

“Knowing” the Rules: Administrative Work as Practice

This article presents a theory of administrative work as practice. Building on a rich narrative of a mid-level administrator in the Dutch Immigration Office, four core elements of administrative practice are identified: contextuality, acting, knowing, and interacting. Taking cues from practice theory and ethnomethodology, the author argues that the visible aspects of administrative work (decisions, reports, negotiations, standard operating procedures, and—on a higher level of institutional abstraction—structures, legal rules, lines of authority and accountability) are effectuations, enactments, of the hidden, taken-for-granted routines, the almost unthinking actions, tacit knowledge, fleeting interactions, practical judgments, self-evident understandings and background knowledge, shared meanings, and personal feelings that constitute the core of administrative work. Taken together, contextuality, acting, knowing, and interacting make up a unified account of practical judgment in an administrative environment that is characterized by complexity, indeterminacy, and the necessity to act on the situation at hand.

Introduction: Understanding Administrative Work

What it is that public administrators actually do when they are doing their job? Despite the vital and ubiquitous functions that public administrators fulfill in modern society, we know surprisingly little about what the work of public administrators entails. The average op-ed piece, or the standard tract that urgently argues for a reform of the public sector, while full of negative attitudes and strong opinions about what is wrong with public bureaucracies, are remarkably silent on the actual activities of administrators. Similarly, public administration or public policy textbooks traditionally largely ignore the sociology of administrative work. What is covered is a range of related topics such as the external and internal organization of public agencies, issues of personnel and human resource management, the public–private relationship, administrative reorganization, the ethics of public administration, and issues of leadership, democratic accountability, and legitimacy.¹ Rarely, however, is public administration discussed as *work*, as a set of activities that employees of public agencies engage in to deal with some of society’s most pressing problems. The work of public administrators—their day-to-day activities, their lived experience in doing what they are required to do—is conspicuously absent from the

literature on public administration (King and Stivers 1998; Orr 1996).²

When I use the term “work,” I do not have in mind a behaviorist framework in which work is a string of more or less related activities: pick up the phone, open a file on the computer, fill out a form, discuss a client with a colleague, and so on. These activities certainly make up work, but no more than, say, the finger movements of a concert pianist make up piano music. In addition to these overt movements, the music is an ensemble of the notes in the score, the long training of the pianist, her powers of concentration, her knowledge of other works of the composer and the interpretation history of the piece, and the thousands of ongoing and embodied judgments of interpretation that, taken together, make up her skill as a pianist. One could say the finger movements are just the surface manifestation of the

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whole ensemble of physical and mental skills through which the musical score is effected. In an analogical way, by using the concept of *work*, I have in mind the hundreds of practical judgments, the everyday, taken-for-granted routines and practices, the explicit and tacit knowledge that is brought to bear on concrete situations, the moving about in the legal–moral environment of large administrative bureaucracies, the mastering of difficult human–emotional situations, the negotiating of discretionary space, and the interactive give and take with colleagues that, taken together, make up everyday public administration. Put differently, by using the term *work* in conjunction with the suggestion of institutional neglect or ignorance, I point toward public administration as a *practice*.³

There are many reasons for the institutional ignorance surrounding public administration as work. An ideological bias toward the control of administrative work is an important, but perhaps not the most important, one. A key element in the consistent neglect of administrative work in the professional literature is its taken-for-granted nature. As competent members of large and complex organizations, we exclude, as in any significant sense constituting the core of what it means to *work*, the unthinking routines, the informal banter and gossip with colleagues during the coffee break, our sympathies and antipathies, our private doubts about the quality of our work, our affective responses to clients or colleagues, and our recurrent sense of stress or work pressure. These are things that belong to us as private individuals, apart and separate from the larger institutional structures in which we move about. These are things we leave behind—or sometimes take with us to worry about at home—at the end of the working day. They are an inevitable part of work, but they are noise to the “signal” of real work: the decision made, the report written, the negotiation completed, the rule applied. We literally don’t *perceive* the everyday experiences of common workers as being part of work in the formal sense because they seem only fleeting events to the invariants of legal rule, organizational structure, bureaucratic procedure, and political accountability; at best irrelevant, at worst a threat to the quality and integrity of public administration. However, this is not an exercise in the sociology of bias. Instead, as I will argue, what is invariant and momentary, what is backdrop and drama in the literature on public administration rests on silent *a priori* assumptions.

My purpose is to make the implicit explicit: To question the taken-for-granted and self-evident in our understanding of administrative work. To switch around figure and ground. In particular, following the suggestions of practice theory, I will conceive of the stability of administrative work, the consistency of administrative structure, routine, and outcome, as collective accomplishments.⁴ This approach differs radically from the traditional tendency in

the social sciences to account for the behavior of actors in terms of some rule or mechanism, often hidden or tacit, which purportedly produces or explains that behavior. The behavior, thus, is rendered intelligible by making it comply with a rule. The argument I develop in this article is that, instead, the actors who are engaged in a particular activity together produce the proper activity through their emerging understanding of what is right or fitting in that particular situation. This sense of rightness is not given in toto and *a priori*, but is collectively produced or reproduced in a dialectical interaction with the particulars of the situation at hand as it is embedded in its wider organizational, social, and cultural context. In this sense the joint activities of actors transcend their inherent subjectivity toward what Garfinkel dubs a “practical objectivity.” In terms of the work of public administrators, I argue specifically that the decisions, reports, negotiations, standard operating procedures, and—on a higher level of institutional abstraction—the structures, legal rules, lines of authority, and accountability of the everyday world of public authority are effectuations, enactments of the hidden, taken-for-granted routines: the almost unthinking actions, tacit knowledge, fleeting interactions, practical judgments, self-evident understandings and background knowledge, embodied standards and warrants, shared meanings, personal feelings, and small rituals that constitute the core of administrative work. Differently put, I will discuss administrative work as *practice*.⁵

Judy’s Story

To edge into administrative work as a form of practice, let us listen to Judy, a 34-year-old lawyer who works in the Department of Implementation Policy at the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service, or IND (*Immigratie en Naturalisatiedienst*). The IND deals with the large stream of refugees who seek legal status in the Netherlands each year. Immigration policy is highly contested in the Netherlands. One indication of this has been the rapid rise (and equally rapid decline) of the anti-immigration Fortuyn Party, which galvanized Dutch politics in 2002.⁶ The Department of Implementation Policy where Judy works must translate broad law enacted by Parliament into operational rules and regulations for the workers in the various field offices. However, as it soon will become clear, this is only one of her many tasks. As she immediately stated at the beginning of the interview,⁷

Yes, in my job, what I do now at the Department of Implementation Policy, I see that there is a tremendous number of things to do between 9 and 5. And particularly the unstructured character of it forces you to think in advance about what to do, but there are always questions in parliament, or some dem-

onstration in the country, or a group of asylum-seekers arrives from a particular country and no one knows how to deal with them. To add to this, I also have the AC file in my task portfolio. The AC is the Registration Center (literally “Aanmeld Centrum”). All asylum-seekers enter the AC and receive their initial hearing. There we select between those who have no realistic chance to obtain legal residence, those who do have a chance, and those who require additional inquiry. So, all new policy or every new situation will surface in the AC first. You have to act fast because in terms of available time the procedure is limited. You have to decide within 48 process hours, that is four working days. If you don’t have an answer to all your questions then, the case will be send on. This has the effect that you constantly are diverted from your work. You cannot plan that.

The first thing that strikes us in Judy’s story are the frequent references to the overload of work she has to cope with. In fact, in her very opening sentence she talks about the “tremendous number of things” she has to do. So what does Judy tell us here in this narrative of administrative work? First, what Judy tries to impart is that lack of control is the overriding characteristic—challenge, if one prefers—of her job. This lack of control follows, above all, from the unpredictable nature of the inflow of refugees in the Netherlands, but also from the contested nature of immigration policy in Dutch society (“there are always questions in parliament, or some demonstration in the country”). This, by consequence, makes her job inherently unstructured, as she says. It is easy to overlook the obvious fact that Judy’s description of work overload is tied to the particulars of her situation. She doesn’t describe overload as an objective condition (too many tasks in too short a time), a condition that could be controlled and improved through some kind of organizational reform. Instead, she describes the condition of overload “from the inside out” as an experiential phenomenon (“there is a tremendous number of things to do between 9 and 5”) that is intrinsic to the particular configuration of tasks, people, and organizations that comprise her work. Differently put, she *situates* overload in the everyday reality of her work. I will return to this aspect of administrative practice later, but already we should notice that, in the way Judy constructs her story, she draws attention to the local, contingent, and experiential determinants of her job situation.

When I asked her to give an example of a situation in which time pressure played an important role, she told the following story:

Well. I can tell you many stories when I think about the AC procedure . . . a while ago a pretty large group of 56 Slovenians entered. We consider Slovenia a

safe country, but some of them had been rejected by other EU countries, some of them had returned and had re-entered via the Netherlands. We have rules for all that. According to the Dublin Agreement you cannot re-apply for legal status in the European Union when you have been rejected by an EU country, but we were stuck with them. And then you have to create all sorts of creative solutions with the people who work at the AC Center who have to handle the case. That takes up a lot of time, while other things get pushed aside.

My role in this is to coordinate this with our Legal Department, our legal experts. And with the people at the AC Center. I have to do the policy coordination, to figure out what is and what isn’t possible within the framework of the law and of our own operational rules. You have to understand, Schiphol Airport is an external border. According to the Schengen Agreement we don’t have internal borders anymore within the EU. But Schiphol is an EU border. That means that our decisions have consequences for our partners in the Schengen Agreement. We can only let those people in whom we give access to our regular asylum procedure. People who arrive at an external EU border enter the quick asylum procedure [the 48-hour procedure to determine the refugee’s eligibility for the longer procedure that eventually grants legal status]. But when you enter the quick procedure from an external border you have no right to enter the country. So we had to think of something so that we could keep those people at Schiphol Airport. So we came up with the idea to create at terminal D at the airport a temporary facility with beds and everything. So we could keep those people outside our borders. That is something that you have to create out of nothing. In such case you have to make agreements with Immigration lawyers, with the Immigration Office, with the police, with all parties involved. And you have to inform the people themselves of course. You need to arrange for translators who can tell those people what is going to happen.

I didn’t have to do all those things myself, but we, as the policy implementation unit have to give the policy input. The people at the airport they have to coordinate with the translators, immigration officers, and the police, who are all there. And they have to coordinate all this with us, what is possible policywise, and we have to, within the head office, coordinate with our lawyers, our process unit, our street-level workers you could call them, and with our director, if we can do it this way, for you are basically creating something new, about which you should wonder if it feasible. I mean, which story will hold before the judge, what kind of legitimization do you have. It shouldn’t be dead on arrival in court.

This particularly rich narrative displays a number of themes that are central to administrative practice. In formal terms, one could say that Judy describes a case of rule application. European and Dutch rules with regard to refugees are applied to the case of the 56 Slovenians who desire to enter the Netherlands. But look what it takes to apply a rule! First, in the way that Judy presents the case, the particulars of the situation at hand and the rules are not two separate domains. Instead, in her story, the two work together to literally create the situation. For example, Judy refers to two European rules that would make the case theoretically open and shut. (Refugees who have been denied legal status in one of the Schengen countries cannot apply for status in another Schengen country. Some borders are internal borders—which have been abolished—and some are external borders. Entry through an external border brings the refugee within the jurisdiction of the European Union). In practice, the case quickly evolves into what she calls “something you have to create out of nothing.” The fact that the group entered through an external border implies that allowing them into the country, and by implication, into European Union territory, would legally impel the Dutch immigration authorities to give the Slovenians access to the formal application procedure for legal status. However, can the airport be considered Dutch territory? The answer here was to create of a temporary shelter at the airport “before the border”—a legal no-man’s-land in both meanings of the term.

Second, Judy constantly refers to the implications that rules have as guidance to her actions.⁸ How should we interpret this? Rules, as every experienced administrator knows, interact with other rules. What Judy is doing here is using her extensive and detailed knowledge, her know-how of immigration rules to gauge the expected effects of suggested solutions on the existing body of rules. In fact, Judy presents a good case of rules in action. She displays a highly pragmatic approach to rule application, driven by the necessity to find a solution to the situation at hand that is feasible (it works), acceptable (it will hold up when challenged in court), and rational (it upholds the integrity of the body of immigration law).

Third—and I will develop this insight more fully in the next section—it would be a mistake to see Judy’s pragmatic approach to solving Slovenians’ problem as teleological in some way. She doesn’t have a more or less clearly defined set of organizational goals in mind that guide her conduct, nor does she comply with some internal or tacit rule. Instead, what we see is that she designs—or, more precisely and less cogitatively, *produces*—solutions “on line” as it were, by acting on the situation at hand. Instead of following static goals, she drags in background knowledge and experience based on what she feels the situation requires. What guides her could best be described as

an *understanding* of the situation: Not an analytic understanding that settles the case once and for all, but instead a more holistic, unarticulated understanding that follows from a career of immersion in immigration issues in this particular organization. Moreover, it is an understanding that suggests meaningful action, but at the same time is sufficiently flexible and open-ended to allow for adaptations if the evolving situation demands it.

Finally, the whole process of finding a solution to the problem is highly interactive. Several times she describes her task in terms of “coordinating” (the active verb, not the passive noun), a term she automatically borrows from the dominant discourse of rational organizational conduct. However, her story is far removed from the tenets of organizational rationality. The picture that emerges from this narrative is one of a community of administrators who interact intensely in the process of negotiating a difficult situation.

How do Judy and her colleagues deal with the work overload? Here is how she described a particularly bad stretch of work in which, on top of her regular work, she had to take on tasks of sick colleagues:

Well, the effect is that I put in a lot of overtime. I don’t have to do that, but I often feel responsible that things go well here. So I spend more time here than my regular working hours. And I also try to get an overview what I have on my plate. At some point it has become so much that I threaten to lose sight of it all. Then I have an oppressive feeling of “Jeez, I still have so many things to do.” And, regular meetings, once a week now, with my cluster coordinator as it is called. To decide what the priorities are, and to acknowledge that, well, ... there is more work than I can handle in a week.... Now, so be it. What has to be has to be. This is characteristic of this department. We really get a lot of questions from the whole IND. And the IND has grown in the last couple of years from 100 to 3,000 people, so the number of questions has grown accordingly. We have also tried to streamline that a little bit.... In the past the regional offices could always just call us. That would be impossible now because the telephone is ringing too often already. We have made an arrangement with the regional offices. If they have a question they send it by e-mail in a certain format to their Management Office. That is, let’s say, the policy department within their region. They first see if they can answer the question, and if they can’t, or if they think that they know the answer but feel that it is important to coordinate it with us, then they call us. So they act as a kind of filter. We then return the answer by e-mail. And, then to all regional policy departments, so that they can handle it themselves whenever a similar question arises in a regional office. It is of course impossible to predict how many questions will arise

over certain issues. On Iraq and Iran alone I have several questions per week.

In this remarkable stretch of narrative Judy lists four ways to deal with the twin problems of overload and unpredictability. It is an interesting observation that, what many would consider the obvious solution—namely, an organizational intervention to redistribute the work—comes last. To cope with the exponential growth of the regional offices and the corresponding growth in demands for support, the IND decides to decentralize the support function to the regional districts. Why would Judy mention the restructuring of the organization last? I speculate that it is because it has ameliorated but not solved the intrinsic problems of unpredictability and overload. Obviously, it hasn't resolved the issue of overload for Judy herself, as she states in the first part of this section.

In that first part she lists three more personalized strategies for coping with work overload. First, put in more time. If the amount of work grows, you simply work longer hours to get it done. This strategy goes only so far as it doesn't prevent Judy from occasionally losing track of all the tasks that need to be done.⁹ This situation announces itself by the emergence of what she calls an "oppressive" feeling. As she calls it in another part of the interview, that feeling is the signal to sit down to try to get an overview of everything that needs to be done and to "redefine what your priorities are." Finally, she discusses the work schedule with her coordinator. My guess is that this provides her both with a perspective on her workload and cover for whatever priority ranking she decides on.

Judy is well aware that work overload is not an individual problem:

I'm glad to say that we really handle it well. Everyone knows of each other that everyone is busy, but everyone is enthusiastic, and we all know, we really do our best to take it on as best as we can. And we pay a price, for we went on too long too fast. Two people have been incapacitated with Repetitive Stress Disorder (RSI), while two others have had to cut in hours down because of RSI. So they can work no longer, or are no longer allowed to use a keyboard. So you see that you just can't keep up with this ...

I also had the early symptoms of RSI. That was partly caused by the psychological pressure of stress. That is often a factor, and, well yes, also your posture.... When my colleague was completely incapacitated with RSI, I said to myself, it makes no sense to feel that you're responsible for everything. A little less will also do. So I had to indicate that you also have to say no sometimes. That is something that I needed to learn. That is hard sometimes.

Interviewer: What happened the last time you said no?

Judy: Well, interestingly enough people you accepted it, for I always thought. I wasn't so much afraid that that would reject it.... Yeah, I start to feel guilty that someone else has to do it. But I can work even harder, but that would make no sense at all.

Interviewer: Did this saying no at times have consequences for the quality of your work?

Judy: Well, that's one of the reasons I put in overtime. If I deliver something I want it to be a good piece of work. But, yeah, you can't have it to be perfect and also do all these things. You forced to compromise.... You have to ask yourself: can I do it a little less perfect, a little less extensive ...

Judy indicates that work overload is a shared problem in the organization. Several colleagues have been incapacitated for shorter or longer periods. Not only does this function as a warning for others, it also increases the workload of the others. Keeping up in such an environment requires a careful balancing of collective and personal responsibilities. The problem is that there is no blueprint or scorecard that tells the individual worker where this balance lies, as it depends on several factors such as the administrator's individual aspirations and self-image, her standing within the work group (which is based on the worker's history within the group), and the implicit contract among members of the work group about the sharing of tasks and responsibilities. Judy was surprised to find out that her co-workers accepted an occasional no, which suggests to her that her aspiration level was perhaps too high. Saying no occasionally met with internal resistance, but it also was an occasion for personal learning, as it made Judy aware of her tendency to be a perfectionist. Coping with overload in constructive ways requires a careful balancing of personal insight and interacting with the work group.

Understanding Administrative Practice

In his book *Continual Permutations of Action* (1993), in which he articulates the concepts and theories underlying a lifetime of research on work and organization, the sociologist Anselm Strauss makes the following observation: "Very frequently when social scientists write about work, the organization of work, and work process, they focus on their rational aspects: planning, goals, procedures and other means to reach goals, and so forth. Admittedly work is not always fully rational; therefore much of the literature is devoted, explicitly or implicitly, to improving either its rationalization/efficiency (through further rationalizing of its procedures or context) or its equity (again through rational changes to make a more equitable distribution of tasks and rewards)" (83).

Then, drawing on a study of medical and nursing work, the author goes on to list a large number of threats to the rationalizing bias in the received view of work and organizations. These threats are configurations of factors in the everyday life of organizations that escape a purely instrumental, efficiency-based approach to the intellectual understanding and managerial control of work. These “hazards” or “difficulties” that beset the rationalization of work, as Strauss calls them, include the unpredictability of clients and problems, the contingencies of interaction in the work place, the unmanageability of external contacts, competition over scarce resources, and the unintended consequences of workers’ actions. Yet, as we all know, and as we have seen in the example in the preceding section, work gets done, and usually gets done well, an observation that propels Strauss to conclude, “In short, the rational and rationalized aspects of work are obviously important, but are neither all-important nor sometimes the most interesting, and certainly not the most profound aspects of work that social scientists need to understand” (1993, 84).

Neither all-important nor the most interesting. In the remainder of this article, I will discuss how everyday administrative work can be explained while avoiding the all-pervasive idea in good currency that work is and should be rationally conceived. Drawing on Judy’s rich narrative of everyday work in a large public bureaucracy, I will focus on the social micromechanics of work to explain how administrative workers negotiate practical problems in the context of a large, complex bureaucracy. Specifically, I will discuss four issues that, taken together, make up something of an outline of a theory of administrative practice: *situatedness* (work always takes place in a context that influences how it is understood and carried out), *knowing* (the application of knowledge in the carrying out of work tasks), *action* (the prime vehicle for negotiating the world), and *interaction* (the centrality of interaction for work). I will draw conclusions, with some observations to support these conclusions, about the central role of practical judgment—the Aristotelian *phronesis*—as the sense-making activity that binds the other elements of a theory of practice into a meaningful whole.

Situatedness

All work takes place in a context. This is in itself a truism if we see context as some kind of fixed container (organizational, cultural, political, historical) that demarcates, through a set of more or less static constraints, a particular field of work from other fields of work. However, if we conceive of context not as an organizational or cultural container, but as a dynamically integrated system of *relations*, it becomes a heuristically powerful tool. The relations within such a system are manifold; for the purpose of this paragraph, the most important one is between the

actor and what Jean Lave calls her “setting” (1988, 151). The personal pronoun “her” is fully justified here as it signifies both the active, ongoing relationship that the actor maintains between herself and her environment, and the fact that this relationship is driven by the particular intentions and understandings of the individual as they emanate from the task she engages in. Instead of passively reacting to the constraints of a particular context, the term “setting” denotes that the actor purposively seeks out those elements of her environment that are relevant to the task at hand. The actor “negotiates” her environment.¹⁰ This negotiating is largely habitual, routine, and second nature, but at the same time an open and improvisational affair. In this sense, practice is always *situated*, meaning the actor and her setting mutually bring each other into being in the course of participating in a particular practice.¹¹ Actors, to use Dewey’s great phrase, do not live *in* but *by means of* an environment (Dewey 1938; Burke 1994, 26).

The importance of the concepts of setting and situatedness is that they allow us to deal with the intrinsic ambiguity of everyday work situations. Judy’s story can be read as a concerted attempt by her and her colleagues to keep the open-endedness, unpredictability, and reactivity of work in check. Not only are many work situations hard to interpret, but it is even harder to gauge how events, partly set in motion by workers’ actions, will develop and what the appropriate course of action should be. Differently put, the interpretative and practical intractability of everyday work situations is not an unfortunate add-on—the result of a lack of information, difficult clients, unintended consequences, conflicting views and interests, or the difficulty of predicting the implications of one’s actions—and therefore partly, if not wholly, remediable. Instead, intractability and indeterminacy are the constitutional features of administrative work, originating in what philosophers call the *indexicality* of language and, by extension, human action. A linguistic expression is indexical, to quote Lucy Suchman, when its “significance ... on some actual occasion ... lies in its relationship to circumstances that are presupposed or indicated by, but not actually captured in, the expression itself” (1987, 58). The archetypal examples of indexical expressions are the first- and second-person pronouns and adverbs such as “here” and “this.” When I say to my 11-year old son, “Will you please pick up that book,” he knows exactly which book from all the books in the house I have in mind by the indexical “that” because of the context he and I share at that moment. The meaning of my request exceeds the semantic information that is actually there (Suchman 1987, 60).

The importance of indexicality for the study of administrative work is that it is not restricted to a relatively small class of formal indexical expressions, as opposed to definite nouns, for example, but that it is an intrinsic feature of

the *communicative* significance of all language and action (Suchman 1987, 60). Whenever language is employed in an everyday situation to communicate something to someone else, or whenever we act on a particular situation at hand, its meaning depends on a reference to a particular setting. This is where ambiguity enters the communicative realm—which setting? For example, the statement “a while ago a pretty large group of 56 Slovenians entered” refers to a country named Slovenia, which was the first to break away from the crumbling post-Tito Yugoslavian republic, remaining relatively unscathed in the vicious civil war that had been raging for many years in the Balkan region, a war that resulted in a huge outflow of refugees, many of whom came to Western Europe, etc., etc. But where, in light of what the administrator wants to communicate, do the etceteras stop? It is clear that we could go on describing the relevant features of the embedding context without ever being certain that we had exhausted all the relevant features. (What about the moral aspects of the situation? Our duty as a rich country to assist the poor? The feelings of guilt and shame in the Netherlands about the botched U.N. peacekeeping mission in Srebrenica?) The conclusion is that we have no choice but to be incomplete and ambiguous about what exactly we are referring to when using language.

Despite this inherent ambiguity of human language, it is typical of indexical expressions in everyday situations that our shared understanding of them is usually fairly adequate—that is to say, adequate for all practical purposes. How do human actors go about making themselves intelligible to each other? How do they demarcate the necessary context to be intelligible in their communications with others? First, for a proper understanding of how social actors communicate in everyday life, it is important that this partial articulation of human language use should not be seen as a kind of communicative shorthand. It is not the case that somewhere in the back of our heads we have a full grasp of all the relevant particulars of the situation at hand and that, when we are pressed to do so, we can fully and formally articulate the embedding situation that provides the meaning of the expression. Both in practice and in principle that would be an impossible task, as the range of features of the embedding situation that is potentially relevant to the expression is indefinite, and we would be caught in an infinite regress of possible further articulation. Rather, it seems that human actors deliberately leave the connection between their statements and the relevant embedding context vague. Or, as Suchman states, “our practical solution to this theoretical problem is not to enumerate some subset of the relevant circumstances—we generally never mention our circumstances as such at all—but to ‘wave our hand’ at the situation, as if we always included in our utterance an implicit *ceteris paribus* clause, and closed with

an implicit etcetera clause” (1987, 60).

Acting and Knowing

How do actors keep the inherent intractability of everyday work situations in check? How do they “wave their hand” in ambiguous situations? Obviously, seasoned administrators like Judy are good at it. The conundrum so often resides in the unrecognized assumptions of the observer—in particular, in the pervasive Cartesian bias in our culture that suggests that mastering a particular situation is equal to knowing it. By organizing our thoughts correctly, we can be certain that what we know corresponds as best as possible with what is out there. Confidence comes out of good thinking.¹² According to this intellectualist view, people succeed in moving about in complex social–moral environments by applying some kind of a priori knowledge. This knowledge, which they have picked up through formal training and informal socialization, tells them how to interpret the situation and where to go. According to the intellectualist view, they have the situation—or better yet, a representation of it—more or less resolved in advance in their head. They have to, according to the intellectualist view: How else would they be able to recognize the situation at hand as a meaningful situation at all?

Not only is this hardly a plausible reading of the way Judy goes about doing her job, it also entirely misses the point of what is required to navigate the kind of everyday administrative situations that confront Judy. Let’s take rule application—the quintessential administrative task—as an example. The case of the 56 Slovenians provides a good example. What does it take for Judy to apply rules in this case? To suggest that Judy has resolved the situation in advance of acting on it, that she, in one way or another, merely applies her knowledge of the relevant legal rules and organizational procedures, does not fit Judy’s own account of how she dealt with this case. For example, several times she emphasizes the newness of the situation (“that is something that you have to create out of nothing,” “you need to find creative solutions”), the circumstance that she and her colleagues had never dealt with such a situation before. How do you prepare for novelty? Also, it is the interactive, practical quality of her story that strikes the reader. A large part of the work, as she says, consists of getting other actors to act in concert. She doesn’t resolve the situation from behind her desk, mulling things over in her head. Rather, Judy’s description of how she dealt with the Slovenian situation has a strong improvisational flavor of making do, of thinking on one’s feet.

Everyday administrative situations are characterized by novelty, deep uncertainty, and the requirement to act on the situation, to find some kind of resolution that is both feasible and acceptable. Benjamin Barber once beautifully captured the intrinsically practical–moral nature of the

administrator's predicament: "It is not granted to political judges not to judge, and that knowledge alters the character of judgement itself" (1988, 208). The problem that administrators face is to arrive at reasonable, acceptable, and feasible judgment under conditions of high uncertainty—not, as Barber emphasizes, to arrive at truth or justice in the abstract (1988, 206).¹³ This requires not just that we apply decontextualized knowledge, but that we draw on our understanding of human experience and life forms. And that understanding, as we have seen, is never fully articulated or even articulable (Taylor 1995a, viii). I believe it is this moving about in a moral-political environment of high uncertainty that gives accounts of everyday administrative work such as Judy's their peculiar improvisational character. But improvisation is not random; it doesn't imply that everything goes (Wagenaar and Cook 2003, 150). Whatever it is that administrators—or for that matter, all practitioners—do, it is certainly not devoid of reason and rationale. But what account of reason in practical affairs does not require the prior erection of the epistemic foundations of the situation at hand?

Rules do play an important role in structuring the situation, but more as an inherent part of the evolving situation at hand than as formal codified guidelines. The rules that are relevant to the situation with the Slovenians, for example, do not act as blueprints or templates for action. They are not internal mechanisms that cause Judy to act in a certain way (Lynch 2001, 141).¹⁴ Instead, setting constraints and suggesting possibilities, the rules are simultaneously part of the problem as it presents itself to Judy and her colleagues, and part of the solution. The rules structure the situation; they signal to Judy that this situation requires attention. At the same time, the rules suggest what is possible and feasible (do not let the Slovenians enter Dutch territory; you only have 48 working hours). But perhaps even more important, for the rule to be able to act as a rule it is important that Judy has a grasp of what the *point* is of using that rule in that particular situation. In other words, the rule, if it is to function as a rule at all, cannot be seen apart from Judy's grasp of the rule. Without that it would literally be a dead letter.¹⁵

One way to describe Judy's account of the situation of the Slovenians is that she *understands* the situation without having articulated knowledge of it. She knows what to do without necessarily having fully rounded mental representations of the whole situation. Differently put, the understanding is in the doing. She understands what is right or fitting to do in this particular situation by acting on it. Or as Taylor puts it, Judy's understanding of the situation is "carried in patterns of appropriate action: that is, action which conforms to a sense of what is fitting and right ... her actions are responsive throughout to this sense of rightness, but the 'norms' may be quite unformulated, or formulated

only in fragmentary fashion" (1993, 51). Judy's story of the 56 Slovenians displays the unified account of knowing and acting that is characteristic of so much (administrative) practice. What Judy knows is not held in memory, but instead embodied in the actions she engages in.¹⁶

Interaction

Administrators move about in indeterminate everyday situations by engaging in open-ended, action-driven dialogue with the world. Structure resides in situationally bound administrative practice. Yet, this unified account of knowing and acting doesn't explain how Judy, and other administrators like her, sense, with any measure of consistency and reliability, what is the right or fitting thing to do. How does Judy know in indeterminate, intractable situations where to go?

The answer lies in the social, communal character of knowing. This observation should be understood in two different albeit closely related ways. First, knowing is social in the sense of being rooted in, being part of, a largely unarticulated reservoir of background knowledge. Unarticulated, as we have already seen, means that actors are hardly aware of it (Suchman's "waving of our hand") and that it is much larger than we can grasp. We are able to act rightly in unstructured, ambiguous situations that require us to improvise because we are immersed in a social-moral collective that we share with our fellow actors, both inside and outside the organization. By being enveloped by this huge background of beliefs, understandings, images, habits, narratives, norms, values, and *epistèmes*, stretching out in all directions of the social universe, we are able to make sense of a situation—to understand it as being the situation it is. Being part of a community is what makes practical judgment possible in the first place. Understanding implies immersion in a life form.

Second, knowing is communal in terms of what is at stake when administrators engage in practical judgment. This aspect of the communal nature of administrative practice follows from the consequential character of human acting. It is characteristic of the everyday world of work, as opposed to the idealized world of organizational theory, that it is more about consequences than intentions. Acting is consequential not only in the sense that it is experience driven (we keep our eye on the desired and expected outcome), but also that it is implication driven. We know that by acting on a particular situation we put ourselves on the line: our reputation for trustworthiness, reliability, and sound judgment. Acting affects our standing in the group because the consequences of our actions do not end when the situation we are acting in has ended. It is the nature of acting that the consequences of our actions, both for those who are affected by our actions as for our reputation, extend well beyond the situation that prompted the action.

This is not just an empirical observation, but also a moral statement, for we deem a person who disavows her responsibility for her actions shallow and unreliable. Acting assumes sincerity, and thus it is integrally bound with trustworthiness, integrity, and commitment (Beiner 1983, 137).

Administrative practice is inherently dialogical and interactive. Although Judy uses a rationalistic vocabulary, this is what she means when she talks throughout the interview of “coordinating” and “talking to her coordinator.” To be effective in practice implies that administrators must be willing to understand and be influenced by the point of view of other members of their community, be they clients or colleagues. In this way practice theory transcends the dichotomy between individual and community. Good administrative practice is not just an individual achievement or a particular faculty of the mind. The categories, norms, and standards are in everyone’s possession and available for others as grounds for assessing the rightness or reasonableness of the administrator’s actions. In fact, productive interactions with clients and colleagues are made possible through this transparency of practical judgment. Administrative judgment is not the sum of a vast series of judgments of individual administrators, who each act on the situation at hand. Instead, administrative practice expresses a community of standards, the commonality and integrity of an administrative collective. Or, as Wagenaar and Cook put it, “[P]ractice is . . . a way to transform the historical, cognitive, emotional, and experiential capital of a particular community in purposeful collective action” (2003, 151).

Conclusion

Judy’s story is an example of what the work of public administrators entails when it is seen as a form of practice. In formal terms, public administrators apply rules to concrete cases. Judy’s story shows in rich detail that rules are only partial and “irremediably incomplete” descriptions of administrative situations (Suchman 1987, 101). Formal rules need to be completed by the kind of implicit work that Judy demonstrates in her story. What does this implicit work entail?

Following Suchman’s line of argument, the key task of administrators can be described as follows: Confronted with the complexity and overwhelming detail of everyday work situations, administrators have to turn the partial descriptions of such situations, as exemplified in formal rules and procedures, into concrete practical activities with acceptable and predictable outcomes. This means that administrators have to anchor general descriptions to concrete objects and actions. A different way to put this is, as we have seen, is to say that administrators make practical judgments about common situations.

Practical judgment concerns the relationship between the universal and the particular. In traditional Weberian thinking, that would mean the particulars of the situation are subsumed under the universal of legal rule and specialized knowledge. In the face of the complexity, indeterminacy, and unpredictability of everyday work situations, as Judy’s story makes clear, this interpretation of practical judgment is hardly an adequate description of what administrators do when they do their job. In most cases judgment takes place in situations where either the general rule is lacking, where there is no obvious way to determine which rule is relevant to the situation at hand, or where the application of the rule results in unforeseen effects. In such situations, as Judy’s story makes abundantly clear, practical judgment implies that the general principle that guides or legitimates the activities of administrators must be produced from the particulars. Although to the uninformed outsider it seems as if administrators like Judy operate in a well-ordered bureaucratic world organized according to fixed rules, stable routines, and dependable procedures, from the perspective of the person on the work floor we know this stability is hard won. Routines are an optical illusion. Instead of describing administrative work as following guidelines or applying knowledge, at an experiential level it can best be described as an active, ongoing orientation in a shared world. Administrative work is, in a deep sense of the word, an accomplishment.¹⁷

This ongoing orientation, as we have seen, involves above all acting on the situation at hand. Acting is continuous with knowing. The received view of administrative work as the application of a more or less circumscribed, fixed knowledge base is abandoned for a more holistic view of knowing in action. In this view knowledge is simultaneously representational and emergent. Knowledge helps the administrator to orient herself in the situation at hand, but by acting on the situation, the feedback from her actions allows her to adjust the initial understanding.¹⁸ Knowledge is thus simultaneously a condition for and a consequence of acting.¹⁹ Knowing, as embodied and enacted knowledge, allows the administrator to extend herself beyond what is known.

“Actions,” as Strauss observes, “are embedded in interactions” (1993, 24). One of the most striking aspects of Judy’s story is the intensity of her involvement with others. Whenever an individual administrator such as Judy acts, she involves and implicates her social group. Judy makes this clear when she says that in dealing with the Registration Center, she routinely coordinates the activities of herself, the legal experts in her department, and the employees of the Registration Centers. But what does “coordination” mean here? Not the stringing together of distinct activities that have become dispersed through the regular division of labor in complex organizations. Judy

uses the term “coordination” to describe an intricate, ongoing process of practical judgment that involves two distinct though related tasks. The more immediate and instrumental task is that of alignment. Alignment makes it possible to extend administrative knowing into space and time. By aligning our judgments and actions with those of others, we not only subscribe to a larger (organizational) purpose, we literally create the common enterprise that is the public agency.

In a wider and deeper sense, however, alignment is a prerequisite of every form of practice. Differently put, interaction is not an add-on to preexisting activities. It is through the active participation in communities that meaningful actions emerge at all. The social situatedness of action structures the activities of individual administrators by going beyond itself and by implicating the larger community within which situations have meaning. Thus, in the context of practice theory, the concept of “community” describes the social configurations in which the principles, values, purposes, and standards are formulated and weighed that identify some activities as worthwhile, and by which some activities distinguish themselves as meaningful or competent. This “other-regarding” (Forester 1999, 46) suggests that good practice—and for that matter, practical judgment—is inherently dialogical and interactive. To be effective in practice implies that actors must be willing to understand and to be influenced by the point of view of other members of their community. Interaction, as Barnes puts it, sustains practice (2001, 24). Alignment in this deeper sense shows the extent to which all forms of practice must be seen as a collective accomplishment.

A final observation about the collective nature of practical judgment is in place here. Interacting, as a key element of practical judgment, points toward the intrinsically public nature of practice. “To judge is to disengage our private perspective and engage a public sympathy,” says Barber (1988, 197). In terms of our project, administrative judgment is not monological, but dialogical; not a mental faculty, but both the act and the product of engaging with a community. Whenever an administrator such as Judy assesses a situation and acts on it, the ensuing judgments pertain to the particular administrative community of which she is an active member (Barber 1988, 203). It is that specific social-cultural-moral community that provides the categories, situations, norms, standards, and exemplars that guide her assessment of situations. They are in everyone’s possession and available for others as grounds for assessing the rightness or reasonableness of the administrator’s actions.

In fact, productive interactions with clients and colleagues are made possible through this transparency of practical judgment. Dialogue, both overt and internal, constitutes the act of judging. In this sense, practical judg-

ment—and its wake, administrative practice—is “enlarged thought,” extending and anchoring the fragile ensemble of observations, beliefs, convictions, and personal feelings into the larger community we are a part of (Beiner 1983, 51). Conversely, any act of judging is also constitutive of the community from which it arises. By entering into a dialogue with other members of that community, be they colleagues or clients, the administrator discovers what unites her and separates her from the other members. Judgment and practice do not only flow from the responsibility we have for the flourishing of our community, but simultaneously forms an assertion of what kind of associations we want to have with others, and, by extension, what kind of person we are.

Contrary to an instrumentalist understanding of administrative work, when administrators act on the situation at hand, their object of concern is always the “very form of relating together” (Beiner 1983, 138). Administrators do not rely on colleagues for merely instrumental reasons (to collect information, enjoy the latest gossip, ask for advice), having the freedom to engage colleagues or decide to go it alone—although they do that, too. An administrator such as Judy involves others above all to express, and thereby sustain, through the way she relates to her clients and colleagues how she perceives her community and what kind of communal life she deems desirable. As Beiner puts it, “All political judgments are—implicitly at least—judgments about the form of collective life that is desirable for us to pursue within a given context of possibilities. The commonality of judging subjects is internal to, or constitutive of, the judgment, not merely contingent or external to it” (1983, 138). In more general terms, administrators’ actions express the nature of the public body that, given the possibilities and constraints of our time, both they and our society at large aspire to.

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Notes

1. Orr (1996) makes a similar argument about labor studies, as does Strauss for the sociology of labor. Strauss, for example, observes, “Studies in the sociology of work, earlier as well as now, are not focused on the social mechanics of work—work as interaction—but rather on gender, class, occupation, professional and other determinants of work, and the consequences of work on these” (1993, 52).
2. For example, King, writing about the antigovernment mood in the United States, observes, “This [a conversation with a colleague] provided me an opportunity to air my frustrations about the lack of scholarly work focusing on what administrators *do*. Many of our respected colleagues and friends have written about the current anti-government era, but their focus is primarily on defending or grounding the legitimacy of the administrative state. This is good work that is needed but it fails, unfortunately, to address the question of what administrators can do about the anti-government era and fails to connect with the lived experience of administrators ...” (King and Stivers, 1998: xiii; emphasis in original).
3. There are two possible exceptions to this observation that space does not allow me to discuss at any length. The first is Roethlisberger and Dickson’s work on informal groups, which emphasizes the social environment of work and what they term “interferences” such as mental fatigue. Key is their discovery of the informal organization and the “social value” aspects of labor conditions as important determinants of organizational effectiveness (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1939). Barnard, of course, famously picked up on this and extended the notion of the informal organization as a major coordinating mechanism in organisations (Barnard 1938 [1968]). The second exception is ethnographic accounts of everyday work. Good examples are Kusterer (1978) on bank clerks and factory workers and Orr (1996) on photocopier service technicians.
4. The literature on practice theory is rich and varied—in fact, too rich and varied to be discussed here with any prospect of doing justice to it. Moreover, and more importantly, the purpose of this article is not to provide an overview of practice theory, but to use some insights of contemporary practice theory to understand the nature of administrative work. For a brief run through of the different traditions in philosophy and social theory that inform contemporary practice theory, see Wagenaar and Cook (2003). Dunne (1993) provides an excellent discussion of some main philosophical strands in practice theory.
5. This approach to administrative practice is informed by different intellectual traditions. The main influence is a Wittgensteinian approach to action and rule following, particularly as it has been taken up and expanded in the work of Charles Taylor (1993, 1995b, 1995c). But, as I will make clear later, this approach to practice also builds on the sociology of work, particularly the ideas and insights of Anselm Strauss (1993). These ideas are strongly influenced by pragmatism, with its emphasis on acting as the royal road to knowing and the continuity between the actor and his environment. My approach to administrative practice also contains elements of ethnomethodology, particularly as it is used and applied by Lucy Suchman (1987) and Michael Lynch (2001). The interactive aspects of practice, as I will discuss these in this article, rest on the epistemic implications of Gadamer’s notion of what it takes to understand something in the human sciences, although these remain somewhat implicit in this article (Gadamer 1989; Dostal 2002). Of course, all of these thinkers are indebted to Aristotelian notions of practical reason (Bostock 2000; Dunne 1993).
6. Another indication is the contested vocabulary of Dutch immigration policy. For example, those entering the Netherlands from abroad with the intention of obtaining legal status are consistently called “asylum-seekers.” This term suggests that all immigrants are refugees seeking temporary shelter and will return when the situation in their home country has improved. In reality, by far the largest percentage of the foreigners who enter the country do so for economic reasons and have no intention of returning to their home country.
7. The interview was held in 2000, a period in which the number of refugees and immigrants who applied for legal status increased with tens of percentage points annually.
8. This aspect of Judy’s narrative is a happy consequence of the artificiality of the interview situation. Quickly sensing that the interviewer lacked detailed knowledge of immigration law, she spontaneously explained throughout what she thought what otherwise would be obscure. Normally, transcripts of practice situations have a more abbreviated, almost shorthand quality, with most of the relevant background knowledge that is required to fully grasp the situation in the background, suggested rather than explained. Practitioner talk is for insiders only. Judy’s interview is in this sense an unusual situation.
9. Another drawback of overtime is that it results in conflicts with her partner. In another part of the interview, Judy states that her partner started to object to the long hours she spent at the office each evening, and that she had agreed she would try to keep a lid on overtime.
10. Compare Wenger (1998), “I intend the term *negotiation* to convey a flavour of continuous interaction, of gradual achievement, and of give-and-take.”
11. The term “setting” transcends the dichotomy between the image of context as a fixed, observer-independent system of structures and constraints impinging on the actor and the ethnomethodological notion of context as purely constructed in the interactive experiences of actors. Setting encompasses both (Lave 1988, 151).
12. See, for example, Cook and Brown: “Descartes’ famous “*Cogito ergo sum*” (I think therefore I am) is both a begin-

ning and a conclusion for the traditional epistemology. It is the conclusion that the thinking self is the one thing we cannot doubt—everything else, from the impressions of our senses to ‘objective’ claims about the world, is subject to one or another degree of uncertainty. It is through analytic reasoning, Cartesians maintain, that we can best minimize or ‘control for’ the clouding influences of our senses and subjective impressions, and thus acquire our most reliable knowledge about the world” (1999, 384).

13. As Barber states, “Some reasonable judgment must be reached even where none can be epistemologically warranted” (1988, 206).
14. See Beiner for a more formal treatment of this issue: “[W]hatever rules are available must be applied to the particular situation in hand, and this application cannot itself be dictated by a rule, for then one would fall into an infinite regress of rule governing rule governing rule and so on. Human agents are not subject to such a regress because rule-application for them itself presupposes what it is to apply a rule, which is not in turn dictated by a rule” (1983, 131). Beiner uses Kant’s distinction between determinant judgment (where the universal is given in advance of the subsumption) and reflective judgment (where the universal is lacking and must somehow be produced from out of the particulars) to argue that rule application always implies reflective judgment on the level of metarules for the selection and correct application of first-order rules. “This second-order level of judgement involved in the application of rules brings into play that whole range of qualities of practised experience and skill that are the mark of a seasoned player—in short all that would in the political domain go by the name of prudence.”
15. This suggests that when we talk of rules in the abstract, we are only able to make sense of the rule because we take our grasp of the point of the rule for granted. This grasp is based on concrete, practical experience with the kind of situation to which the abstract rule refers. Oakeshott (1962) captures this very effectively by comparison to cooking: “It might be supposed that an ignorant man, some edible materials, and a cookery book compose together the necessities of a self-moved (or concrete) activity called cooking. But nothing is further from the truth. The cookery book is not an independently generated beginning from which cooking can spring; it is nothing more than an abstract of somebody’s knowledge of how to cook: it is the stepchild, not the parent of the activity....” Beiner suggests something similar when he states that “our ability to identify and class particulars under the correct description is not exhausted by what we are able to specify by explicit formulation, but presupposes a grasp of the point of classing something under one description rather than another” (1983, 134). Thus, formal rules, like cookbooks, do not act as instructions, telling the actor what to do. Rather, they are repositories of the accrued experience and understanding of a community of people. In that sense, they function as signposts in a practical–moral landscape, giving the actor a bearing, suggesting what fruitful and feasible directions to take, and providing standards to assess the direction finally taken.
16. “We mark the distinction between what is known in the sense of what is ‘held in memory’ and what is ‘embodied in action’ by the terms *knowledge* and *knowing*, respectively” (Wagenaar and Cook 2003, 152; see also Cook and Brown 1999).
17. Barnes writes, “Rules can never be sufficiently informative or well-exemplified to keep instances of rule-following behaviour relevantly identical in all the diverse situations wherein rules are followed.... Whatever is accounted agreement in the following of a rule is produced by the membership that follows it, not by ‘the rule itself’” (2001, 26).
18. For example, Keller and Keller note, “... in which an individual’s knowledge is simultaneously to be regarded as representational and emergent, prepatterned and aimed at coming to terms with actions and products that go beyond the already known. Action has an emergent quality, which results from the continual feedback from external events to internal representations and from the internal representations back to enactment” (1993, 127).
19. In this way, a reciprocal, dialectical relation exists between problems and solutions. This is a relationship in which the different elements are mutually constitutive or, as Lave puts it, in which “its component elements are created, are brought into being, only in conjunction with one another” (1988, 146). There is more than an echo of Dewey here. I conceive of the way administrators move back and forth between problems, solutions, the possibilities and constraints the situation presents, the consequences, both intended and unintended, of initial interventions in the situation, the contingencies that suddenly present themselves, and the meaning all this gives to situations in this evolving dialectic, as a form of *inquiry* as Dewey conceived it—an ongoing conversation with the world. This reciprocal relationship between actor and environment is what I call situatedness in the preceding sections. Thus, situatedness is more than just the observation that an action or actor is located in space or time. It is even more than the observation that a tight coupling exists between actor and environment (Burke 1994, 27). Situatedness is a dynamic, relational perspective on the way administrators deal with the everyday problems of their working environment that expresses both the routine and generative aspect of practice. It suggests that by engaging in practice, administrators perpetuate and maintain the organizational and institutional structure in which they operate, while at the same time they are creative and innovative in that they find novel solutions to the myriad of unexpected, problematic situations that come their way in the course of a working day.

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