

## Bureaucratic Power in Note-Writing

Authoritative Expertise within the State

### Abstract

What produces the power of senior civil servants at ministries of finance, positioned at the top of the bureaucratic hierarchy? Max Weber has claimed that a hierarchical organization, meritocratic recruitment and procedural work provide bureaucracies with legitimacy. In particular he insisted on the role of *Fachwissen* (disciplinary knowledge) obtained through formal education. However, he also argued for the role of *Dienstwissen*, forms of knowledge and skills stemming from the experience of service in itself. Weber did not elaborate on this concept in detail, and few analysts of governmental expertise have examined this notion. We draw on the practice-turn in sociology, combining the study of governmental expertise with micro-sociological studies of administrative practices. By analysing interviews with 48 senior civil servants at the British, French and Norwegian ministries of finance about their daily practices, this article demonstrates that bureaucratic note-writing and the procedural evaluation of such notes constitute a key form of expertise that yields authority. The study provides an analytical framework for understanding what administrative expertise consists of, how it is integral to procedural work, the forms bureaucratic hierarchies take in practice and how these three dimensions provide authority.

**Keywords:** bureaucratic power; expertise; authority; note-writing; Weber

Bureaucrats possess power and this is perhaps especially true of those at ministries of finance – but what produces this power in practice? If expertise legitimises power, what kind of expertise is required to gain top positions, close to political decision-makers? These are key questions in the study of power and strategies of legitimisation in sociology (Bourdieu 1989; Foucault 2004; Scott 2001; Weber 1992 [1921]). For more than a century, Max Weber has served as a key point of reference for sociologists analysing bureaucratic power in modern society. Weber was particularly concerned with how a special type of competence - *Fachwissen* (disciplinary competence) - produced legitimate power, i.e. authority (Weber 1972 [1921]: 128-129, 677; 1992 [1921]: 223-224, 1143-1144). To Weber, *Fachwissen* was fundamental to the making of what he described as legal-rational authority enabling bureaucratic authority. John Scott, following Weber's distinction between hierarchy and expertise as sources of authority, has also spoken of expertise as disciplinarily defined (Scott 2001; 2008).

However, in attempting to analyse and conceptualize bureaucratic power and competence, Weber also introduced another concept, *Dienstwissen*, which he described as stemming from the experiences gained through service. Interestingly, this concept indicates a more practice-oriented dimension to bureaucratic power and competence, which is often overlooked. This may be because Weber did not elaborate on *Dienstwissen* to the same extent as *Fachwissen*, nor did he describe in much detail how this practice-related competence is part of what produces bureaucratic authority. A practice-related approach to understanding bureaucratic power is the point of departure for this article.

Our approach also employs an additional key aspect of Weber's analysis, namely the significance of 'the file'. To be precise, we are not so much concerned with the activity of 'filing' and the issues of transparency and accountancy related to that. We are interested in the competence used to write files in the first place, i.e. the ability to write 'a good bureaucratic note', or *submissions*, as British civil servants call them. We are specifically interested in the notes prepared by senior civil servants at the ministries of finance in Britain, France and Norway for the political leadership to prepare for political decision-making and action. These senior civil servants defined note-writing as their main task when they were interviewed for this study. These notes represent the crux of bureaucratic elites' professional practice, their influence on policy and the exertion of their power. This article does not analyse the social background of bureaucratic elites or strategies of elite formation (Barberis 1996; Bourdieu 1989; Eymeri 2001; Kelsall 2013; Mendras and Suleiman 1997; Theakston and Fry 1989); instead, it focuses on the key sociological matter of the construction of hierarchy and the legitimisation of power, while enquiring how bureaucratic note-writing contributes to this. When assessing and discussing the legitimacy of the power of bureaucratic elites, as well as unequal access to such power, we need to understand what top bureaucrats' practice and competence consist of.

Studies of expertise within the bureaucracy have often focused on formal requirements and disciplinary knowledge, whereas practices, procedures and the more tacit knowledge and skills of everyday public administration have been investigated less. Scholars of science and technology who have spearheaded more practice- and materiality-oriented approaches (Knorr-Cetina 1981; Latour and Woolgar 1986 [1979]; Law 2002; Mol 2003; Marres 2005; Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and von Savigny 2002), have not shown much interest

in exploring the inner workings of the state-apparatus (but see second author 2014; Barry 2001; Latour 2002; Lascoumes and Le Galès 2004; first author 2015; Rhodes, Hart and Noordegraaf 2007). The post-Foucauldian governmentality tradition follows up the analysis of state power in a practice-oriented move, including the role of knowledge as an intrinsic part of political technologies. However, following Foucault, this body of work is predominantly focused on the ways in which bureaucratic power reaches out beyond the machinery of the inner state (Barry, Osborne and Rose 1996; Foucault 2004; Rose and Miller 1992). Also Weber was predominantly concerned with the way in which bureaucracy was directed outwards towards the client. Unlike the Foucauldian tradition, however, he was more concerned with analysing and understanding the hierarchic structure of the bureaucratic organization.

This paper draws on the practice turn in sociology, including its interest in the materialities of government, in analysing bureaucracy as an authoritative, hierarchical organization. We also combine the study of expertise in government with micro-sociological studies of administrative practices (Bezes and Joint-Lambert 2010). We do so by analysing 48 senior civil servants' practices at the ministries of finance in three European countries (Britain, France and Norway), all three of which have different traditions for administrative elite education and recruitment. For the interview material to shed light on such practices and the skills necessary for them, the interviews were conducted inductively, thereby avoiding pre-constructed categories of competence. Using a descriptive approach to ask the top bureaucrats to describe their daily tasks has teased out data that are not purely discursive but close to practice and automatic procedures that may often be taken for granted. Hence, tacit knowledge and skills are made explicit, showing categories of

competence that are meaningful to the senior civil servants, guiding their daily work at the ministries of finance.

This allows us to explore the specific competence required to reach the top echelons of ministerial bureaucracies and the way in which this legitimises bureaucratic power. We thus shed light on a key form of bureaucratic expertise which is often overlooked, a form of *Dienstwissen*.

After situating our approach in a wider scholarly landscape and presenting our data and methods, the analysis proceeds in four steps. First, we examine how the bureaucrats in all three countries, regardless of their differing formal educations, define their practice and competence as mainly consisting of writing notes for the political leadership. We describe the amount of time dedicated to this task and how central it is.

Second, we analyse the specific characteristics of this writing practice. Because these administrative notes are directed upwards to more senior bureaucrats and to the political leadership for decision-making, specific textual qualities are required. We will map how the interviewees characterize these writing skills which are similar between the three countries.

Third, we show how the ministries in all three countries have institutionalized systematic training and supervision in such note-writing. We analyse the continuous training, supervision and the perfection of such as an indicator of the role note-writing plays as an advanced and specific bureaucratic competence nurtured and valued in the three countries.

Fourth, we analyse and discuss how such on-the-job training and supervising subordinates help legitimise authority within the bureaucratic system; we also outline the interviewees' descriptions of their correction and improvement of their subordinates' notes. We argue that through this line-management system, which also serves as a quality

assurance and control system, the bureaucratic hierarchy is enacted and re-enacted in daily practice. Accordingly, this is not a study of the way in which a specific social group constitutes its power (Bourdieu 1989; Eymeri 2001), although this was also one of Weber's interests (Weber 1992 [1921]); instead, we present a broadened analytical framework for understanding what kind of competence is at play and valued in practice in the central administration, and how it contributes to constitute hierarchy and legitimise bureaucratic power.

### Expanding the understanding expertise and authority in the public administration

According to Weber, authority is legitimate power. His classical writings and ideal-typical model of rational-legal authority remain fundamental to our understanding of the legitimization of bureaucratic power. He explains rational-legal legitimacy as 'belief in the validity of legal statute and in functional (*sachlich*) competence based on rationally devised rules' (Weber 1988 [1921]: 398 *our translation*; 1994: 312). Bureaucrats should be recruited to and promoted within this hierarchic system based on their competence. Those possessing administrative power do so due to the positions they hold, ones situated in a system of distinctly categorized *areas of competence* and levels of hierarchy (Weber 1992[1921]: 212–223). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the kinds of competence that are valued and necessary and how these inform the hierarchical structures.

Weber offers a number of descriptions of the kinds of competence that provide access to positions in a bureaucracy and the role of these competences in constituting hierarchic structures but his descriptions are somewhat vague (Weber 1992[1921]: 212–223,

258–263, 973–975, 998–1002). Although he sometimes operates with a rather comprehensive understanding of bureaucratic competence, he mainly discusses it within the analytical framework of disciplinary knowledge (*Fachwissen*):

The choice is only that between bureaucracy and dilettantism in the field of administration. The primary source of superiority of bureaucratic administration lies in the role of technical knowledge [*Fachwissen*] (Weber 1992 [1921]: 223; Weber 1972 [1921]: 128).

However, Weber also broaches a practice-related dimension to bureaucratic competence in the concept of *Dienstwissen*:

In addition to this [*Fachwissen*], bureaucratic organizations, or the holders of power who make use of them, have a tendency to increase their power still further by the knowledge [*Dienstwissen*] growing out of experience in service (Weber 1992 [1921]: 225; Weber 1972 [1921]: 129).

Although Weber's concept of *Dienstwissen* seems to have referred to a knowledge of the facts of a case (*aktenkundigen Tatsachenkenntnisse*), we will rather follow up his pointing to how certain forms of bureaucratic competence are acquired through practice and are not inherent to the concept of disciplinary knowledge.

Weber's focus on bureaucratic expertise, organization and procedures has usually been followed up by scholars of public administration, rather than by sociologists (March and Olsen 1989; Weick 1995; Hood and Lodge 2004; Bezes and Joint-Lambert 2010; Page and Jenkins 2005; Olsen 2015). These studies offer significant empirical and theoretical insight into the workings of bureaucracy, yet rarely make use of the analytical and

methodological insights from the practice turn in sociology to focus on the way in which administrative expertise and hierarchy play out in daily practice and legitimise power. Furthermore, few scholars have conducted in-depth qualitative studies of administrative practices at the level of *senior* civil servants who are close to political decision-making (but see Noordegraaf 2000; Rhodes, Hart, and Noordegraaf 2007; Rhodes 2011).

Similar to studies of the relationship between expertise and policy (Markoff and Montecinos 1993; Fourcade 2009; Reay 2012), studies of expertise in public administration often employ as a point of departure the analytical framework of discipline-based professional expertise. Davies (2011), Christensen (2013) and Lie (1995) have addressed how the discipline of economics influences policy within the bureaucracy. Our data suggest that types of competence other than disciplinary, formal and explicit education are also significant. Page (2010: 258) broaches forms of expertise that go beyond the disciplinary framework but he does not analyse daily writing practices per se as a form of expertise.

Scholars of administrative competence often employ methodological approaches focusing on more discursive and explicit levels of data (see e.g. Hood and Lodge (2004)). However, in order to understand how bureaucratic power is legitimised, we also need to understand the bureaucrats' own accounts of what they actually do and what they need to excel at to succeed. The required competence and the procedures it is inherent to may be so automatic and taken for granted that they may be omitted from bureaucrats' and scholars' discussions and analyses. Scholars may be framing their analyses too narrowly in line with Weber's conception of bureaucratic competence as consisting primarily of *Fachwissen*.

Weber's concept of competence as consisting primarily of *Fachwissen* should be understood as related to the way in which he conceives of bureaucratic work as consisting



largely of *handling cases for clients*. Bureaucrats must be competent within the topic or field where the case handled is situated. This understanding of competence is based on a conception of bureaucracy that is directed downwards *towards the client*. Scholars in the governmentality tradition also tend to focus on how a disciplining bureaucracy reaches outwards and increasingly to new parts of citizens' lives (Barry, Osborne and Rose 1996; Rose and Miller 1992). However, we would argue that we need to conceive of bureaucracy as directed *upwards*. Although significant public administration scholars have given attention to the higher levels of central administration and its interface with politics (e.g. Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981), they have not adjusted the Weberian analytical framework of a bureaucracy in order to grasp the specificities of the senior civil servants' daily work. Weber's understanding of rational-legal authority is still relevant in the sense that competence is thought to underpin hierarchy and legitimise the influence these bureaucrats have on policy-making, but when bureaucracy is directed upwards, *Dienstwissen* becomes more central than *Fachwissen*.

Our interview data illustrating what characterizes the practices of top-level bureaucrats and their expertise indicated a need to focus more on the writing of bureaucratic notes. According to the interviewees, they spend most of their time writing notes and to do so successfully, a set of skills is required. Existing analytical approaches to bureaucratic competence and expertise fail to grasp the significance of this and this needs developing accordingly.

Addressing the role of notes in bureaucracy is not new. Max Weber acknowledged the importance of documents and regarded 'files' (*Akten*) as constitutive of bureaucracy:

The management of the modern office is based upon written documents (the 'files'), which are preserved in their original or draft form, and upon a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts. The body of officials working in an agency along with the respective apparatus of material implements and the files make up a *bureau*. (Weber 1992[1921]: 957; 1972: 552)

However, he did not analyse the production and trajectory of such notes or the skills needed to produce them.

The significance of documents and writing in the public administration has received more attention in recent social science research, particularly within science and technology studies and anthropology (Latour 2002; Riles 2006; Mukerji 2011; Hull 2012; second author 2015). However, few have studied the writing practices of the parts of bureaucracy that are directed upwards, towards the political leadership, and the way in which the competences required for these writing processes help shape and underpin authority.

To investigate the legitimatization of bureaucratic power, we would suggest examining what have been dubbed the 'little tools' of knowledge and central administration (Becker and Clark 2001; second author 2008). This may help us better understand the phenomena studied (first author 2014, 2015; second author 2015, 2016). In taking Weber's concept of bureaucratic legal-rational authority as based on competence and authority as our point of departure, we will thus argue for the need for an empirically based and nuanced development of the understanding of the relationship between competence, hierarchy and authority in the upper echelons of central public administration.

## Data and methods

Our analyses are based on data from 48 semi-structured interviews with 20 senior civil servants from the Norwegian Ministry of Finance, 15 *hauts fonctionnaires* from the French Ministry of Finance and 13 civil servants from the British Treasury.<sup>1</sup>All 48 were deputy directors, directors or above. Although there was some variation, all of the interviewees were in charge of a team of subordinates and were involved in the analysis and development of strategies, political advice, negotiations, project management and legislation. The ministries of finance were chosen because these, through their role as over-arching rather than sector specific, and through their role in the budgetary process, are considered particularly powerful institutions in all three countries (Bezes and Siné 2011; Chapman 2002; Lie and Venneslan 2010; Peden 2000). Senior positions at these ministries are regarded as particularly prestigious and candidates tend to be recruited from the most selective educational institutions (Eymeri 2001; 2006; first author 2015).

Further, these cases were chosen because the public administrations of the three countries are all based on principles of meritocratic recruitment, while representing three distinct traditions for educating and recruiting civil servants (first author 2015). Whereas the British Treasury's senior civil servants tend to have bachelor degrees in a wide range of disciplines, often the humanities, from top universities, the French *haut fonctionnaires* are often graduates from the *Ecole Nationale de l'Administration*, a school specifically designed to train senior civil servants across ministries. The Norwegian Ministry of Finance recruits university graduates at Master's or PhD-level who have specialized in economics, law or political science, depending on the unit to which they are recruited. Both the French and the British educational institutions that traditionally train recruits for elite civil service positions explicitly focus on skills of argumentation and skills in the writing of relatively short texts,

whereas Norwegian university training focuses more on research skills and less on writing; when writing is focused on in Norway, it is usually for the production of much longer and more scholarly texts than in Britain or France (first author 2009; 2015). . In this study, we will endeavour to look beyond these formal requirements and investigate the kinds of competence that seem to be valued when one's focus is on actual practice and more implicit, tacit knowledge and skills.

The interview guide was constructed for a broader study of the knowledge and skills that characterize and legitimise senior civil servant positions in the British, French and Norwegian central administration (first author 2015a, b, 2016). James Spradley (1979) argues that using descriptive questions in ethnographic interviewing provides richer data than more direct, analytical or normative questions. Using such an approach is crucial to our analysis to obtain more detailed and accurate information about bureaucratic practices and competence. This methodological approach is important to shed light on tacit knowledge and procedures that may be taken for granted. When asked about their daily tasks and a typical day at work, the interviewees repeatedly referred to note-writing and their efforts to perfect this activity. The interviewees themselves mentioned this without being asked about it. They were then asked to describe how they worked on such notes, what characterized a good note and how they endeavoured to improve them. This interview technique was used to avoid a purely formal and discursive level of how bureaucratic practice and competences are defined. They were then asked what they needed to succeed in their jobs. By focusing on detailed descriptions of their actual activities and skills used, rather than only on their educational background or formal expertise, we are able to grasp key features of administrative practice and competence. In line with Michèle Lamont's inductive and

comparative approach to the sociology of culture, knowledge and valuation (Guetzkow, Lamont and Mallard 2004; Lamont 1992; 2012), we sought to grasp how the interviewees valued certain types of knowledge, skills and expertise and how these valuations are operationalized in the politico-administrative apparatus.

We did not use the data uncritically, nor did we take what was said at face value. First, the descriptive interview technique is a means to access information about the valuation of competence that incorporates an analytical and critical dimension in itself: this technique goes beyond the interviewees' pre-constructed and explicit discourses about the necessary competence within the bureaucracy and grasps implicit categorizations and valuations. It avoids social desirability bias (Fisher 1993). We used techniques (asking indirect and descriptive questions) to avoid the interviewees expressing only rehearsed, official accounts of what they were supposed to do and thus give accounts of what was regarded as legitimate practice and competence in their daily work and within their professional group.<sup>2</sup> Second, the international comparative approach serves as an analytical tool that is used to question ideas of bureaucratic competence that may be taken for granted by the interviewees and by researchers. As the interviewees described different formal educational requirements for recruitment, but similar practices and practice-related competences across the three countries, this allowed us to avoid making hasty assumptions about the relationship between formal education and the competences used and valued in practice. The interviewees' accounts are not analysed as providing the 'truth' about bureaucracy, but as accounts of what is perceived as legitimate in their professional group.

## Writing notes

Arguably, although writing is part of the bureaucrats' daily practice and skills, it could be regarded as just a residual or trivial aspect of their competence, as their main competence is disciplinary expertise, for example in jurisprudence or economics. The Norwegian top-level bureaucrats from the Ministry of Finance initially spoke in such terms in presenting their key competence as disciplinary and they described disciplinary expertise as highly valued. However, our analyses show that this, though important, represents the "official narrative" about which competences are key at the Norwegian Ministry of Finance and they do not necessarily reflect the actual competences that are most central in the exertion and mastery of the senior civil servants' professional practice in daily life. When describing their daily tasks and which competences they deemed to be the most valuable at work, the ability to write administrative notes of various kinds, and especially writing notes to prepare for decision-making and action by the political leadership, stands out. In this context, the Norwegian interviewees, just like their French and British counterparts, rarely spoke of tasks or skills related to their disciplinary expertise. They said that their work mostly consisted of writing notes to prepare for decision-making or action by the political leadership, refining such notes and improving their subordinates' abilities to write them:

I would probably say that 70, 80 percent of our work is related to the writing of notes [for the political leadership]. [. . .] That's kind of what life here is all about, the production of those notes. (Norway, Finance 14)<sup>3</sup>

The interviewees were also asked which tasks they spent most time on and note writing was mentioned as particularly time-consuming. The amount of time devoted to this task reflects its key importance:

What takes the most time is preparing documents for submission to the political leadership. It's certainly what we do the most. (Norway, Finance 2)

Despite the noteworthy differences regarding formal requirements, the significance of note writing was mentioned as equally important in all three countries:

The basic product that we deal in is a submission, which is basically . . . it's a piece of written advice which sets out an issue, presents analysis, typically offers a recommendation and asks for a decision. My team will produce – because we're involved in the process of legislation, developing policy which will lead to legislation – we have quite a lot of issues which need to go to ministers. [. . .] With something like that, I will always just take quite a lot of time to look at it. (Britain, Treasury 3)

Not only do they spend much time on this task, but they consider it their most significant task:

I'd say [working on the submissions] is probably 30 per cent of the stuff that I actually do. But it's by far the most important 30 per cent. So basically, I could *not* do all the rest, and it would all be fine. (Britain, Treasury 1)

We have thus seen the extent to which this task is time-consuming and central to the senior civil servants in all the countries' ministries of finance.

### Note-writing upwards

Weber (1992[1921]) describes proceduralism, precedence, predictability and impartiality as key features of bureaucratic professionalism. The delimitation of bureaucrats' power by the area of responsibility and expertise is also essential. In relations with the state, as mediated by the bureaucracy, all citizens should be treated impartially based on rules, not emotional relations. Civil servants should use their knowledge of the relevant field (such as pension systems, kindergartens or health policy), as well as their knowledge of the law, when responding to citizens' inquiries. In highlighting these characteristics of the bureaucracy as described by Weber, Paul Du Gay (2000, 2005) also stresses an inherent 'ethos of office'. However, the aspects mentioned above are largely linked to the kind of bureaucracy that is directed outwards or downwards, toward the client. In our interviews with the British, French and Norwegian senior civil servants, another aspect was most prominent: the way they serve and lead teams for the political leadership, the way they inform them and how they prepare for decision-making. Their bureaucratic practice is directed upwards. Note-writing, and a particular kind of note-writing, forms the crux of that role:

Our products consist of written material in the form of notes, which are submitted to inform the politicians, or for decision-making. And then it can be shorter – what we



call 'sheets' or 'hand notes' – for the politicians, which they use when they are going, for example, to the Parliament for questions or other reasons. And it can be for speeches they are giving. (Norway, Finance 14)

Our study shows the centrality of this professional practice: top-level bureaucrats write notes for the political leadership and they manage the processes of this note-writing to ensure the supply and quality of such notes. This practice, directed upwards, was shared by all the senior civil servants interviewed in the three countries.

According to the interviewees, bureaucracy directed upwards requires a high level of skills in note-writing and special kinds of writing skills:

The things that the team produces range from very simple kind of lines, to . . . take briefings for ministers, so that they understand the policy which is already set, so that they have the most effective lines or facts for communicating that policy properly. That's really simple stuff . . . to kind of explanatory notes, if the chancellor or another minister has asked a question about . . . let's say, about quantitative easing scores in the public finance statistics. Then we'll produce a two- or three-page note which explains what the concepts are and how it works. And then there's submissions which are policy advice, you know, ten pages, twelve pages. If it's getting beyond twelve pages, then you've probably written too much. (Britain, Treasury 1)

## The form of expertise

Keeping the varying educational traditions, and the varying importance given to writing and argumentation in mind, one could have expected to find varying conceptions of a good administrative note among the British, the French and the Norwegian interviewees.

However, the similarities between all the ministries in the three countries are striking. First, the notes should be brief.

Politicians have incredible amounts to read, so it must be simple and short. (Norway, Finance 9)

The notes must also be clear, precise and swift and easy to understand:

They have to be short, because, you know, ministers get boxes and boxes of them, and they need to be able to sort of get through them quickly. So it has to be as short as possible, as precise as possible. What you are trying to do is set out the issues as clearly as possible, write the information that is needed in as clear and easily digestible a form as possible. (Britain, Treasury 3)

The requirement for simplicity, precision and brevity should be seen in relation to the common structure of the politico-administrative system rather than the varying educational traditions between the countries: a small number of politicians (the minister and his or her cabinet of advisers) constantly need to be informed and make decisions about many issues

handled by a necessarily more numerous bureaucratic staff. The traditional Weberian bureaucratic system is divided into sections according to tasks and disciplinary or thematic competences: one section dealing with the budget, one section dealing with tax jurisdiction and so on. In each of these sections there are subsections and possibly even sub-subsections, and within each of these units, notes are produced. During note production, information from stakeholders, experts (both in-house and external) and other relevant actors is gathered and transformed into notes. To make these notes more usable and help politicians at the top of the pyramid to handle the volume, the note writers must be good at reducing the glut of information. This process of reducing text, of synthesizing, is closely related to the ability to interpret and prioritize more or less important information. The interviewees described their ability to prioritize as part of their writing skills. They described it as a linguistic skill which distinguished the excellent from the less competent bureaucrat.

The interviewees also described an ability to simplify and translate between different types of 'languages', i.e. technical language into laymen's terms: a wide range of expert knowledge is constantly gathered and collated to inform policy-making and decision-making. However, politicians cannot be experts in all the fields. Accordingly, bureaucrats must be good at translating the expert language into laypeople's terms. Clarity is required due to a lack of time for politicians:

If it's a crucial piece of advice, then occasionally I'll kind of take it over and say right, I'll write this one. But most of the time [my job] is helping other people structure their thoughts and communicate them clearly enough, which tends to be the biggest problem. The thing where I'm adding most value most of the time, given that lots of

people who work for me are either kind of professionals, i.e., statisticians, or sort of good economists, is making sure that they're able to communicate those ideas sufficiently clearly to the chancellor, who doesn't have the time nor the inclination to try and understand bad writing. So I do quite a lot of that actually. [. . .] The Treasury places a much higher weight than other departments on this kind of clarity-of-thought, clarity-of-expressions aspect of it. (Britain, Treasury 1)

The importance of clarity is not simply about making the text understandable. It is closely related to the fact that the notes have a specific purpose: they are the basis for decision-making and action. The aim is

to succeed in producing short notes, and . . . covering the totality of a complex subject matter in a note that is short and simple enough for the minister or for his political staff, in order to facilitate decision-making. And to succeed with that, I think that it is pretty good to be a generalist, rather than being too specialized. One could be going too much into detail, not seeing what is the heart of the matter. So it's a capacity to synthesize and to facilitate decision-making. (France, Finance 6)

Ultimately, the test of a good submission is whether you get a decision or not.  
(Britain, Treasury 3)

When decision-making is the desired outcome of the production of notes, the text must be clear and precise about the consequences of policy alternatives or action alternatives. The notes must also be convincing:

When a note is well written, just from reading it, it should be convincing. (France, Finance 7)

The ability to persuade is presented as *part of* the writing skills. Rather than approaching writing skills as a tool that is neutral and limited, the interviewees speak of writing skills as a broad category of competence.

Integral to such competence is an ability to write within limited time frames. They must be able to write as a response to specific assignments or signals given to them within the system. The demands for swift delivery of new and revised notes defines much of the ministerial rhythm and pace, and it disciplines the civil servants. Writing to deadlines is a key skill:

You must be able to give good advice quickly. You must be able to express yourself precisely, in writing and orally. (Norway, Finance 6)

The interviewees in all three countries mentioned that the need for better information or better language in a note must always be balanced with a need to deliver on time. Those who succeed in striking this balance can carve out a career pathway. Whereas the British and

French have been trained in this by the education system, the Norwegians bureaucrats were trained to a greater extent in this specific form of writing on the job (first author 2015).

Because writing skills are so central to their work, it is not sufficient that the top-level bureaucrats are relatively competent in this when they are recruited. Throughout their careers, they are constantly trained in this skill. Although the British and French have had somewhat more training in similar forms of writing before recruitment, in all three countries additional on-the-job training is institutionalized.

### Ongoing training

Despite the varying educational profiles of the candidates for top-level positions in the three countries, recruiters are all very interested in the candidates' writings skills when they are recruited. Regardless of the quality of the candidates, they believe that bureaucrats must work throughout their careers to hone these writings skills. In particular, they must work on sharpening their skills in note-writing, as that represents a specific type of writing:

The point at which people learn [how to write precisely and clearly] may vary. Most people cannot [at the point of recruitment], because they are not used to thinking along the lines that one has to think here. So it is much about experience and about learning to accept that this is something one *has to keep working on*. At least for my own part, I have learned it over several years. So I have tried to be conscious about it. The challenge is that it takes time, that there is no easy way to writing briefly and

simply. [. . .] Each and everyone should be able to improve. [The ones working under me] shall see the kind of changes that I make [when I correct their drafts], so that they can learn from it. We talk much about ways of writing and writing rules and . . . the vocabulary to choose. (Norway, Finance 14, our emphasis)

On the one hand, as we can see from this statement, one has to keep working on one's writing abilities, a skill that must constantly be perfected throughout one's career. On the other hand, as one climbs the ladder and takes on more senior positions with managerial responsibility, one also becomes responsible for training subordinates in such writing. In all three countries the senior bureaucrats described their daily work as including highly institutionalized roles as teachers, with training that generally consisted of correcting and rewriting their subordinates' draft notes:

We also offer [the new recruits on our team] training in the technique of note-writing. It's an element . . . that you don't learn at school. Here, we rewrite the notes much in the beginning, and we try to show them why we rewrite. (France, Finance 12)

It is a necessary quality for a deputy director to know how to rewrite properly the notes that are badly written. And that is part of [our work], really. When I read through the notes, half of my work is about checking the readability, whether the note is well written and pedagogic. There are so many notes, and the work on them is essentially about the writing, not about checking the quality of its content. (France, Finance 4)

Writing skills are thus crucial to career development and those who excel at this reach the highest positions. We asked the interviewees what they felt was lacking in those who did not succeed in carving out a career for themselves in the civil service. Rather than a lack of knowledge, they lacked certain general skills:

It can be all kinds of things. Sometimes it is communications skills – they just can't write very well. (Britain, Treasury 1)

This way in which subordinate bureaucrats are corrected and asked to rewrite their drafts before their superior accepts them, modifies them and advances them in the system seems to be the most concrete, clear expression of the way in which the bureaucratic hierarchy is exercised in everyday practice.

### Hierarchy through note-writing

The trajectory of a note, passing through the various stages of production until it is ultimately submitted to the political leadership, demonstrates how the bureaucratic hierarchy is enacted in daily practice. The following statement by a Norwegian Deputy Director at the Ministry of Finance illustrates a standard case:



Something often comes in from another ministry, and we evaluate it and write a note about [it]... and then we send it to the Director and discuss it with her. And when she has approved it, we send it to the political staff. Then we get response on that from the political staff. And we have to consider what to do with that. As a rule, we must just do what is decided . . . (Norway, Finance 9)

This statement describes the hierarchy between different levels of sections and positions within the Ministry of Finance (the Director must approve the section's draft before the note is handed to political staff) as enacted through the note-writing process. It also demonstrates the enactment of the hierarchy between the political staff and the bureaucracy (the bureaucrats must rewrite the note according to the political staff's decision) (see also Page 2012: 70).

From several detailed descriptions of the process of text-production, featuring various stages of drafting, correction and approval, we can reconstitute the typical trajectory of a bureaucratic note as follows. First, the production of a note can start in many different ways.<sup>4</sup> One typical starting point is when one of the senior bureaucrats is asked by his or her political leader(s), by way of an e-mail, to produce a note, for instance for the minister. This commission normally involves a specific deadline. Very often the deadline is short and often the note needs to be written and submitted within 24 hours. Such timeframes establish the specific rhythm that constitutes one of the defining features of bureaucratic life (Palonen 2008).

The commission may be passed down through several bureaucratic layers, often attached with directions about responses. Normal procedure is then for the senior civil

servant to delegate the task to a subordinate. This is often accompanied by a meeting where relevant input and context are discussed, which will guide the note's content and framing. Typically, the bureaucrat appointed to the task will then gather the necessary information and input from various sources before drafting the note and passing it on to a superior. Sometimes the note will return to its author with suggestions or demands for improvements. There may be a request for more substantial information but often the request is for increased clarity and brevity. The initial author then amends the draft before it is returned to the superior, who may then edit the note, for instance by cutting out adjectives, shortening sentences, expressing nuances and adding clarity. The note is then sent one level higher up where it is reworked further. At each new superior level – from the ordinary bureaucrat to the deputy director, director and director general (titles and levels vary between countries) – the text will often be improved in terms of clarity, precision and overall structure before it is ultimately handed to the minister or the minister's political staff. Most commonly the note-writers use text-editing software but in order to signalize that a comment is particularly important, the most senior bureaucrats may add a handwritten comment on the printed text before handing it to the political leadership.

With superiors constantly correcting the notes drafted by their subordinates - described as one of the leaders' key tasks - the development of a note from draft to draft enacts the bureaucratic hierarchy in daily practice. At each new hierarchical level, a bureaucrat exerts his or her authority over the level beneath through their correction of their employees' version.

But the policy advice [submissions] is the stuff where my line management is looking to me to make sure that this is the highest possible quality. (Britain, Treasury 1)

This line-management system, which also constitutes a quality assurance system for the core bureaucratic product – the note – is how the bureaucratic hierarchy is constructed and reconstructed in daily practice. At all three ministries of finance, the supervision and training of new subordinates in this core competence is an institutionalized practice exceeding the individual civil servant's personal initiatives.

When superiors correct their subordinates' notes, representing a level of quality assurance and certification, the implication is that they have the legitimate authority to do so.

Moreover, this system of emendation and certification indicates that in addition to their formal educational merits and their formal hierarchic position, their mastery of note-writing is key in providing top-level bureaucrats with the legitimate authority to do so. The skill of note-writing provides top-level bureaucrats with an authority that allows them legitimately within this system to contribute to policy and decision-making. Without this core competence in central public administration and the authority emanating from it, the politico-administrative system – in its daily practice – would break down.

#### Conclusion: note-writing as a key expertise in public administration

Top bureaucrats write notes and these are directed upwards to politicians for political decision-making. Note-writing does not only constitute their daily professional practice; at

all three ministries of finance, it is their most central task and product. Because the purpose of the note is to prepare for decision-making, within the context of high workloads, technical jargon, ambiguity, high complexity and tight schedules (conditions relevant to all three ministries), the texts must be short, clear, precise and convincing when outlining clear alternatives for action. The ability to write such notes is a core competence that bureaucrats must possess on recruitment, while constantly working to improve this skill throughout their careers. Administrative leaders train and control their subordinates by correcting and rewriting their notes and this practice represents the enactment of the daily bureaucratic hierarchy.

Existing analyses of bureaucratic expertise and power have not taken sufficient account of the role of administrative text production and related skills. Focusing mainly on disciplinary and formal expertise, the relationship between knowledge and politics that is depicted is obfuscated.

Weber's analysis of the way in which competence and hierarchy provide legitimate bureaucratic authority is fundamental. However, recent studies of bureaucratic power have not developed his analytical framework sufficiently to grasp a wider array of competences at play in the construction of hierarchy and authority in the top echelons of ministerial departments. Our study allows us to suggest an adjusted analytical framework comprising three core elements. First, the concept of competence should be detached from an assumed necessary and intimate connection between academic disciplines and formal education (*Fachwissen*). Second, with Weber's notion of *Dienstwissen* and filing as a basis, the notion of competence should be reconstructed to capture generic and tacit skills residing in the everyday practices of bureaucratic work so that the analytical framework widens the

concept and understanding of administrative expertise. Third, procedures must be accounted for in more detail. Our framework suggests that procedures are grasped as they play out in daily practice. This article has suggested analysing this using a specific method, i.e. a specific form of descriptive interviewing that provides data closer to procedural practices. This allows us to work more inductively and disentangle the analysis from preconceived categories.

This practice-oriented approach produces a clearer picture of what contemporary ministerial bureaucrats' roles in the political system are, thereby shedding new light on a crucial aspect of bureaucratic power. Our analyses of the bureaucratic practices show that because bureaucrats write notes, and because this is what they need to be good at to excel in their jobs, gain authority and climb the professional ladder, note-writing is more than a trivial or residual competence: it is a key form of expertise upon which the bureaucratic hierarchy and the politico-administrative system rest. Ed Page (2010) states that his empirical analyses offer little support to the view that scientific or technical expertise offers bureaucrats power. He argues that even Weber, when carefully read, was ambivalent about the importance of expertise and its role in strengthening bureaucratic power in policy-making. In line with Page, we consider that our understanding of what bureaucratic expertise consists of needs to be elaborated to grasp whether and how it provides power in the policy-making process; we thus need to build on Weber and develop the analytical approach to bureaucratic expertise. Arguably, only when note-writing and the authority that it creates are properly understood and accounted for can one fruitfully examine the way in which bureaucracy influences policy.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> They are all from the prestigious section *Le Trésor* in what is called *le Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances*.

<sup>2</sup> This approach is not incompatible with studies of such ulterior motives, which they may or may not have.

However, such motives are not the object of this analysis.

<sup>3</sup> In order to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, we will not provide the title of their position or the division within which they work, only the country and ministry which they come from. We give each interviewee a number, so that the reader can determine whether it is the same or different interviewees that are quoted.

<sup>4</sup> The interviewees describe a range of different types of notes. However, the general descriptions of the core competence needed in order to write a good note are similar across the different types of notes. Therefore, we do not differ between the various types of notes in the analyses in this article.

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