

Context-Specific Images of the Archetypical Bureaucrat: Persistence and Diffusion of the Bureaucracy Stereotype

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When the word "bureaucrat" is used, it often bears no relation to the concept of bureaucracy as an efficient way of organizing an administration, as it does in Max Weber's writings (Weber, 1922). Even "civil servant" carries a negative connotation. Civil servants are lazy and avoid risks (Merton, 1940). If a civil servant takes initiative, this is considered as being engendered by the wish to protect one's own or one's administration's interests, as the public choice approach would state (Niskanen, 1971; Dunleavy, 1992). These connotations pervade all uses of the words.

There are many jokes about civil servants. Most officials on television series are portrayed as corrupt. The alienation between the administration and citizens is also a common theme in literature. Beck-Jorgensen analyzed novels in which government-citizen relations serve as the central theme (e.g. Kafka's *The Castle*). His analysis showed that when dealing with the alienation between the citizen and government, novels or the characters in them never refer to concrete activities, facts or events, but to perceived aims, consequences and contexts of the administration in question (Beck-Jorgensen, 1994).

Evaluations of government are not only based on allegedly objective facts, but also on pre-established images. Context determines when these pre-established images or stereotypes surface and when an honest evaluation of government is made. Even though we find similar processes throughout the entire government, we will focus on the image of civil servants and bureaucrats. Part of the image of the administration is generated by stereotypes. We will not only focus on the content of these stereotypes, but also on the factors that determine their persistence and diffusion despite observations to the contrary. Governments worldwide are making efforts to modernize their administrations in order to give them a more positive image. The existence of negative stereotypes of the administration suggests that any modernizing efforts by governments are bound to fail.

In this article we want to do two things: illustrate how stereotyping theory can help to explain citizens' image of government and demonstrate how, by approaching the stereotype of civil servants as a social norm, the image of civil servants is diffused and preserved.

The Image of the Administration

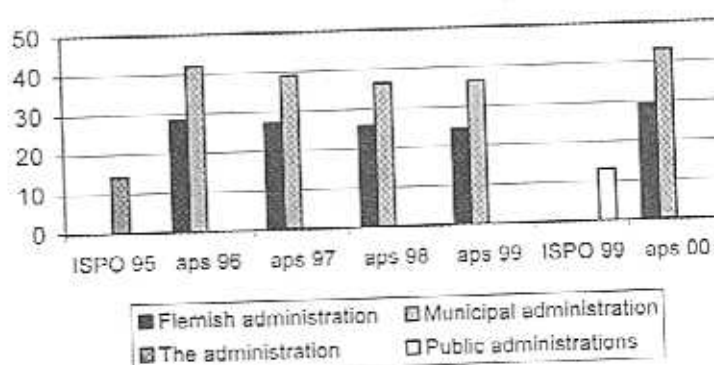
Government efforts to ameliorate the public image of bureaucracy often focus on encounters with public service (Van de Walle and Bouckaert, 2003). The main question is why specific evaluations of government are generally positive; however, when the same people are together with friends, in the pub, on the bus, etc., they speak about government in demonstratively negative way. We think this can be explained by revisiting the theory on stereotypes (Ott and Shafritz, 1994; Rainey, 1996).

Gordon W. Allport, one of the founding fathers of stereotyping theory, attributed two main characteristics to a stereotype. There is an attitude of favor or disfavor, and these attitudes are related to an over-generalized belief (Allport, 1958). Generalization means that people refer to groups or structures as so-called out-groups and not to specific persons or institutions. Confrontation with facts that run counter to the stereotype then does not imply one has to change the stereotype itself, but rather classify these facts as exceptions to the general rule (e.g. All bureaucrats are lazy, except for my neighbor, who's a hard-working civil servant).

Charles Goodsell previously observed this phenomenon by concluding that citizens have a negative view of government in general, but once this government becomes more concrete, the negative attitude largely disappears (Goodsell, 1994). The evaluation of government - as a whole is different from the evaluation of the separate agencies that comprise government (Princeton Survey Research Associates and Pew Charitable Trust, 2000). Similar observations are found everywhere. Parents evaluate the educational system in a negative way, but are positive about their children's school (Loveless, 1997). Individual members of parliament are rated favorably, but Congress has a negative image (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995). Citizens distrust government, but give public services good ratings. Dinsdale and Marson refer to research which shows that the more specific a public service under question is, the higher the satisfaction score.

A good example of this theory can be found in the following meta-analysis of opinion surveys in Belgium. Both the yearly APS survey and the ISPO-election research use the same method; however, the former asks for trust in the "Flemish (regional) administration" and the "municipal administration," while the latter gauges trust in "administration" and "public administration". Even though the context of the surveys is slightly different (general survey vs. election research), we see a vast difference between the levels of trust in the specific & concrete municipal and Flemish administration and the general administration or public administration. The more abstract the concept, the less trust. This seems to confirm that the more concrete the question, the less impact of the stereotype.

Figure 1: Trust in Administrations (% trust)



One of the most obvious expressions of the stereotype becomes visible in public-private dichotomies. Negative attitudes toward public services are not resulting then from how these services work, but simply from the

¹ can be compared to 'state'-level in the US

observation that they are public services. Van Slyke and Roch researched user satisfaction with social and health services in the state of Georgia (Van Slyke and Roch, 2002). Government offered some of these services, and others were offered by not-for-profit organizations. They found that satisfaction partly depended on perceived status of these services. Respondents who thought the service was offered by government gave it a lower rating. Dissatisfied users were inclined to think they were dealing with a government-organized service, even if this was not the case in reality. According to Deakin and Wright, this is a result of the political discourse that is using the slogan "public bad, private good" as an "Orwellian incantation" (Deakin and Wright, 1990). Fox explains it as follows:

Damn-gummint [damn government] is a conflated aggregation, the illogical and shifting mingling of perceptions, symbols, examples, and nonsequitur inferences. Consider that every customer has had a bad experience with some private enterprise. But 'damn-bidness' [business] is not a conflated aggregation in high circulation (Fox, 1996).

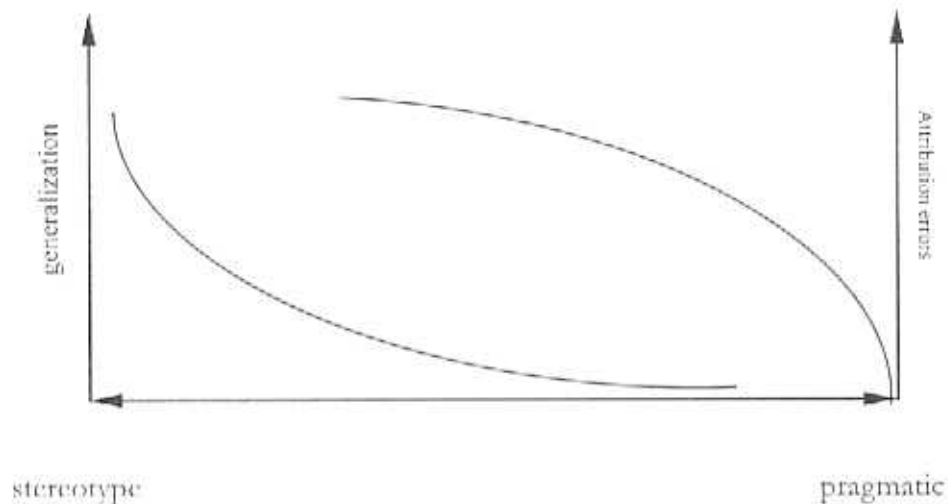
The most revealing research on this public-private stereotype can be found in *Bureaucratic Encounters: A Pilot Study in the Evaluation of Government Services*. When their respondents had the chance to compare private and public services, private services received a higher rating. When the questionnaire became more specific and respondents were asked to compare their last-used public and private organization or service, the difference between public and private disappeared (Katz, Gutek, Kahn and Barton, 1977).

Context appears to be the core factor in explaining differences in the evaluation of public services. In abstract surveys, probing for government in general, the prime referential framework is the stereotype. In more specific situations, actual experience or other forms of fact-based evaluations serve as the platform for opinions. During a spontaneous discussion about government or civil servants, people will refer to the stereotype. In a customer survey, the concrete experience of the encounter will serve as a referential framework, because that information is more easily accessible. In opinion formation people use that information that lies closest at hand in their brain (Zaller, 1996). Context determines whether the opinion given is a pragmatic one (referring to the directly accessible, concrete, factual information) or an ideological one (referring to the easily accessible stereotype) (Katz, Gutek, Kahn and Barton, 1977). The border between these pragmatic and ideological answers is, however, sometimes difficult to define.

What makes it so difficult to change the clichéd image of government is the nature of government itself: many government tasks are very ambiguous. It is often quite difficult to distinguish between governmental and private sector tasks. As a result, many errors of attribution occur (Hoogland DeHoog, Lowery and Lyons, 1990). However, government is more than the administration and civil servants; there are also politics, scandals, laws, etc. which make the referential framework extremely broad and unspecified (Bouckaert and Van de Walle, 2003).

The figure below summarizes the previous paragraphs. Evaluations of the administration can be pragmatic or stereotyped, where a pragmatic evaluation means it is based on the actual encounter between the specific citizen and the specific public service. Such a pragmatic evaluation requires that the citizen does not make attribution errors and that the object of evaluation remains concrete. As errors of attribution occur more frequently and as the situation that has to be evaluated becomes more abstract, the impact of conventional images will become more apparent.

Figure 2: Pragmatic and Stereotypical Opinions on Administrations



When Stereotypes Become Social Norms: The Diffusion and Persistence of the Bureaucratic Stereotype

According to recent research, stereotyping is no longer emphasizing generalization and is moving away from cognitive explanations as well (Hinton, 2000).

Stereotypes do not simply exist in individuals' heads. They are socially and discursively constructed in the course of everyday communication, and, once objectified, assume an independent and sometimes prescriptive reality. It is naive to argue that stereotypes are simply a by-product of the cognitive need to simplify reality (Augoustinos and Walker, 1996: 222).

Van Langenhove and Harré bring the use and diffusion of stereotypes further into focus. The explanations provided by Van Langenhove and Harré are better able to expound the use and diffusion of stereotypes. Stereotypes are an instrument to position oneself in the discursive space (Van Langenhove and Harré, 1994: 368). They give the following example on the philosophers' stereotype:

Probably, in many cases the reason [for using the stereotypical image of 'philosophers'] can be very simple: people know that a certain public image is often used and that it makes rather a good impression when one simply conforms to the 'general' idea. So without too much reflection they will call upon that image. In terms of positioning this means first and above all that the speaker is positioning him/herself towards the other speaker as somebody who acts in conformity with the 'general ideas' that live in what (s)he believes to be their common moral order. If the addressee sees him(her)self as part of a moral order in which the cartoon-stereotypes of philosophers are not much appreciated, (s)he will possibly object and say something like 'wait a minute, that's unfair, not all philosophers are etc.'. Whether or not the other speaker will object depends to some extent on his/her beliefs about philosophers but equally so on how (s)he wants the conversation to proceed. If these persons are in the

middle of a business transaction, person B will probably not take up this point in order not to upset the other party.
(Van Langenhove and Harré, 1994: 367).

Stereotypes then may not be used for their cognitive value, but their use may be simply an expression of conformity to a social norm. The pervasiveness of negative images of bureaucrats may make deviation difficult, if not impossible. Expressing about a positive perspective of bureaucrats attracts scorn and laughter from one's environment. Deviating from the negative social norm is rebuked with social punishment.

Studying individual attitudes is not sufficient to explain pessimistic attitudes toward government, because the expression of these attitudes is part of a prejudice, fashion or even a cultural element. Citrin observed a "Zeitgeist" that stimulates anti-political rhetoric (Citrin, 1974). Distrust then becomes the basic attitude toward government, and there is social pressure to conform to this basic attitude. Sztompka uses the term "culture of distrust": "When a culture of trust - or culture of distrust - appears, the people are constrained to exhibit trust or distrust in all their dealings, independent of individual convictions, and departures from such a cultural demand meet with a variety of sanctions" (Sztompka, 1996).

This suggests that the focus of research should be on the diffusion dynamics and not on the alleged content of these stereotypes. Interference into its diffusion dynamics will not directly alter the stereotype, but merely facilitate contra-stereotypical expressions. Two questions remain: via which channels is diffusion done and how to explain the strength of the stereotype on the general opinion, even when a continuous stream of personal experiences may show it is not correct? These two questions are interrelated.

Bureaucratic condemnation is a popular element in research on negative images of government (see e.g. Lee, 2000). Thad E. Hall analyzed the ways in which civil servants were referred to in speeches by members of the US Congress (Hall, 2002). He found that four different terms were used: bureaucrat, public servant, civil servant and government worker. The word "bureaucrat" was mostly used in a negative context, and bureaucrats were also frequently contrasted to other groups, for example teachers and parents versus Washington education bureaucrats. His phrase, "Bureaucrats are everywhere yet nowhere," provides a valuable summary of the research, because he observed that these bureaucrats never seemed to work in a specific or identifiable agency. According to Haque bureaucratic bashing is a rather recent trend. As Canadian research suggests, citizens initially thought about politicians, not civil servants, when referring to trust in government (Dinsdale and Marson, 1999). Citizens do not consider civil servants as being at the origins of their distrust (Council for Excellence in Government, 1999). In spite of these comments, the political rhetoric has a solid impact on not only citizens' image of the administration, but also their attitudes to civil servants and politicians themselves (Ringeling, 1993; Terry, 1997).

In research on the diffusion of ideas and attitudes, the media receives most of the attention. The Council for Excellence in Government did research on how professions related to government were depicted in television series (Lichter, Lichter, Amundson and Center for Media and Public Affairs, 1999; Council for Excellence in Government, 2001). Notwithstanding a recently observed increase in positive images, the original research depicted a gradual decline of the image of public servants since 1955, and public servants in television series were found to commit twice as much crime as other professional groups. Though teachers and law enforcers were more often than other professions depicted in a positive way, they were in those cases not presented as public officials. Most positive images referred to whistleblowers or people standing up against the system. Positive images were related to individual persons, negative ones to the system. The latter observation is found in most of the research. When bureaucrats are featured in a positive way, they are in most cases front-office workers or they wear uniforms. They are hardly ever classic bureaucrats (Lee and Paddock, 2001). Movies focus on specific professions and on individual heroes (Gabrielian, 2000). This focus on heroes conforms to the findings of the stereotyping theory. The expectancy violation theory states that people not conforming to our expectation, such as hard-working bureaucrats, are evaluated in a more extreme way than other persons with comparable characteristics, such as normal hard-working individuals (Hinton, 2000).

Despite complaints by civil servants about their negative image, they frequently contribute to its persistence. Studies among young civil servants at the Belgian Ministry of Finance on their motivation to work for the ministry revealed that their evaluation of the older civil servants was rather negative and not different from that of the general population (Hondeghe, Parys, Steen and Vandenaebiele, 2002). This leads to a situation where it is *bon ton* not only to express negative attitudes about civil servants among citizens, but also among civil servants themselves. This process is not only found among civil servants; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse found that it is the (American) politicians that are the most critical of the functioning of Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995).

An often-neglected concept in the study of the diffusion of negative stereotypes of civil servants is that of interpersonal communication. The reason for this omission is perhaps the lack of attractiveness of it as compared to media analysis or research on bureaucratic criticizing. Studying interpersonal communication requires techniques less common to public administration research. A firm theoretical base for research on interpersonal communication can be found in the diffusion studies in sociology and communication science (Rogers, 1995). Even though these studies primarily focus on the diffusion of innovations, they are also useful for analyzing the persistence of opinions. In these studies, communication is not restricted to mass-communicational channels, and a plea is made for interpersonal communication (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1965). These theories emphasize the role of multi-actor communication networks. In his research on political attitudes, Weatherford found that political attitudes are largely influenced by the social context in which the owners of the attitude circulate. This means that these attitudes can show a large degree of harmonization within a social network. This is not only due to the self-selection of interaction partners within the network (Weatherford, 1982). In the spiral of silence hypothesis, the perception of the composition of the public opinion influences the inclination to express one's own opinion by the fear of becoming isolated with a divergent opinion (Noelle-Neuman, 1974; Glynn, Hayes and Shanahan, 1997). The expression of personal opinions is being influenced by what one thinks is the general opinion. Perceptions of the public opinion are thus a key concept. If individuals believe that others in their environment have a negative opinion of government, they will also express themselves in a negative way, because they feel this is what society expects them to do. Most of this social pressure disappears in private discussion or in a survey. The bulk of the research on this phenomenon has focused on racial issues. Even though few respondents identified themselves as in favor of segregation, the same people estimated the number of segregationists in their society as amounting to twice or three times the number of respondents who actually expressed themselves as being segregationists (O'Gorman, 1975). Similarly, respondents evaluated teachers in a positive way, but still stated that most people evaluate teachers in a negative way (Vrieze, van Kessel and Mensink, 2000).

Social Engineering: Changing or Circumventing the Stereotype?

Improving the image of administration is an important concern for governments. In the final section of this article, we want to discuss a number of possibilities for changing citizens' opinion of public administration. Whether such a change in the stereotypical lackluster image of civil servants will have an impact on the actual functioning of government and the public administration is not clear. The desire to change or abolish the stereotypical image is mainly a normative option.

More and better communication is the fashionable solution. Classic government communication however is just one of many channels via which the opinion on public services is diffused. Initiatives to improve the functioning of administration and communication about these improvements will not necessarily lead to a change in the image of civil servants. Quality improvements could lead to more positive assessments in customer satisfaction surveys, because opinions in these surveys are expressed in concrete context. The specificity of this context enables the administration under question to become the prime reference framework for the creation of an opinion. This specific context is not present in most cases, which causes the stereotypical image to act as the prime referential framework.

Based on our analysis of the reasons for the persistence of the stereotypical image, we can identify two possible ways of changing the negative stereotype. One focuses on the specification of opinions and is an accommodation of the stereotype by making it redundant; the other consists of a frontal attack on the stereotype itself by focusing on its diffusion dynamics.

The first approach builds on the observation that the more specific the object of evaluation, the closer the evaluation reflects the object and the less impact of the stereotype. Bureaucrats have a negative image, while teachers, nurses and fire fighters are more valued. If one changes one's identity from a civil servant in the Ministry of Public Works to an airport designing engineer or from health bureaucrat to hospital manager or doctor (even when this doctor is only involved in administrative tasks and not practicing medicine), the public appreciation increases. Then there is no longer a Federal Government organizing productivity, but instead a consortium of very specific "Agencies for..." (see also Dubnick and Justice, 2002).

Such an approach does not actually change the stereotype; it simply removes a number of professions and institutes from the headers "bureaucrat" or "government" and is, therefore, a defensive reaction. Though this strategy is useful, there remain professions and agencies that do not qualify for this exemption. The emptying of these categories may result in a rest-category filled with bureaucrats and administrations dealing with coordination, general policy preparation, ceremonial functions, etc., thereby actually strengthening the stereotype because of the lack of concreteness of their tasks. However, the most important argument against this approach is the possible loss of a collective governmental identity and esprit de corps among civil servants. The creation of multiple crosscutting identities undermines the previously existing single dominant image.

The second approach for challenging the negative stereotype focuses on the dynamics of diffusion and preservation. It tries to remove the constraints for expressing ideas in a contra-stereotypical way by creating a new dominant image. This approach requires a government to play an active role, because it must dominate the public discourse. Civil servant arch-types featured in television series have to radiate a positive image. Actual civil servants must refrain from publicly discussing the tedious characteristics of their jobs, and politicians should refrain from bureaucratic bashing. Massive communication on modernization and quality improvement initiatives may also contribute to this end. Unfortunately, government's potential impact on most of these aspects is rather limited, and the need for a domination of the discourse implies that scattered initiatives will not generate the desired result. According to the stereotype theory, they will be disregarded as exceptions to the general rule. Nevertheless, governments can train their staff; they can attempt to make politicians aware of the consequences of their words.

This approach would be rather unprecedented but not necessarily impossible. With regard to campaigns against drunk-driving, Dearing and Rogers offer the example of initiators who were able to convince Hollywood to include designated drivers into their television series. In a similar plan of action, politicians refuse to be photographed while smoking, because they are concerned about the message this habit sends to young people. A social engineering process can be time-consuming, and results may not come immediately. Such an approach is likely to encounter resistance because of democratic concerns. The boundary between honest communication and propaganda is often blurred, and social engineering initiatives may create an atmosphere in which critical comments are more damaging than before.

Conclusion

Citizens' evaluation of government and public administration is largely based on pre-existing images. Perceptions are not only based on facts, but also on stereotypes. Observations then become supposition instead of fact-driven. The main characteristic of stereotypes of bureaucrats is, as in all stereotypes, generalization: opinions and statements never demonstrate a concrete foundation. Whether or not these stereotypes have a strong impact on assessments depends on the context. The most common prime referential framework for formulating an opinion is the negative stereotype of bureaucrats while factual information and concrete aspects are required.

Research has focused on the nature and content of these labels. However, it often failed to address the issue of the persistence of stereotypes despite contradictory information. We have tried to express the tendency of the content of stereotypes to become a social norm and how social pressure can stimulate people to express themselves in a way

consistent with the stereotype. In the final part of the article, we have outlined two strategies for administrations to alter dominant negative images. The first strategy stresses the creation of new identities, which allows opinions to become more specific. The potential scope of the stereotype is limited, but the stereotype itself is not changed. The second strategy focuses on the channels for diffusion and persistence of the stereotype. By dominating these channels, it is possible to change the content of the stereotype or at least to make divergence from it easier by making the stereotype less dominant in discourse.

This article takes governments' preference for creating a more positive image of the public administration as an implicit assumption. Citizens' negative attitudes towards government and public administration have an undeniable impact on their behavior, such as paying taxes and obeying the law and on their general willingness to comply (Tyler and Huo, 2002; Levi, 1996). Stereotypes also have their merits. Negative framing of bureaucrats has certainly contributed to support for recent administrative reforms. In the pressure for these reforms, realities and images or symbols are intrinsically linked, and the latter often have a creative effect. There is growing attention for the importance and merits of symbols and rhetoric in public administration (Farmer and Patterson, 2003). Harmonizing reality and image is perhaps not only impossible, but also not entirely desirable.

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Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Dave Gelders and Melvin Dubnick for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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