Analysing the Adjectival Museum: Exploring the bureaucratic nature of museums and the implications for researchers and the research process

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Abstract

The proliferation of titles for types of museum has resulted in an adjectival explosion in recent years (with museums being engaging, relevant, professional, adaptive, community, national, universal, local, independent, people's, children's, scientific, natural history, labour, virtual, symbolic, connected, trust and charitable, amongst many other labels). This paper argues that the adoption of an organizational focus on bureaucratic features such as hierarchical authority, centralisation of power, functional specialisation and research processes can show commonalities in the understandings and challenges linked to museum function. The emphasis on museums as a specific institutional and organizational form allows for the identification and explanation of similarities and differences in their operational existence that extends beyond their particular individual natures. This also implies that the bureaucratic nature of museums has implications for researchers as they are organizations that reflect gender and power dynamics on a micro-level within the research process.

Key words: Bureaucracy; Adjectival Museums; Museums research; Analytical methods; Culture

Introduction

Museums are no longer simply 'museums'. In recent years the use of adjectives as labelling modifiers for these institutions has proliferated. Developing beyond the standard forms of 'art', 'science', 'ethnographic' and 'natural history' museums, for example, discussion has moved on to consider, amongst many other varieties, *relevant* (Nielsen 2015), *inclusive* (Tlili 2008), *community* (Crooke 2007), *urban* (Agusti 2014), *enlightenment* (O'Neill 2004), and *political* (Stylianou-Lambert and Bounia, 2016) variants[1]. The adjectives that are applied in these cases are usually related to particular characteristics of individual museums or groups of museums. This often focuses attention onto specifics rather than onto other dimensions of them. While this identifies valid particularities and peculiarities of museum practices, it also raises questions about the relationship between the specific and the general when undertaking an analysis of museums. This paper argues that a concentration on the individual dimensions and dynamics of museums misses out on more general factors that can serve to increase understanding of these differences for the sector as a whole. By analyzing museums as versions of bureaucratic organization it will be argued that many of the individual differences that there are between the adjectival variants that exist can be identified and explained at a generic level, and that a focus on the organizational and institutional characteristics of museums could be developed further to make sense of how and why museums operate as they do in matters of everyday practice and how it is researched. In short, this paper will demonstrate how structural commonalities across museums with different collections and missions can support the research process.

This paper will demonstrate that wider theoretical approaches from sociology, social policy and political science can be used as a lens to explore museums and museum practice. The paper firstly explores the complexity of the adjectival museum, which can give a false impression of differentiation between organizational types. Then we examine how taking a general analytical lens – in this case that of bureaucracy - can give new and exciting insights for researching museums. The paper is structured within Weber's ideal types and draws on empirical evidence from various studies conducted by the authors on museums throughout the United Kingdom[2]. We finish the paper with some reflection on the *process* of researching museums and how the structural elements that we use as a lens to explore museums also comprises the researcher and their practices.

The Adjectival Museum

The 'museum' can be a complicated place to explore. It has been seen as an organization, an institution and an authority on truth (Harrison, 1993). The labels that are applied to museums are designed to differentiate between them in terms of the work that is, and could be, undertaken within them. In general terms these adjectives are concerned with the *contents* that museums contain (as with natural history or science museums); the *audiences* that they are directed at (as with national or community museums); the *functions* that they are intended to fulfil (as with participatory or inclusive museums); or the *formats* that they take (as with virtual or digital or, in a rather different fashion, charitable trust museums). By distinguishing between museums in this way the specific features of museums are effectively seen to outweigh the more general features that are shared in common across each of these forms. Given that museums are rarely defined by only a single variable, they usually have a range of contents available to them. They are also being aimed at multiple audiences for quite distinct reasons, being multi-functional in what it is they are doing, and undertaking these activities through a variety of formats at any given time. The focus that is provided by any given adjective is likely to be, at best, a partial characterisation of what an individual museum actually is given that museums can be both inclusive and exclusive, community and national, and symbolic and material all at the same time.

The drawing of distinctions between museums, and the provision of a particular label to describe them, does allow for the establishment of a focus to guide the analysis, interpretation, evaluation and explanation of what it is that these institutions and organizations are providing, who this is aimed at, how it is done, and, it is to be hoped, why it is being done, and what outputs and outcomes arise from doing it. Such analysis, however, will be largely restricted to the particular phenomenon that is under examination and the possibility of extending analysis to broader considerations of policy and practice will be constrained. The examination of the particular specificities of museums, often through the application of case-study approaches (as, for example, with Macdonald [2002]), is important for developing an understanding of the particular dynamics of their operation. For broader and more methodologically effective generalizations to be found it is usually necessary to also apply other approaches to analysis (as Yin [2009: 15] points out, case studies are 'generalizable to theoretical propositions but not to populations or universes'). Thus, the proliferation of titles as descriptors of museums serves a valuable purpose in identifying how systemic properties of, or activities within, the sector can be illuminated (as with the analysis of processes of organizational change examined in the Canadian example to be found in Janes [2013]), but their ability to explain processes and practices across the sector as a whole are severely limited.

A switch in focus from the particularities of individual museums or individual features of museums to a sectoral-level consideration implies that there will be analytical methods available to provide the larger generalizations about museum performance and practice that can identify a range of behavioural and structural characteristics. In turn, this can be utilized to make sense of specific examples and cases of museum functioning as well as of the sector as a whole. The value of adjectival labelling can also be seen in the tendency to ascribe classifying labels – such as 'fields' (DiMaggio 1981), 'networks' (Thompson 2003) or 'bureaucracies' (as will be seen in the present case) – that establish general ways of thinking about, and investigating, the properties of the organizations and institutions that are covered by the particular label that is being applied: the shift is from what museums *do* to what museums *are*[3]. The application of classificatory labels is intended to provide a means by which general explanations can be given of the operational characteristics present within particular organizational or institutional categories. By treating museums as bureaucracies it is expected that certain dynamics of structure and behaviour will be found within them that extend across the sector as a whole, and that these can then be used to explain differences and similarities between individual examples of museums, and, by doing so, analysis can be focused on the general rather than the particular.

Any classificatory label that is applied to museums will direct analytical attention to some characteristics of them rather than to others. This does not mean that any such label has a monopoly of truth or relevance, only that it has been adopted in the expectation that they can be utilized as a means to generate information and knowledge about the particular issues and concerns that the analyst is interested in. While this inevitably raises a series of analytical questions concerning ontology, epistemology and methodology it also points to the fact that certain types of information and knowledge will not be available through the application of the particular classificatory approach that has been adopted. Thus a concentration on the bureaucratic dynamics of museums will leave the evaluation of the aesthetics of museum displays and exhibitions completely blank. What it could provide, however, is an explanation of the choices that were made in the construction of these exhibits and displays in the first place, through an examination of power and authority relationships within the museum concerned, the structure of rules and processes that underlay the processes of choice that were involved, and who the relevant actors in these processes were deemed to be.

To undertake this, a particular approach to questions of analysis, a focus on particular aspects of organizational functioning, and the development of particular techniques of data collection are required to make any classificatory label meaningful. In the case of bureaucracy, for example, a materialist approach is required in the first instance as there are particular structural and behavioural characteristics of these organizations (discussed further below) which require examination. Examples from past examinations of bureaucratic organizations at work have focused on structural matters (such as the role of professional organizations in affecting authority, organizational structures and policy-making within museums [Di Maggio 1981; McCall and Gray 2014; Gray 2016]; questions of work processes (as with 'total quality management' production processes [Bank, 2000]; and how exhibition design will be organised in museums [Macdonald 2002]); and on matters of the relationship between formal and informal working conditions and practices (as in the classic Hawthorne experiments of the 1920s [Mayo 1949]; or as seen in the development of new collections and new ways to collaborate with source communities in museums [Message,2014]).

Alongside such matters of focusing upon specific examples from museum working, and specific dimensions of their organization, there are also questions of the ontological, epistemological, theoretical and methodological choices that are present in undertaking such types of empirical work within museums. Indeed, whether bureaucracy is a valid approach to take to the examination of museums and their work depends upon more preliminary research decisions in the first place. While it is possible to simply use 'museums' (in both a generic and specific example fashion) as a site for undertaking research the status of bureaucracy as an organizing concept and set of practices requires consideration. The adoption of a materialist approach to investigation, for example, is not easily compatible with approaches that emphasize more immaterial ideas of meaning as a core research strategy. Thus while it is possible to apply social constructivist and anthropological methods to museums, what they are doing, and how they are doing it, the focus in each of these would not be on the core features of museums that a materialist epistemology would be focusing on. This means that using bureaucracy as an organizing focus for research is only one amongst many possible ways of analysing these institutions – as the other papers in this collection demonstrate.

Museums as Bureaucracies

'Bureaucracy is characteristic of most governments, nearly every university, established religious orders, and large corporations the world over' (Hatch 2011: 33), and claims that bureaucracy has become a redundant organizational form in the face of increasing levels of organizational uncertainty in the present over-states the extent to which bureaucratic structures and processes have ceased to dominate work-places around the world (Alvesson and Thompson 2005). Despite the justified criticisms of bureaucracy as an organizational, social and political form – which originated with Max Weber (1864-1920) (Weber 1978) and have continued ever since (Albrow 1970); Kamenka and Krygier (1979); Bauman (1993); Beetham (1996) and, in the specific case of museums, Bienkowski (2014: 47-9), who examines the manner in which museums as bureaucratic organizations affect questions of value, authority, legitimacy and ownership through their control of power resources and organizational rules, with these limiting the extent to which indigenous groups are able to claim the restitution of both tangible and intangible cultural material –and the establishment of new patterns of working practice and organization in both the public and private sectors of the economy, bureaucracy still continues as the dominant system for organising and managing work within the overwhelming majority of institutions around the world today (du Gay 2000).

As Sennett (2006: 45) has noted, despite the effects of changing economic circumstances and operational technologies that have affected the organizational principles and operational characteristics of large-scale, and particularly trans-global, organizations, 'small bureaucratic pyramids' can still 'function perfectly well', and Weber, therefore, 'remains a reliable guide to the inner workings of such small pyramid organizations'. Museums, even the largest, are extremely small when compared with the mega-corporations which have changed towards 'casualization, delayering and nonlinear sequencing' (Sennett 2006: 49), meaning that bureaucracy still remains the dominant form of organization for them to employ as it has many more benefits to offer in terms of organizational efficiency and effectiveness than other working practices do.

In the case of museums, justification needs to be given as to why the bureaucratic form of organization continues to dominate. To do this, this paper will briefly outline the core features of the bureaucratic modes of structure and behaviour and then will show, with empirical evidence, why this description of museums is not only applicable but also makes sense of questions of control, power and legitimacy within the museums context. Finally, the benefits of analyzing museums as bureaucracies will be explained and the limits to such analysis will be outlined.

The status of bureaucracy in the Weberian tradition rests upon a claim as to the legitimacy of authority relationships within societies (Weber 1978: 212-45), with legal-rational forms of authority being seen to have demonstrable benefits as compared with charismatic or traditional forms. It is further argued that the form of organization that allows legal-rational authority to be most effectively exercised is the bureaucratic (Weber 1978: 223). The core features of a bureaucracy are that it is staffed by specialists, operating in a system based on instrumentally-rational formal rules that are managed through hierarchical patterns of control; there are formal records kept of operational rules and decisions; there is also a formal career structure in place based on competence and/or seniority; staff members do not control resources or the job as personal possessions; the job is their sole or major occupation, and they are free to leave it at any time (subject, of course, to organizational rules!) (Weber 1978: 26, 956-63; see also Albrow 1970: 43-5).

An extension of this can be found in Selznick (1943: 47), who argues that the relationship of 'bureaucracy' with means-end, instrumental, forms of rationality can be applied to any purposeful organization, and leads to the position where every organization creates an informal structure; the goals of the organization can be modified (abandoned, deflected, or elaborated) through internal processes of management and policy-making; and this process is effected through the informal structure. Thus the focus is not simply on the traditionally unpopular formality of rules and structures, but should also take into account the ways in which these are made use of by the actors who are working within them. The application of this to museums therefore precludes the particularities of adjectival museums, as whatever description they carry, they can all be described as 'purposeful' to some degree (Gray 2008).

It is also the case that museums cannot be considered to be tram-like organizations that run along pre-determined lines; they are open to flexibility and the vagaries of human choice and behaviour (Gray 2014, 2016) as a consequence of the inescapability of the 'translation' activities that are undertaken by lower tier workers when making sense of higher tier orders and instructions (Sennett 2006: 32-7). To demonstrate the effectiveness of these ideas about the bureaucratic form of organization in the context of museums, an examination of how the key features of the form can be seen to be relevant to understanding how they function is required and this is done through an investigation of each of the dominant features of bureaucratic organizations identified above.

Although structured under Weber's features of a bureaucratic organization, the empirical data presented in the following sections originate from the experiences and qualitative studies conducted by the authors which have been, and are still, taking place since 2009. These are based on a series of qualitative, semi-structured interviews throughout Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England with front-line museum workers (including those undertaking a variety of roles such as curators, outreach officers, security staff, retail workers and so on). The authors have used theoretical approaches such as street-level bureaucracy and partnership working as a lens to approach bureaucratic hierarchical working[4]; and some of their conclusions, such as shared challenges in museums, managerial conflicts and research limitations have been shown to cross-cut not only museum types but also across UK national borders (Gray 2014; McCall and Gray 2014; McCall 2016; McCall and Rummery 2017). It is now worth considering how this can offer further insight into the functions, and functioning, of museums.

The Division of Labour and Hierarchical Authority

The division of labour entails the establishment of functionally differentiated tasks within the organization. Within museums the result of this is the creation of various factions defined by role, with this being amplified by the location of roles within the organizational management hierarchy. In the research that we have undertaken it was evident that many lower-level, front-line, non-professional workers were unaware of other functions in their museums, such as outreach and community work, which were conducted at higher levels:

> You never recognise people in the office, most of them I have not seen before... Curators are there but you don't know them they become moles, really. Come out when things need fixed [sic].

There was also a perceived gap between front-line workers and managers or 'those people up in the offices' as it was phrased in one case. These divisions provided a source of potential tension between what are seen as 'core' and other duties, especially when workers believed that their freedom to focus on their ideals was compromised, and when managerial control was seen to challenge workers' understandings of their own roles. McCall and Gray (2014) discuss the perceptions of this at the front-line around the tensions between the 'old school' (curators) and 'new school' (outreach) workers in the museum. While this might be taken to imply a series of vertical and horizontal divisions between mutually antagonistic groups of workers and managers, it could also provide a valuable means for understanding the carving-out of autonomous spheres of control across museums that serve to limit potential conflict – provided, that is, that each actor accepts the formal and informal 'rules of the game' and is prepared to abide by them.

The principle behind the establishment of hierarchical differentiation within organizations is to demarcate arenas of competence which are aligned with control over the operational matters that are a part of the respective arenas that are involved. In this respect staff at all levels of a museum should be expected to have the freedom to make their own choices and decisions over their own functional activities, and that there should be clear differences between staff as to where the boundaries of their competence lie. McCall (2009; 2016) for example has applied Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucracy approach to museum practice in the case of particular museum services in England, Scotland and Wales, as they are examples of 'hierarchical organization[s] in which substantial discretion lies with the line agents at the bottom of the hierarchy' (Piore 2011: 146), where 'translation between levels not only occurs but is also expected to occur' (CITATION PLEASE). This was often expressed in statements where front-line staff clearly identified expectations about how their own direct service providing roles differed from the expected strategic and service-management roles that senior figures in the organizational hierarchy were expected to fulfil, particularly if, as one senior museum manager put it, 'we're seen not to have screwed up yet'. One curator described this as involving a recognition that there could be considerable differences between the ideal world that senior management could often assume to be in existence and the rather more complicated reality that confronted staff on a daily basis: allowing staff to exercise control over policy implementation provided the means by which abstract managerial strategies could be turned into effective organizational practices thus enabling the instrumental objectives of the museum to be met. Control of the implementation process in museums by lower-level ('street-level') staff thus allowed real power to be exercised and can be explained by the concentration of technical knowledge and skills amongst practitioners rather than amongst generic managers.

This can also be seen to have generated a sense of guardianship, as curators see themselves as parents, defending their collections against top-down management and policy changes that might create conflict: 'and so you feel a guardian for that hidden potential that others can't always see and being asked to compromise that creates that sort of tension' [sic]. Furthermore, in a Scottish case, customer assistants, who had previously been based in individual museums, had been 'pooled' to a centralized rota. They were often given one week's notice of which museum they would be working in and this management decision led to feelings of anxiety and redundancy: some workers had felt comfortable in their knowledge of specific museums, and struggled to absorb new knowledge for each of the museums in the service. This, along with other bureaucratic changes in line with local authority policy, caused some severe anxiety for front-line staff. In this case the connection between staff and 'their' museum was felt to have been broken, which generated resentment against management and a perceived loss of service quality. Despite these staff concerns, however, there was an acceptance that management had the right to make this decision.

Similar resentments about the decisions that managers were making and, equally, about the resistance that managers met in their attempts to manage budget cut-backs and the demands of their own line managers were common across museums. For example, these challenges ranged from matters such as getting reimbursement for 19 pence diaries to struggles over the control of exhibitions and galleries. Large or small, and senior or junior, the bureaucratic organization of museums was a source of frustration in every organization that we have studied, even if the response to these issues varied considerably. At lower levels, for example, there was often a simple shrugging of the shoulders and an attitude of 'you change the language but you still do the same stuff', as one learning officer put it, or 'that sort of thing is set out for us… it's passed down to you' as another front-line worker said – implying that whatever happened at senior levels had either no real relevance for undertaking the job or that there was little that could be done about it anyway – while at more senior levels there tended to be more positive and actively engaged responses that saw change as something to be positively managed rather than resisted or ignored, with these differences being clearly linked to the position in the hierarchy that staff members filled (McCall and Gray 2014).

Thus, instead of simply seeing conflict as an everyday and inescapable part of museum operations, a contextualization of it through an application of ideas drawn from the literature about bureaucracies can establish not only a means for recognizing the sources of such conflicts but also a mechanism for generating hypotheses about how and why museums function in the ways that they do, and what the consequences of these questions are for everyday practice inside museums.

Formalism in the Museum

Common criticisms of bureaucracies are that they are rule-bound organizations, that the rules which they utilize are pointless, and an adherence to them stifles creativity and innovation in the work-place. This makes them soul-less institutions that are incapable of exercising 'common sense' when making decisions, and are positively damaging to those who are subject to their power, both as members of bureaucracies themselves and as the recipients of their services. Each of these criticisms has a long history (see Beetham 1996, 1-5; Casey 2002, 64-70; du Gay 2000: 1-2) and while there is an element of truth in each of them, and they have led to considerable attention being paid to bureaucratic reform, their relevance in the context of undertaking research into museums as bureaucratic organizations is less evident. In the current discussion the formal dimensions of bureaucratic organization that will be considered, given the space constraints that we are working within, are those of the existence of formal rules in the first place and, secondly, their role in establishing and maintaining career structures and pathways. Both of these are important for establishing the bureaucratic identity of organizations, and have significant implications for the distribution of power and authority within them. No organization can function with any efficiency if it does not have some sets of rules (both formal and informal) to govern behaviour and to control the demands of service provision. The nature of these rules can vary considerably, and their direct effect on the functioning of organizations can veer between the large-scale (such as rules on accounting for expenditure) and the minimal (such as rules on dress-codes for staff[5]). The nature of the rules that are to be found in museums and galleries tend to be of three types: those that are part of the broader organizations to which they belong – with this being particularly common in the case of local authority and university museums and galleries; those that govern the formal dimension of their operations; and those that are concerned with their everyday working environment, with these being a mixture of formal and informal ‘rules of the game’.

Examples of these can be found in the first case in, for example, the information that is demanded by a local authority concerning everything from visitor numbers to expenditure to the number of days of sick leave that staff have taken. Each of these is concerned with ensuring the accountability of museums to their funders and are generally seen by museum staff as being things that museums *have* to be concerned with, even if they cause extra work for staff.

The second type of rule concerns operational practice. In our research the most commonly mentioned rules of this sort governed health and safety at work where museum staff at all levels pointed out that their museums and galleries had individual sets of rules about this which differed from the ‘standard’ local authority or university rules as a consequence of the jobs that staff were undertaking. This was as much a consequence of the collections that were being dealt with - as dropping a box of personnel files or memory sticks from a height is less likely to be damaging to them than would be the case if a Greek vase was being dropped from a comparable height – as it was of anything else, but these rules were seen as being of great importance for the protection of the museum’s assets and were consequently taken extremely seriously.

In the final case, that of rules of behaviour and practice, there was a much greater level of potential conflict arising from their application as they were understood to be more directly concerned with matters of power and the exercise of managerial control in a top-down, hierarchical fashion. In one case, for example, collection items about the suffragette movement had to remain in a display case instead of being handled and examined in detail by students as a result of curatorial insistence about the care of the collection, with this trumping the possible educational benefits that students may have gained by having direct access to the material. Not all applications of rules, however, led to potential conflict. In many cases the guidelines and professional standards that organizations like the Museums Association have developed had effectively become a set of standard operational procedures for museums staff: they did not have to refer to them directly, with them being treated, as one senior curator said, as ‘largely second nature’, and they were simply accepted as being appropriate guidelines for behaviour, particularly at more senior levels amongst museums staff. As such, they were not subject to debate and were more a source of legitimation for staff decisions than they were anything else.

Overall, organizational rules appear to be relatively uncontentious insofar as they fulfil an instrumental requirement in terms of the functions that museums are undertaking. They can also, however, appear as a source of disagreement if the rules are not perceived in the same way by all of the participants in the process. In many cases this is as much a case of who has control of the rules, and how the rules are being applied, as it is anything to do with the rules themselves. In such cases the question of whether rules are pointless or not depends upon who is being asked, rather than it being anything intrinsic to the nature of the rules involved. In the case of the formal rules that govern organizational behaviour the bureaucratic dependence on them can be seen as being rather double-edged: they provide an essential basis for the undertaking of much of the work of museums and galleries while at the same time they can serve as a focus of discontent as a consequence of their application in individual cases. This has the potential to lead to forms of class, gender, age, ethnic and disability biases – and overt discrimination – in how they function, depending upon what the rules are and how they are employed through forms of formal and informal behaviour, as will be seen when researching museums as bureaucracies is discussed below. The formalization and standardization of organizational responses to issues depends upon the extent to which these are perceived as being legitimate by those who are affected by them. Taking a Weberian approach, Gross *et al.* (2013) reconcile potential bias in the bureaucracy with the concept of ‘substantive rationality’ to allow for individual cases, discretion and exception to informal rules. Therefore, bureaucracy at the same time sits within professional standards and control alongside the scope to address bias and conflict.

The acceptance of professional standards as a mechanism for establishing legitimacy within museum settings is strongly associated with the establishment of clear career structures, the means by which questions of seniority and promotion can be established, and through which authority can be claimed over the management of museums (di Maggio 1981; Gray 2015a). The overwhelming majority of interviewed staff at middle and senior management levels had either academic museum studies qualifications[6] or technical qualifications (particularly in education and conservation), or both. Between them these provided evidence of technical competence that was simply unavailable at lower levels of the organizational hierarchy, and provided the means by which the political authority and status of elected politicians could, to some extent at least, be countered. In some cases the head of museum services was not technically qualified in fields that were directly related to museums but held their position as a consequence of their managerial experience and non-museum qualifications instead (thus still having technical competence but in a different field), and the head of a variety of services (such as accounting and marketing) only rarely had a museums background at all. In these cases, however, it was still the formal qualifications that staff had which determined their ability to develop their career trajectories within the sector[7]. Professional standards as an underlying justification for particular sets of working practices can also be used as a way of determining what these standards might be – as the introduction of SPECTRUM records demonstrates.

As has been implicitly noted above there is a marked difference between formal rules, organizational structures and hierarchies, and the informal methods that are developed within any bureaucratic system to allow it to function efficiently. The staff in museums are not simply robots, mindlessly undertaking a set of actions that have been predetermined for them by their hierarchical superiors, particularly as many organizational policies are so ambiguous that they are capable of multiple interpretations, with this providing a variety of benefits for both policy-makers and implementing staff (Gray 2015b). Indeed the available evidence demonstrates that museum staff are capable of managing the demands that are placed on them in ways that are not only examples of their individual agency but are also capable of modifying what is demanded of them into completely new forms (see, for example, Gray 2014, 2016; McCall 2009; Newman and McLean, 2004; West and Smith 2005).

A direct consequence of this is that there will always be an implementation gap between what those at the top of the hierarchy desire and what those at the bottom of the hierarchy will deliver. In many cases this gap will be small but occasionally it will produce significant differences between intentions and outcomes. Weber’s approach helps us understand this conflict within ideas of formal and substantive rationality (i.e. it makes sense depending on the point of view that is adopted within the bureaucracy) (Brubaker 1984). As every position within an organizational hierarchy has control of particular resources this implementation gap is only to be expected and accounts for many (but not all) of the perceived failures that organizations are prey to. In itself this provides a clear reason for why the imposition of top-down hierarchical control is demanded within museums – the desire to avoid failure – and, equally, why it is so difficult to actually get such control – the top cannot achieve the hands-on control that would be needed to overcome bottom-up independent action and choices, often as a result of their lack of technical knowledge and expertise[8]. The presence of informality within bureaucratic organizations thus has an explanatory role to play in making sense of the ways in which museums and galleries function, the ways in which they undertake their various roles, and why there are often mis-matches between theory and practice in terms of what they actually provide.

Researching Museums as Bureaucracies

We have argued that the bureaucratic model can be applied to museums. This has the ability to give insights into the ways in which formal structures, formal and informal organizational rules and hierarchical differentiation can shape the behaviour of people working within them and affect the multiple functions and adjectives with which they can be linked. In this section, we give further evidence that highlights the importance of bureaucratic management and control in shaping what museums do in terms of how recognizing museums as bureaucracies has consequences for how they may be researched. We reflect on some of our own personal experiences from doing research in and about museums to share insights that have arisen from this concerning ethics and power in research processes.

Power in the research process is mostly focused on the 'researchers and their "subjects"' (Smyth and Williamson 2004), which focuses on the power of the researcher. However, in the context of trying to understand those power structures, we have found that where there is bureaucratic management there is also a means of controlling those who seek to understand it. We have observed, examined and spoken to people working in museums both throughout the United Kingdom and internationally, and throughout this process have also been subject to the impact of the bureaucratic features outlined above, even if these varied considerably in their precise detail as a result of differing contextual factors in each case. In turn, this has shaped how we think museums work, what they do and what we think they are, as the position of the researcher can affect access to the field, the nature of the researcher-researched relationship, and how the researcher understands the world (Berger 2015).

The process of researching the museum, as with any other organization, is also important to note due to the wider societal context and its divisions within which they function. In one case, for example, a senior female manager explained that part of her job involved 'gentle flirting with older men' as a means to ensure that the museum service was appreciated by local elected politicians. This demonstrated that however senior she was in the museums service, there were still expectations of how women should behave, reflecting the wider patriarchal patterns to be found in society, as well as demonstrating her lower hierarchical status, as an appointed officer, in comparison with elected councillors. By conducting qualitative research we were able to understand these nuanced social experiences that were shaped by gender, race and class. This gave extra insight to the workings of the patriarchal bureaucracies that exist in museum hierarchies.

As researchers, we also found that our gender (a man and a woman) and career position (one a PhD researcher and one an established academic) had a direct effect on the experience of conducting research in and on museums (see also, Munro, 2014 on the significance of gender in the museum context). Berger (2015) highlights that access to the 'field' can be affected by the social position of the researcher and we found that in particular being a woman, at the very beginning of an academic career, produced more negative experiences around access as compared to the experiences of the senior academic. In one English museum, for example, there was an attempt at full senior (male) managerial control over the research process. This was done via producing a special 'list' of people that the researcher was allowed to talk too. On top of the clear ethical concerns in this case, this was also an attempt to control the sharing of information and the researcher's understanding of what the museum was doing[9], and made clear where authority was to be found inside the museum: at the top of the hierarchy.

Not only were there examples of top-down managerial control over access, but the organizational culture itself – with its formal and informal sets of rules – could also be a barrier to research. This often had added gender implications. For example, in one museum the male ground floor staff were careful never to talk to the female researcher, to the point of rudeness. Often as well when accessing senior (male) managers, this researcher was left waiting for hours to talk to them, including being left outside in the rain. These experiences emphasize the usefulness of an organizational focus for analysis as it helps us also understand that museums, as bureaucracies, also embody the prevailing cultural norms and social divisions of the societies within which they are located. This is something that all museums share and contributes to the analytical base that can serve to remind researchers that museums are not abstract entities but are a part and parcel of their wider communities (a point emphasised, for example, in Message [2014]). Furthermore, the intricacies of researching 'within one's own culture' cannot be separated from the sometimes conflictual issues of gender, ethnicity, colour and class (Johnson-Bailey 2010) in a museums sector that has repeatedly faced calls for a more diverse workforce, as in the *Character Matters* report which shows clearly a need for more occupational role and organizational diversity within the sector (BOP Consulting 2016). The ongoing debate of whether museums reflect or reinforce cultural norms is equally, therefore, displayed on a micro-level within the research process.

When researching museums, therefore, it is pertinent to keep in mind that these structural factors can also control the research process. This clearly can affect the researchers' positionality and researcher-researched relationship, which can shape the findings and conclusions that can be arrived at (Berger 2015). Bureaucracies include structures of accountability through hierarchy and functional specialization, and it is part of their structural and behavioural characteristics that they will try to control processes that may be counter-productive, or paint a different picture, than the ones that senior managers are trying to convey and that front-line staff are trying to establish through their activities.

The result of this reflection would be to highlight the importance of reflexivity in the research process, especially in light of the context of bureaucratic organization. Reflexive research is 'paramount' as is the need to situate ourselves as researchers socially and emotionally; Fawcett and Hearn 2004; Mauther and Doucet, 2003 and Scott ***et al.*** (2014) also note that in a 'culture of evaluation', supporting an holistic approach to looking at museums with an 'array of methodological options' has the potential to bridge the divide between different expectations. Doing this can help researchers be reflexive, triangulate themes and narratives to support a trustworthy representation of their findings (Berger 2015).

The precise means by which museums may be analyzed as bureaucratic organizations is therefore rather varied. Our own research has been based on qualitative approaches that are focused on theoretically-derived concerns about how museums function on a daily basis, with these theories being found in the social science literatures concerning public policy and its implementation. It is certainly not the case that our own approaches are the only ones that could be utilized in researching museums as bureaucracies as a variety of quantitative research methods could also be employed, as well as approaches that stem from concerns with the social construction of meaning within museums, or ethnography and social anthropology. Our own approaches, again, are concerned with the empirical investigation of social and organizational behaviour and not with theoretical and conceptual elucidation, each of which can be important in developing an understanding of how museums can be thought of and investigated. If anything we support an open approach to researching museums as bureaucracies: all that is needed is an appreciation of the ontological and epistemological foundations of the research methods that are being applied so that research makes sense in its own terms. As the other papers in this collection make apparent not every approach to analysis would see the bureaucratic framework of museums as being a necessary starting point to investigating them but for certain dimensions of museum practice it is a very good place to start.

Conclusion

The identification of museums as particular examples of the bureaucratic organizational form makes it possible to identify and explain the underlying reasons why particular features of museums function as they do. The development of adjectival variants of museums can be misleading as to the common nature of their organizational environments and capabilities through their focus on the particularities of individual cases. A focus on such bureaucratic features as functional differentiation and hierarchical authority can not only explain the similarities between many dimensions of museums and their work, but can also be used as a means by which to understand the differences between particular and individual examples of museums. If the adjectival museum allows for the identification of particular trees, bureaucracy, as an organizing concept, allows for the identification of the forest of which they are a part.

The utility of bureaucracy as an organizing idea for researching museums in terms of their structural characteristics and their formal and informal patterns of everyday working practice will not give all of the answers for the questions that researchers may wish to ask – we have not, for example, mentioned questions concerning worker alienation and the personal feelings that museum staff may have about their roles, each of which can be affected by the bureaucratic nature of work within the museums context - but it can certainly help establish where the answers to these questions may be found. By viewing museums as examples of particular ways of organizing work, managing staff, and exercising power in the processes of making and implementing policies bureaucracy, as a concept, directs attention to specific sets of activity and organization that might otherwise not be considered relevant for understanding them. The key features of bureaucracy that have focused upon in this paper demonstrate how they can illuminate how museums function, and how their activities can be understood as exemplars of standard bureaucratic practice. What this paper shows is that museums are open to further theoretical development as different approaches from sociology, social policy and political studies can give exciting and innovative new insights not only to museum functionality but also to the process of doing research itself. As such, a more explicit focus on museums as organizational units rather than as adjectival entities can be used to extend the types of analysis that can be fruitfully employed for understanding them, particularly in cases where detailed empirical evidence about the choices and actions of museum staff is sought.

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Notes

1. We could also have made reference to engaging, professional, adaptive, local, national, universal, independent, people's, children's, labour, virtual, symbolic, connected, trust and charitable museums. References for all of these are available from the authors if they are desired.

2. Full details of the interviews that we make reference to are available from the authors on request.

3. This distinction is not intended to make a claim that doing and being are two entirely separate realms of existence, only that the labels that have been attached to museums implicitly accept that a difference between them does exist in terms of how sense of the sector, in part or as a whole, can be established. The distinction is thus an analytical one rather than anything else.

4. The precise, and detailed, methods that were employed in these papers are available from the authors on request. Some detail about these is also available in the individual papers themselves. Word limits prevent a detailed account of the full methodological, epistemological and ontological choices that were made during our research.

5. These may, and probably do, have an effect on how people relate to the museum that they are visiting – although we know of no causal explanation that accounts for how and why this occurs - but the job of guiding people to the room that they want, or ensuring that there is no rubbish on the floor of the museum will get done whether people are in uniforms or not.

6. From a relatively small number of institutions. The usual homes were at (in alphabetical order) Leicester, Manchester, Newcastle and St Andrews Universities, with others having less presence, almost certainly as a result of the geographical location of the museums that were covered by our research rather than anything intrinsic to museum education opportunities themselves.

7. Although the recent appointment of the new Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, an academic historian and former MP, serves as an interesting counter-example to this image of the importance of technical professional status and expertise within the museums sector.

8. Such control is easier to achieve in very small organizations which have limited hierarchical authority within them: in effect, the smaller the organization the smaller the implementation gap.

9. It should also be noted though that in many other cases access was unproblematic – and much appreciated.

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