaged, its actions accidental and undesired, and their angst unexpected and unexplained. Hence, our informants regarded themselves as victims of organizational actions and inactions designed to paralyse outsiders, a paralysis partly achieved through the organizational construction of meaninglessness. Finally, the Kafkaesque organization is a product of emotions, channelling emotional work, offering opportunities for people to vent their frustration, in the process of making sense of the seemingly senseless; they end up naturalizing the attributes of the Kafkaesque organization as essential features of bureaucracy. We explain the different interpretative levels next.

Meaninglessness: meaning work in Kafkaesque organizing

Interacting with a Kafkaesque organization is cognitively challenging: it does not make any sense how the process was done ‘as one informant explained’. It involves intense attempts at understanding apparently meaningless actions in a struggle to produce meaning (Benford and Snow 2000). Our informants mentioned two main cognitive difficulties raised by the interactions they described: (1) sensebreaking and (2) built-in complexity. Sensebreaking represents the perception that the organization was actively blocking their attempts at comprehension. Sensebreaking, it was felt, was promoted by a degree of complexity that was a product of the organization’s ongoing design. Built-in complexity made the system inscrutable and difficult to understand.

Sensebreaking

Sensebreaking, understood as the blocking of meaning (Mantere *et al.* 2012), resulted from respondents’ ignorance and confusion. On the part of our respondents, information about organizational processes was limited and the functioning of the system was seen as involving an element of uncertainty and surprise regarding its outcomes, as well as frustration at barriers to sensemaking. Every

interviewee mentioned these processes. In different ways, lack of understanding was a constant in the episodes documented.

Making contact with the Kafkaesque organization seems to be akin to entering *terra incognita*, an organizational territory where the habitual rules of sensemaking are suspended and sense is broken and constantly challenged. Informants found sensemaking impossible when they explained, ‘I don’t understand the reason for this formality (...). I don’t understand’ or ‘The request was denied (...) without any explanation about the reason for refusing it’. People were confronted with decisions that lacked explanation, with processes that unfolded in mysterious ways for which explanation is refused, making sensemaking in terms other than common vocabularies of motive (Mills 1940) about ‘red tape’ a virtual impossibility.

Built-in complexity

In addition to the lack of explanation, our informants considered the level of complexity developed by the bureaucratic organizations they encountered as puzzling. The system, as one informant reported, is ‘unable to achieve something that is apparently simple in other places’. As a result, trying to understand organizational processes was like fighting a massive and mysterious machine; as another informant put it, ‘people feel very small’ in front of the big organizational machinery. Attempts to penetrate the nature of the ‘machine’ were condemned to failure, as Kafka would have predicted and as one of our informants reported: ‘Since the beginning, it was impossible to reach the Director’. That everyday interpretations are reminiscent of *The Castle* is possibly more than mere coincidence.

The trope of *The Castle* is well established; it captures a representative experience of our respondents and many others as well. Bureaucratic systems are sometimes both overly complex and also too opaque to be understood (Ballas and Tsoukas 2004). It is in this sense that we describe their complexity as *built-in* to their design – a carefully woven construction, a product of vested interest, tradition and mutual adjustment to the status quo. The complexity of a large bureaucratic apparatus protects its incumbents and ensures that its work is hidden from meaningful external scrutiny.

Inaction: practice work in Kafkaesque organizing

The construct of the Kafkaesque organization restricts individual behavioural options by socializing clients in their respective lack of agency, subjecting them to reminders of their impotence, inviting them to give up any attempts to persuade the organization to be responsive to what they want and need when and how they express these desires: ‘There is nothing to do’ one informant explained. Kafkaesque organizations can actually be seen as actively training people to feel impotent in the face of their masterly incapacity to provide satisfaction. In part, this is achieved through sensebreaking and complexity but is also translated into active behavioural restrictions. Organizational carelessness transmits a perception of individual abandonment that renders further attempts towards action futile and thus less likely. The Kafkaesque organization, in summary, as clients experience it, reduces the sense of agency of outsiders; it creates a perception of disempowerment via carelessness, leading to inaction.

Restrictions to action

Significant restrictions to action characterize the Kafkaesque organization. People are often forced to take a multiplicity of steps and to follow a strict bureaucratic path to be able to reach their goals. Nonetheless, the notion that they lack the means to solve problems, even when the complex steps are followed, is frequent, which convinces people that their efforts will not necessarily lead to successful accomplishment. As one of our informants described, 'Maybe we could have continued arguing with the woman, but we left already tired of the entire situation'. Restrictions on their action led respondents to desist because of 'tiredness, exhaustion or ignorance', as one of them pointed out. Barriers to knowledge and action were associated with our interviewees' predominant perception: the scarcity of information about the process they were embroiled in severely constrained available behavioural options and transmitted an impression of organizational carelessness.

Organizational carelessness

The sensebreaking experience and the lack of organizational support produced paralysing effects. Organizational scholars have mentioned the importance of care for virtuous leadership (Cameron and Winn 2012, Rego *et al.* 2012), something these organizations failed to express. The obligation to follow a rigid path, in order to solve one's situation without guarantees of success, narrowed perceptions of action possibilities sympathetic to one's circumstances and neutralized realistic attempts to open alternative behavioural options. The result was behavioural paralysis or inaction. The lack of organizational care was seen as expressing a paucity of interest in individual problems and of a limited capacity for response from the organization via its employees as reflected in quotes such as 'I have nothing to do with it' or 'That is not my job', typical formulae of bureaucratic dysfunction and disdain.

Successively being rerouted inside the organization seemed senseless and useless to interviewees, creating perceptions of the organization on their part as lacking a capacity for attention, rigour, support and care. Respondents felt powerless in the face of such a system and considered their powerlessness aggravated by the abuse of power by employees. A key dimension of the Kafkaesque bureaucracy, as represented by its users, was that the unknown internal rules, rather than the interests of the public, guide its operations at large. The organization is not genuinely oriented to open possibilities of action but rather seeks to close them down, creating rigid bureaucratic ways that the public knows so well, a typical organizational response that communicates lack of service personalization and minor interest for the user.

The organization's response ultimately depends upon the people who have authority: in the eyes of our respondents, authorities are less professional Weberian bureaucrats than petty tyrants who give bureaucracy its bad name. Disregarding the client's problem, lack of effort in helping, and indifference towards problems (e.g. providing inaccurate or incorrect information) are the main causes of the perception of not being taken care of, feeling abandoned, making respondents feel neglected and unable to act.

Helplessness: emotion work in Kafkaesque organizing

Interactions with Kafkaesque organizations produced significant emotional work and emotional reactions by clients. People expressed two types of emotional

display: (1) those intended to manage, control and alter one's emotions in the process known as emotional work, i.e. the conscious effort to alter one's sentiments (Hochschild 1979), and (2) emotional reactions, such as anger, occurring in spite of emotional work. Together and supported by the cognitive and behavioural aspects considered previously, those two types of emotion created a learned form of helplessness (Seligman 1972), a notion whose central premise refers to the effects, including the emotional effects, resulting from the perception of powerlessness: 'Revolt against them, because supposedly it is an institution that must defend our rights'.

People in this psychological condition have learned to believe that any effort will be insufficient and that an attempt to solve a problem will possibly aggravate it, an indicator of vicious circularity. There is a component of emotional work in learned helplessness, a dimension reflected in interviewees' responses such as 'There is nothing that can be done' or the perception that one 'has no control over (the) situation and that whatever he/she does is futile'. Helplessness translates into a combination of intense emotional work with the behavioural passivity discussed before.

Emotional work

Interactions with Kafkaesque bureaucracies involve significant emotional work, i.e. 'making a conscious, intended try to alter feeling' (Hochschild 1979, p. 56). Time, paperwork, money and psychological energy, as well as other personal resources, were perceived as emotionally taxing and requiring emotional work, as defined above. The repetitive explanation of one's situation and the need to go to different places to solve a single problem were the main emotional burden associated with Kafkaesque organizing. The emotional costs require purposeful management of one's emotions. One of our respondents expressed the desire to forget about the experience. Interviewees considered that they were 'paying the price' (as one of them pointed out) for something that was not their fault, such as the flawed functioning of the system. Such perceptions forced respondents to expend emotional work to manage their own emotions. Emotional work could assume multiple forms such as accommodating ('But I have to follow all the bureaucracies, all the procedures, every paper, and so I have to wait') or forgetting ('When it was over [...] we only wanted to forget the experience').

Emotional reactions

Experiences with Kafkaesque bureaucracies were not only wearisome and resource consuming. They also produced emotional reactions and proved to be emotionally costly. Our data contained references to intensely emotional responses, such as a desire to 'payback' the harm caused by the organization. Revolt, fury, despair and anger emerged in the interviews. As one informant put it, 'The word with which I can describe [the organization] is "irritating"'. Or, as another explained, 'I was revolted knowing that there was an easier way'. An informant said, 'Every time people argued with us and we fought their arguments, they raised yet another argument, and they were always inventing new ones until a certain moment in which we, because of tiredness, exhaustion or ignorance, quit'.

Constructing an emergent model

Based on the findings, we will now turn these middle-level interpretations of our respondents into a theoretical model integrating the findings (see Figure 2). In general, the findings suggest that perceptions of the Kafkaesque organization differ from Weberian principles of bureaucracy in terms of three main processes: the social construction of meaninglessness, managed inaction and taught helplessness.

We offered preliminary evidence of how organizations teach people to feel helpless and accept their situation. Emotional work may produce powerful emotions but these are rendered ultimately unproductive because they are interpreted as part of the experience of dealing with the strange and ultimately incomprehensible world of the Kafkaesque bureaucracy. Avoidance and forgetting on the part of clients becomes the lived experiential counter to blocked external pressure for organizational change. Because ‘everybody knows’ that bureaucracies are often Kafkaesque, their impenetrability becomes all too natural: it cannot be changed, as it corresponds to its deep nature.

The passivity, the assumption that costs incurred in connecting with the bureaucracy are sunk and the cathartic effects of emotional responses such as anger and revolt may paradoxically end up reinforcing the system. The next interaction with some bureaucracy will be less costly because one will be more prepared: expectations will be aligned. As a Danish CEO operating in Portugal pointed out (in Santos 2005, p. 103):

In contact with local authorities, I usually expect a poor service and a bad time management, therefore I don’t react. On the contrary, I’m glad whenever they provide a good service and make good time management.

But one will also be more helpless and more prepared for helplessness, closing another round of the vicious circle. As expressed in the outer arrows of Figure 2, the state of inaction diminishes opportunities for sensemaking, and the lack of meaning promotes helplessness, which reinforces inaction. The process is imbued with a quality of the self-fulfilling prophecy, another characteristic evocative of the vicious circle (Weick 1979, Masuch 1985, Cunha and Tsoukas 2015).

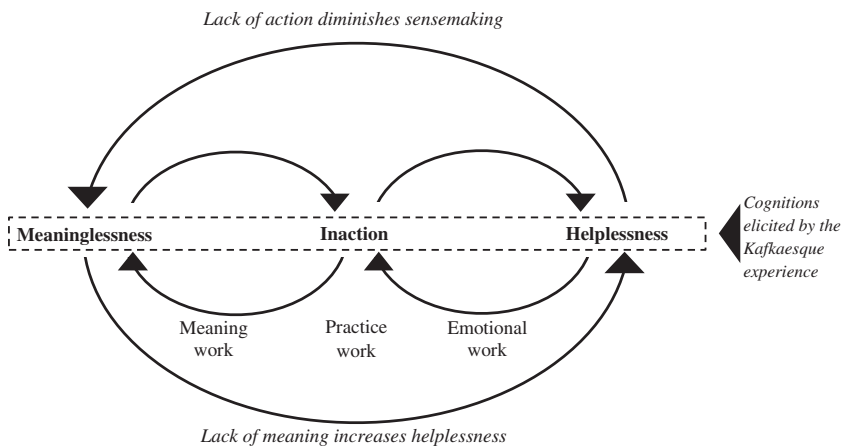


Figure 2. Building the Kafkaesque vicious circle.

Validity issues

To test whether our conceptual interpretations respected our informants' perspectives, a validity procedure was undertaken. The major goal was to find out whether the emergent interpretations plausibly reflected the meanings that formed the essential structure of the phenomenon as we had encountered it in the respondents' stories. As explained in the methods section, by further clustering the concepts initially found, more abstract and simplified themes emerged. To validate the findings, half of the informants were questioned to see whether they agreed that the emergent dimensions could be considered to compose the basic underlying structure of their experiences. They also reviewed the conclusions. The explanation was received with general agreement, given that respondents 'discovered' (as one of them pointed out) that Figure 1 expresses what they meant. The validity procedure suggests that the interpretations drawn here can thus be considered robust.

Discussion

The trope of *The Castle* is well established; it captures a representative experience of our respondents and many others as well. Bureaucratic systems are sometimes both overly complex and also too opaque to be understood (Ballas and Tsoukas 2004). It is in this sense that we describe their complexity as *built-in* to their design: it is not necessarily something inherent to the system, an out-pouring of routine, so much as a carefully woven construction, a product of vested interest, tradition, mutual adjustment to the status quo and a lack of accountability other than in accord with its own devices. Much as a giant arachnid, the bureaucracy is seen as spinning networks of confusion to entrap the unwary. Built-in complexity protects opacity, making organizational functioning less amenable to scrutiny, less sensible.

Sensemaking difficulties on the part of clients are countered by practices that make routines recognizable and acceptable (Zietsma and Lawrence 2010). Such practices refer to efforts to encourage clients to accept a given set of routines rather than to simply engage with them, irrespective of perceived legitimacy (Phillips and Lawrence 2012). Kafkaesque routines do not simply 'happen': they happen because they are actively enacted. Practice means that clients do not 'just' become engaged in and by a routine: they actively support the routine while practicing it. An extreme case of such compliance has been described by Bauman in his classic study of the Holocaust which observed that the cooperation of the Jewish leaders was solicited by the Nazis on the understanding that they must 'sacrifice some, in order to save many' (Bauman 1989, p. 140). This kind of solicitation plays an important role in Kafkaesque bureaucracies where clients are typically advised not to make a fuss since this may endanger the treatment of their particular case, and they may also be offered informal leverage within the system in exchange for their compliance (Kafka 1999, 2000). Such engagement severely restricts possibilities of action and reinforces client inaction via a cultivated expression of organizational carelessness.

Our first-order interpretations corroborate some of the findings revealed by previous research (Hodson, Martin *et al.* 2013, Hodson, Roscigno *et al.* 2013) relating to the chaos, fear, patrimonialism and abuse that may be rife in bureaucracies, but in addition, the deeper analysis results reveal how these have become institutionalized as apparently inescapable vicious circles. First, Kafkaesque

organizing creates a socially constructed meaninglessness. As the results indicate, organizations are not Kafkaesque effortlessly. On the contrary, creating a Kafkaesque organization requires intense institutional work, i.e. the ceaseless attempt to create a certain type of organization (Lawrence *et al.* 2013), an organization whose interiority makes it impermeable to external attempts to render its functioning more transparent and modifiable. As our informants noted, attempts to understand the inner workings of the organization are actively and purposefully countered by the organization via its representatives. Our informants offered abundant evidence of the active construction of meaninglessness (see Appendix 2). Functionaries, it was shown, actively sustain the meaninglessness of the system. Explanations for this process may include the standardized, depersonalized nature of the work being done that eventually renders it meaningless for the functionaries themselves (Grant *et al.* 2014), a meaninglessness that is then projected onto all they deal with.

Second, organizations become Kafkaesque through managed inaction. In other words, they neutralize the agency of external interlocutors by confronting them with progressive layers of rules and obstacles. The more the outsider tries to penetrate the system, the more the system responds by raising yet another rule, in a cycle of positive feedback characteristic of the vicious circle (Weick 1979). A rule always seems to lead to another rule. A routine intersects with some other routine. A solution leads to a problem, and an open channel comes to an unexpected dead end. The bureaucratic apparatus reveals a strange capacity to multiply its legalistic resources via the expression of a twisted form of creativity: rules that were not invoked previously are suddenly activated, impeding the stranger from getting inside the metaphorical 'castle'. The notion that bureaucracies are devoid of creative skills seems to be challenged in the descriptions collected here. Informants actually describe a system with an unexpected capacity to improvise new rules where and when the old ones seem to be insufficient to deter the questioning of the outsider. The system seems all too creative in its own dark and twisted form of bureaucratic fantasy.

Finally, the Kafkaesque organization operates and sustains itself by educating users in helplessness. If helplessness is learned (Seligman 1972), then it can also be taught. People caught in the dynamics of Kafkaesque organizing have learnt to feel trapped: they don't know what to do, what to think and what to feel. They are disempowered of their agency and devoid of their singularity. As Huber and Munro (2014, p. 263) put it, 'the institutions that are supposed to help us, such as the law, confront us as an inhuman and alienating force'. Citizens are stripped of their citizenship and are not allowed to escape the organization. They participate in their own disenfranchisement via learned helplessness: their passivity, accommodation and distress (Seligman 1972) are naturalized as organizational normality. Their compliance becomes part of the process, a feeder of the vicious circle.

The findings suggest that if the Kafkaesque bureaucracy is a product of effort and work, consistently woven together over time, then solutions blind to this genealogy will be destined to fail. Internally focused solutions without clear incentives and implications management (e.g. empowerment, leadership training, performance assessment, de-bureaucratization) will potentially be neutralized by vested interests (see Gordon, Clegg *et al.* 2009, Gordon, Kornberger *et al.* 2009, Clegg and Gordon 2012 for relevant examples). It is not only vested interests that are at work. Tendencies towards enhanced accountability and transparency in organizations can further institutionalize bureaucratic devices such as audit. Power's (1999,

2007) work on the audit society, performance measures and risk, has noted an 'explosion' of bureaucracy. This is one of the Kafkaesque aspects of the 'audit society', associated with a focus on neoliberal forms of 'self-regulation' and an 'audit explosion' to regulate the 'self-regulation'.

Existing research into the Kafkaesque organization has focused upon both the existential issues of organizational life (e.g. Munro and Huber 2012, McCabe 2015) and governance issues (e.g. Hodson, Martin *et al.* 2013, Hodson, Roscigno *et al.* 2013). The existential approach highlights the intractable problems that are entailed in the individual's sensemaking, highlighting the emotional dimension of the Kafkaesque nightmare. In contrast, the governance approach tends to call for greater levels of industrial democracy and transparency in an attempt to mitigate the corrupting and dehumanizing aspects of bureaucracy (e.g. Hodson, Martin *et al.* 2013, Hodson, Roscigno *et al.* 2013). As we have pointed out, Kafkaesque organization has so far been mostly approached from a metaphorical perspective. In this study, the metaphor was scrutinized empirically.

The findings of this research have identified three key processes that characterize the active construction of the Kafkaesque bureaucracy: (i) socially constructed meaninglessness, (ii) managed inaction and (iii) taught helplessness. These findings reveal the processes underlying formal bureaucratic mechanisms that explain not only the corruption of bureaucracy ideals (Hodson, Martin *et al.* 2013, Hodson, Roscigno *et al.* 2013, Huber and Munro 2014) but also the active cooperation of those subject to it in the perpetuation of the vicious circle. In contrast to existing research (Hodson, Martin *et al.* 2013) that has recommended empowering the workforce to address such bureaucratic dysfunctions, the present findings reveal that the clients and subjects of bureaucracy must also play an important role in breaking the vicious circle. The question then becomes one of how to restructure unwieldy organizations without succumbing to the bureaucratic temptations of the audit society (Power 1999). The process through which organizations protect their opacity, how they normalize negative emotions associated with Kafkaesque experience and the way they sustain their traditional routines without genuine attempts to change are all ripe for investigation. We found that persisting suboptimal practices are not necessarily unintended by-products of organizational routine but involve an effortful practice, resulting from the interplay between different forms of work. Such intentionality is not necessarily activated by unethical motives, as will be discussed below, but it has grave ethical implications. This work can be taken as an invitation for researchers to uncover these implications. Organizations having recognizably Kafkaesque traits are actively constructed, products of effort and human diligence. In this sense, a significant part of our contribution is to extend research on Kafkaesque bureaucracy from metaphor to practice.

No organization is born Kafkaesque, which means that researchers should try to better understand the longitudinal process of 'Kafkaesquing' organizational practice. We offered some possibilities, but more needs to be known about the process. How does the Kafkaesquing of organizations start? Studying newly created organizations may shed light on the origins of this process. How is the division of Kafkaesque labour done between managers and the managed? More specifically, how do leaders sustain the Kafkaesque organization? How do they counter it? What management practices fortify the Kafkaesque bureaucracy? How does the cultural/societal/political context influence the Kafkaesque intensity and nature of state bureaucracies?¹

Given that organizations are highly intricate organizational ecologies, facilitative of vicious circles (Weick 1979, Masuch 1985), and considering that they are often poor setters of explicit goals, people can be motivated by unconscious goals, including those that subtly protect the status quo via interlocked patterns of action (Tsoukas 2012) and that buffer the organization from external scrutiny and from externally caused disturbances of standard operating procedures. Future research may explore how employees internalize those roles that are perceived so adversely by those whom they subject to their routines. Why is the Kafkaesque organization so persistent? These and similar questions are worth pursuing, given the familiarity of the form to our informants. Future research should continue the analysis of the collective construction of the organizational form that Kafka so vehemently criticized and that, with Kafkaesque irony, his critical writings may have partially naturalized.

Finally, there is an intriguing issue, raised by a reviewer: Kafkaesque organization crystallizes what Arendt called, with percipience,

the latest and perhaps most formidable form of domination: bureaucracy or the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible, and which could properly be called rule by nobody. (Arendt 1970, p. 38)

Rule by nobody protects bureaucratic face, by making nobody accountable. For the client, there is no one responsible: just a set of rules that defer forever. Government by nobody has this unique quality that there is no centre of power. There is no king's head to be cut off (Foucault 1980). In terms of the Hayward and Lukes debate (2008), there is nobody to shoot. A functional bureaucracy has a goal other than its perpetuation, and there are visible decision-makers. A Kafkaesque bureaucracy seems mostly to be concerned with perpetuating itself, which it does by protecting its bureaucrats from responsibility, by positioning nobody in charge, all being imbricated but none ultimately accountable in a vicious circle of rules.

Conclusion

The current work should be taken as a preliminary step for more research on Kafkaesque organizations' causes and processes leading to an experience of labyrinthine bureaucracy understood in terms of vicious circles. Our research question explicitly asked informants to reflect on those bureaucracies that, in their experience, they would label in terms that, following their understanding, could be ascribed as Kafkaesque – which excluded well-functioning bureaucracies. Our research question, then, clearly established the limits for the findings and the applicability of the conclusions. Those bureaucracies standing outside the initial definition of 'Kafkaesque' were not considered by respondents. In this sense, the study's conclusions should not be extrapolated or regarded as a critique of bureaucracy per se, because this is clearly beyond the scope of the paper. It must be considered that data were collected in a particular cultural–institutional context (Cunha *et al.* 2009), a condition that establishes a relevant conceptual boundary and suggests the importance of cross-national research on the topic. Given the pressures of austerity politics and economics on state functioning in Southern European societies, Portugal affords an example of a naturally occurring experiment in increased bureaucratic dysfunction as resources have been tightened and cut since 2008.

Kafkaesque bureaucracies confront people with a barrage of seemingly pointless rules. The findings of this study suggest that the ethos of the Kafkaesque organization is not a matter of organizational stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer 2012). The findings indicate that it would be naïve to assume that stupid results are the product of stupid organizers or stupid organizing. The Kafkaesque organization can be explained as the result of the interplay of intense and sophisticated forms of work (namely meaning, practice and emotion work), conducted at several layers by different participants. The study uncovered three main processes intervening in the development and consolidation of the Kafkaesque organization: the social construction of meaninglessness, managed inaction and taught helplessness, the building blocks of the Kafkaesque bureaucracy. The organizational form is not an unintended degeneration of healthy bureaucracies but a purposeful product of meaning, practice and emotional work.

In summary, the Kafkaesque bureaucracy should not be viewed complacently, as a literary curiosity, but as an intentional, socially constructed form of organization that needs to be de-naturalized as a first condition for change. The ‘circular’ nature of the Kafkaesque problems is revealed by this study, manifested both in existential meaninglessness (failures of sensemaking), and in managed inaction (failures of governance). Kafkaesque organizations thrive on opacity and lack of accountability, suggesting that pressure for external scrutiny must come from outside the system, namely from civil society. Hodson and Martin *et al.*’s (2013) call for greater industrial democracy is by itself not enough to address the thorny issues that the Kafkaesque organization presents, however. Opening the system via democratizing public innovations and co-creating improvement initiatives with the collaboration of the public (e.g. Sifry 2011, Von Hippel 2005) may help to break closed loops and increase openness to public scrutiny and ‘open innovation’ (Von Hippel 2005) and ‘open politics’ (Sifry 2011) offer fruitful possibilities for mitigating against systems of ‘managed inaction’ and ‘taught helplessness’ in providing platforms for participation and outside intervention, as well as greater levels of transparency. Sifry’s (2011) work has demonstrated that platforms for ‘open’ politics have generated numerous successful reform movements (e.g. Mysociety.org; Theyworkforyou.com; Fixmystreet.com) which have used social media platforms to enable citizens to intervene from outside of impersonal political bureaucracies to help improve local regeneration as well as improve the governance of these bureaucracies.

Kafkaesque power is pervasive, especially in these times of austerity when the servants of the state are unable to offer an ethic of care, consideration and compassion that once marked the sense of public service. A vigilant, constructive and persistent pressure for transparency and improvement is necessary to reduce and correct dysfunctional practices and to remove the very complex and intricate institutional ecology of bureaucratic organizations (Tsoukas 2012). It is, perhaps, time not only to rediscover bureaucracy (Olsen 2005) as a moral project (du Gay 2002) but also to render its more Kafkaesque elements less ‘obese’, ‘anarchic’, ‘inefficient’, ‘incomprehensible’ and ‘idiotic’ (Bennett 1994, p. 650). Citizens, desperately seeking sensemaking while entangled up in the ‘hermeneutic machines’ (Bernheimer 1977) that power and bureaucracy’s enmeshing produces, deserve no less.

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Note

1. The problems of unconscious goals and the implications of complacent management practices are possibly especially acute in the case of Portuguese organizations, whose performance management systems tend to be poor (Bloom *et al.* 2012, World Economic Forum 2013).

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Appendix 1. The open-ended interview protocol

Interviews followed an open-ended interview protocol, composed by the following list of main questions. They were semi-structured, meaning that the list was used in a flexible way, considering the major goals of the study and the profile of the interviewee. For example, some interviewees were more knowledgeable about some topics than about others. The focus of the interview would be centred on their area of expertise.

Framework

Explanation of the interview objectives

Description of the episode

Rich description of the episode

In-depth analysis of the experience

'In your perspective, why did the episode occur as it did?'

'How did you feel during and after the incident?'

'How did you react?'

'Did you ever, during the process, put yourself in doubt? Meaning, did you ever think that they could be right, or it was always something senseless?'

'What have you done about the process?'

Additional information

'Was that the only similar situation with bureaucracy that you ever had, or have you had other experiences of the same type?'

Appendix 2. Representative data for first-order concepts

Concept	Representative evidence from interviews
<i>Crafted ignorance</i> : lack of information produces a perception of ignorance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The request was denied (...) without any explanation about the reason for refusing it. • I didn't know how my process was, I didn't know if I had done things rightly or not, until at a certain time I understand that my papers are missing and nobody knew where they were. (...) I never got that confirmation, never. So I never knew if my information arrived there.
<i>Meaninglessness</i> : the process cannot be interpreted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't understand the reason for this formality (...) I don't understand. • It does not make any sense how the process was done. • Now I know it functions this way, but I still don't understand exactly how, or why. • Then there is no way of (...) understanding what is there. So until today (...) I do not know which movements are behind it. • It doesn't make sense, it's not logic. (...) what I went there to do has no sense.
<i>Process complication</i> : processes are unnecessarily complicated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I felt that I wasn't sure of what was going to result, that is, with so many successive requests of new documents, one is unsure about what the final result will really be. • I was a little disappointed for not being able to achieve something that apparently is simple in other places. • In one place I was told something, in another I was told differently. • It always involves moving between places, waiting in line, with papers. • I had to wait about two hours to do something that, in my opinion, I shouldn't have to (...) I don't have to pay for this organization's incompetence. • When I arrive there I see that it is not one further step, there are two, three, four, five, and I don't know how long and how many steps I'll have to take until I can complete something so simple.

(Continued)

Appendix 2. (Continued).

Concept	Representative evidence from interviews
<i>Process inscrutability:</i> processes are presented as inscrutable, as black boxes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They ended up creating a situation which they can't answer. • I felt that I wasn't sure of what was going to result; that is, with so many successive requests for new documents, one is unsure about what the final result will really be. • This is not over, because then we have (...) everything you can imagine, that will force to more steps, to more processes, to more papers, to more validations. • In one place, they said one thing, in another place another thing. • It is always this answer that they give, and if I ask other questions they don't know the answer. • I asked and they answered that it is how it is planned, with no further explanation. • I know that the process is not over. • His head was only directed towards one point: it was that way, was that way that it should be done. • I think that person does not have that decision-making power concerning how the process is done (...), her/his role is only to do what is asked by the superiors. • I asked and what they answered was that it is how it is planned.
<i>Impotence:</i> people feel agentless in face of the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She said she had already investigated which version is the true one • My request is not even considered by the people that could take a decision that goes against the rule. • There is nothing to do. • It's not going to change much.
<i>Resignation:</i> people feel that their lack of agency cannot be remedied	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The problem is that there's no way around, I do not have another way. • One rule – as stupid as it may seem – has to be followed. • Every time, people argued with us and we fought their arguments, they raised yet another argument, and they were always inventing new ones until a certain moment in which we, because of tiredness, exhaustion or ignorance, quit. • I just wanted to end this, so I ended doing everything they told me to. • Lines that are always everywhere.
<i>Abandonment:</i> people feel unconsidered by the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a system centred on the rules, and not centred on the person. • I think it would be useful to explain 'the request was refused because of this, this and this', so that the issue could be properly clarified. • Not feeling the responsibility or the interest in students' personal situation (...) Not feeling personalization of the issue, not feeling that they are really taking care of me as

(Continued)

Appendix 2. (Continued).

Concept	Representative evidence from interviews
<i>Abuse of power:</i> people feel that the systems allows functionaries to abuse their power	<p>they should.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They don't worry. • People feel very small to fight a machine so big that exceeds them. It is that feeling of impotence (...) that one is left with in the end. • I felt there was an abuse of power. • We are dependent on people that have power to act over us, but that are inefficient and are ignorant.
<i>Emotional reaction:</i> emotional response to the situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revolt, and rage, and sadness, yes. It's a set of emotions. • I went away and arrived home furious: it wasn't possible – once again, wasted time. • Revolt against them, because supposedly it is an institution that must defend our rights. • I felt really angry because women were really inflexible. • We were really upset with this penalization because it made it seem that it was our fault. • 'You must be kidding me' (...) I left completely irritated (...) because it is really despairing. • I was revolted knowing that there was an easier way.