Bureaucratic Ambiguity

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Abstract

We live in a world in which ever-greater arenas of social life are shaped by standardization and bureaucratic rationalization, as the pursuit for quantification—of “measureable results”—sweeps everything from universities to hospitals to international organizations. Yet intuitively we understand that much of our collective and individual existence escapes these efforts of rationalization. We know that not everything can be measured, and that those things that resist easy classification or definition are often the most vital. How then do we develop a conception of the social world that appreciates both the powerful drive towards rationalization and the things that escape or overflow these efforts? This article seeks to answer this riddle by examining the central role of ambiguity in social life in general—and in organizational practice in particular. Drawing on the examples of two international organizations—the IMF and the World Bank—I explore the ways in which bureaucracies not only seek to contain ambiguity through various forms of quantification and standardization, but also seek to create and exploit institutional ambiguities.

Introduction

We live in a world in which ever-greater arenas of social life are shaped by standardization and bureaucratic rationalization, as the pursuit of “measureable results” sweeps everything from universities to hospitals to international organizations. Yet intuitively we understand that much of our collective and individual existence escapes these efforts of rationalization. We know that not everything can be measured, and that those things that resist classification or definition are often the most vital. How then do we develop a conception of the social world that appreciates both the powerful drive towards rationalization and the things that escape or overflow? This article seeks to answer this riddle by examining the central role of ambiguity in social life in general—and in organizational practice in particular. Drawing on the examples of two international organizations—the IMF and the World Bank—I explore the ways in which bureaucracies not only seek to contain ambiguity through various forms of quantification and standardization, but also seek to foster it.

Ambiguities are far more pervasive than we generally assume. While I was working on this article, I had a conversation with a friend who is also a family doctor. When I mentioned that I was working on ambiguity, she was immediately interested. Ambiguity, she said, was a key challenge for family medicine. Every day, a doctor sits across from patients who present mysterious symptoms that could represent one of a multitude of possible health problems. Doctors do their best to interpret them and to suggest appropriate treatments. Many cases are straightforward, with obvious diagnoses and solutions. Yet in some cases, the doctor never actually knows for certain what the problem really is, or whether the treatment was the reason for recovery. In medical school, they are told again and again that they will have to learn to live with ambiguity. In fact, she suggested, some medical students avoid general practice precisely because of their discomfort with this kind of ambiguity.

This brief anecdote points to the ambiguous character modern institutions like medicine.[1] It also provides us with some clues about the sources of that ambiguity. Family medicine is prone to ambiguity because it involves so many layers of interpretation: the symptoms themselves can be ambiguous signs, with several possible meanings. In interpreting the patient's description of their symptoms, the doctor is interpreting the patient's own interpretation of the evolution of their ailment. The doctor must also interpret various medical guidelines and norms in her efforts to determine whether they apply to this case. While one might understand this as a particular kind of ignorance—the key theme in this special issue—it is not a kind of ignorance that is necessarily resolved through more information (in fact, patients may very easily present too much information, as they recite a variety of other symptoms that might or might not be relevant). Ambiguities are unsettling to us in part because they are not easily resolved with more information, our usual solution to unknowns.

This glimpse into the world of the family doctor gives us some sense of the complications that can arise when efforts to rationalize and standardize medical practices (through, for example, the development of the "standard human" which serves as the basis for the testing of drugs and the development of dosages) confront actual human beings (Epstein 2009). Although family medicine is a world apart from the institutions of global economic governance that are the focus of this paper, these kinds of tensions between efforts of standardization and the ubiquity of ambiguity are remarkably similar.

The central question that I want to explore here is how to understand the role of ambiguity in organizations that are increasingly dominated by the logic of technical rationality and the corollary effort to standardize, quantify and formalize so much of social life. I will suggest that the concept of ambiguity is implicit in much social theory, but has tended to be underemphasized and under-theorized. When theorists examine the social character of human interactions, they focus on the many effective techniques that we have developed to constrain or manage ambiguity. In Bourdieuian analysis, for example, the stabilization of social meaning is achieved through the accretion of structured habits (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1990); while in Actor-Network Theory (ANT), it is through the techniques of inscription, translation and enrolment (Callon 1986b; Latour 1987; Walters 2002).

Of course, many of these same theorists are aware of the messiness of social life and struggle to represent it through their analyses. As I will elaborate further below, there are moments within their analyses where we can find an opening to the persistence of ambiguity. Yet, over time, much of the openness to tension and ambiguity present in these theories has been closed off. As John Law has pointed out in the case of ANT, the "black-boxing" of this theory has gradually purified its internal tensions, in the process losing much of its capacity to capture the complexity of the social world (Law 1999).[2] What I want to do here is to recapture some of that messiness, to shift the focus of attention slightly and to look around the edges of these kinds of social practices, attending to what slips out, does not fit, or gets lost in translation—and then to consider the implications of these ambiguities for our understanding of organizational culture.

The remainder of this article is organized around three major sections. I will begin by developing a definition of the concept of ambiguity and identifying some preliminary implications for the study of organizations. In the second section, I will briefly examine two cases from the realm of global economic governance, examining the persistence of ambiguity in the World Bank's good governance agenda and the IMF's conditionality policy. One would not expect organizations like the IMF and World Bank, with their commitment to mainstream economic theory and their mandate of technical efficiency, to develop particularly ambiguous policies. And yet, I will suggest, a study of the evolution of these policies reveals that ambiguities in the policies not only persist but that key actors are often aware of them and seek to retain or exploit them.

In the final section, I will consider some of the implications of these cases for a broader understanding of the role of ambiguity in bureaucratic organizations. Both cases point to the centrality of ambiguity to organizational practices, as well as to the ambivalence of institutional actors about the tradeoffs between ambiguity and various forms of standardization and rationalization. It also highlights the strategic value of certain kinds of ambiguity: ambiguities are not only useful for organizations themselves, allowing them to adapt to changing environments and varying contexts, but are also a source of power for certain institutional actors which can reinforce existing asymmetries. Yet the very mutability of ambiguity also means that such strategic deployments are always provisional and liable to failure, as a policy can be reinterpreted in unexpected ways.

Defining ambiguity

One of the difficulties of using the concept of ambiguity is the fact that it tends to be, how shall I put it, ambiguous. Intuitively, it is easy to see a multitude of different kinds of phenomena as potentially ambiguous: language, practices, symptoms, roles, norms. While the ubiquity of ambiguity makes it a particularly powerful concept, the very diversity of ambiguous subjects also appears to blunt that power, as the term comes to mean anything and thus nothing. In order to develop a useful definition, it this therefore worth spending some time discussing what ambiguity is not before turning to consider what it is and what it does.

What ambiguity is not

Although there has not been much attention to the idea of ambiguity in recent years, social theorists have been preoccupied with other kinds of unknowns—notably those of uncertainty, ignorance and risk. There are many ways of linking these three concepts and telling a story about the problems of contemporary life. Ulrich Beck's well-known narrative puts risk centre-stage (Beck 1992; Beck 2006). Frank Knight and Pat O'Malley make uncertainty their driving concept (Knight 1946; O'Malley 2004). Niklas Luhmann, in contrast, places considerable emphasis on the phenomenon of ignorance. It is possible to develop a clear understanding of the relationship between ambiguity and these other conceptions of the unknown by engaging with any of these scholars.[3] Given the emphasis that this special issue is placing on the problem of ignorance, however, I will use Luhmann as a way into my definition of ambiguity.

Niklas Luhmann has described the pervasiveness of uncertainty in modern existence in two essays: "Describing the Future," and "The Ecology of Ignorance."[4] Luhmann suggests that we are living through a time of extraordinary social complexity, in which the continuity between past and future is "broken," and "we can only be certain that we cannot be certain whether or not anything that we remember as being past will in the future remain as it was" (Luhmann 1998a: 67). For Luhmann, this uncertainty is produced by the fundamental unpredictability—even unknowability—of the future.[5]

Luhmann goes on to suggest that the pervasiveness of uncertainty has had two effects on social life: there has been an integration of ignorance into individual and organizational life and an increased reliance on risk-based decision-making. One consequence of the uncertainty of the future is that ignorance has become an all-pervasive aspect of our lives. We simply do not know what will happen tomorrow. Yet we realize that it depends in part on what we decide today. This uncertainty poses a considerable challenge to those experts who guide such decisions, since they may be held accountable for unfortunate outcomes. In response, Luhmann suggests, expertise has become increasingly provisional, leaving room for unpleasant surprises (Luhmann 1998a: 69). Expertise has incorporated rather than eliminated ignorance.[6]

One of the forms that such expertise has taken is that of probabilistic or risk-based reasoning. Whereas uncertainty is a concept that points to the limits of calculation, risk-based analysis seeks to assign probabilities to unforeseen outcomes. Yet in Luhmann's version, such strategies of calculation give expression to our ignorance without actually eliminating it (Luhmann 1998a: 70). Far from providing a solution to the problems of ignorance, risk-based reasoning has become one way of accommodating it while also avoiding responsibility for its costs (Luhmann 1998b: 89-91).

For Luhmann, uncertainty, ignorance and risk are linked but distinct concepts. Uncertainty is a concept that points to the unpredictability of the future. Ignorance, or a lack of authoritative knowledge, is one consequence of those uncertainties. Risk seeks to render such unknowns calculable in terms of probabilities: "to calculate a future that can always turn out otherwise" (Luhmann 1998a: 70). Each of these concepts describes some form of unknown that has become a central problem and preoccupation of (post)modern life. In each case, the source of such unknowns resides in the challenges of social complexity or the unpredictability of the future.

Yet none of these conceptualizations focuses on how meaning itself is a source of the unknown: even if the future were more amenable to prediction, if additional knowledge reduced our ignorance and the unforeseen were fully calculable, we would still have to *interpret* our findings and communicate our certainties. As Foucault reminds us in *The Order of Things*, the very intellectual tools with which modern subjects seek to manage the unknown are themselves steeped in the densities of language, the subjectivities of self-analysis and the contingencies of history (Foucault 1970: 304-310, 369).[7] It is in this way that ambiguity enters into the picture—through the inescapability of interpretation—and provides us with a fourth key concept for comprehending the indeterminacies of modern existence.

Ambiguity as interpretation

Ambiguity is a concept that underscores the polysemic character of meaning: the potential for a plurality of meanings, and thus for more than one interpretation. The Oxford English Dictionary is useful here, defining “ambiguous” as: “not clearly defined,” “Admitting of more than one interpretation of explanation,” or “of doubtful position or classification” (OED 1989).

What aspects of social life are ambiguous? Clearly *texts* and language more generally can be open to multiple interpretations. The anecdote about family medicine that I began with takes us one step further and suggests that we broaden our conception of potentially ambiguous signs to include certain *material* manifestations: a bad cough may be physically evident, yet its meaning as a symptom of a broader illness may be ambiguous for the doctor who seeks to interpret it. Similarly, the meaning of economic data such as a drop in the rate of growth in consumer purchases can be endlessly debated by economists without any consensus. Certain kinds of *norms and social practices* can also be ambiguous: norms around tipping, for example, may be collectively understood but still open to interpretation (how bad was that service really?). *Social roles* may also be ambiguous—allowing a certain measure of play around the ascribed boundaries of an actor, group or organization’s identity. In each of these cases, what makes the phrase, object, practice or role ambiguous is our effort to interpret it. Ambiguity is therefore a social concept that comes into play when people begin to try to make sense of the world around them and act on those interpretations.

Social constraints on ambiguity

Of course, not every text or practice is equally equivocal in its meaning. Some things are far more ambiguous than others—a poem will tend to be more ambiguous than a training manual. Following Mikhail Bakhtin, we might think of these as existing along a spectrum of open and closed texts (Bakhtin 1996). Bakhtin suggests that although all language tends towards hybridity and heteroglossia—an openness to the multiplicities of meaning—there are nonetheless constant efforts to contain that diversity into coherent and closed texts. Thus language is torn between centripetal (centralizing) and centrifugal (decentering) forces, which take both textual and socially contextual forms (Bakhtin 1996: 270-2).

In fact, much of social life is designed to constrain the scope of ambiguity in our lives (even if the effects of those efforts are not always those intended). Intersubjective understandings work to foster convergence in our interpretations of a given social fact. Understanding the social or material context of a text reduces its ambiguities. For example, if a sensitive issue needs to be discussed, an individual might avoid sending an email, which can be misconstrued, and opt instead for face-to-face interaction, in which the participants have more context to help them interpret the tone and sense of what is being communicated.

Social theorists who examine the logic of practices provide us with important clues to the ways in which background norms, rules and practices can help to reduce the potential ambiguity of social interaction.[8] Bourdieu's concept of the habitus provides one explanation of how such social predispositions can be integrated at an individual, corporeal level through the inculcation of concrete patterns of being in the world, including ways of standing, greeting, and tones of voice {Bourdieu, 1990 #11766}. The habitus is a kind of internalized social structure that helps to coordinate communication and interpretation—effectively reducing ambiguity.

ANT theorists also provide us with insights into the ways in which practices of inscription, translation and calculation work to stabilize meanings. Latour and Woolgar's research into the scientific laboratory reveals the ways in which scientists work to translate everything from chemicals to rats into paper—in the form of tidy graphs, tables and scholarly articles—seeking to produce a kind of meaningful order from disorder (Latour and Woolgar 1986). Callon and Latour use the concept of inscription to describe the processes through which complex material realities are made visible. Thus, for example, in *Science in Action*, Latour describes the way in which a particular figure or graph "has been *extracted* from the instruments in this room, *cleaned*, *redrawn*, and *displayed*" (Latour 1987: 65 Emphasis in original). In some of his later work on markets, Callon explores the ways in which various devices, metrics and procedures work to make even the most slippery of economic processes calculable and thus manageable (Callon 1998a: 20-21). These various devices and techniques work to reduce messiness, contain overflowing, create common meanings and practices, and thus reduce ambiguity.

Residual ambiguities

Yet in spite of these clever mechanisms for reducing the ambiguities of social interaction, they tend to persist. An organization's guidelines may be a lot less ambiguous than a poem, but may still be open to interpretation. All texts exist within a network of other texts and are therefore liable to different interpretations as we each bring different prior texts and contexts to bear in reading them.[9]

Moreover, our very efforts to constrain such ambiguities may create others. The kinds of forms that we fill out on a regular basis would appear to be one of the least ambiguous kinds of inscription. They take potentially ambiguous inputs and translate them into a standardized, calculable form. Yet this kind of translation always misses something: a form will tend to assume a standard respondent and create boxes and categories accordingly, forcing those who do not fit (perhaps because they have no phone number, a foreign postal code, or a complex ethnic identity) to squeeze themselves into the existing boxes (Lampland and Star 2008: Ch.1). The form appears to be unambiguous—all of the boxes neatly filled out and capable of tabulation and analysis—but actually produces all sorts of ambiguities when anyone tries to interpret the actual relationship of the form's contents to the world beyond it. If the form designer gives up and creates an "other" category for each of the entries, he is faced with interpreting all of the many things people choose to fill in—answers that may not be so easily counted.

Some of the very same theorists that I discussed above as analysts of how social practices contain ambiguity also provide us with some clues to the limits of those efforts. There exists within Bourdieu's writings some awareness of residual ambiguity—a recognition of the "fuzziness" of social practices that leaves room for invention, innovation and (I would suggest) ambiguity. Bourdieu's concept of "virtuosity," for example, points to the possibility that exists for individuals to improvise on social scripts, complicating straightforward notions of social structure (Bourdieu 1977: 79).

Callon has pointed out that acts of translation are also a kind of displacement (Callon 1986a: 81) or even betrayal (Callon 1986b: 25). So much must be excluded in the creation of inscriptions and actor-worlds. And while these processes of calculation and inscription are powerful and performative, they are also inherently fragile. Something always overflows the frames that we create to make things calculable (Callon 1998b: 18). Andrew Barry has taken this insight one step further in demonstrating the fragility of systems of measurement, as "standardized procedures will not be able to capture the complexity of objects and practices in actuality" (Barry 2002: 275). Although neither Callon nor Barry explicitly engages the concept of ambiguity itself, each provides an opening to examine its role. Both theorists suggest that although the simplifications of inscription and standardization are useful, they also create residuals that ensure that a measure of ambiguity persists.

Organizational ambiguity

What then is the role of ambiguity in organizational life? After all, the first thing that is likely to strike one when thinking about ambiguity and bureaucratic culture is that the terms do not belong together. In fact, bureaucratic organizations do act in many ways as ambiguity-reducing machines. As Max Weber argued, "the primary source of the superiority of bureaucratic administration lies in the role of technical knowledge" (Weber 1976: 223). Central to that technical knowledge are the practices of quantification, standardization and classification, which work to reduce ambiguities. Just as the fruit fly was bred by scientists to be less subject to genetic variation (Epstein 2009: 41), so bureaucratic organizations create their own kinds of standard humans, economies, or sewage systems so that they can manage them more effectively. This kind of standardized knowledge combines with standardized practices—forms, procedures, guidelines—to reduce the range of interpretation and minimize ambiguity.

Yet the residual ambiguities that I discussed in more general terms above also play their role in organizations of various kinds. Contemporary organizations often face one or more dilemmas that foster ambivalence in their attitude towards ambiguity: those of *uncertainty*, *diversity*, and the *limits of quantification*. First, as Luhmann has pointed out, organizations are often faced with chronic uncertainty (Luhmann 1998a)—about the future, about a changing external environment and about their own internal dynamics and direction. However they try to plan for this uncertainty, organizations must also simply accept that the unpredicted will sometimes occur. While bureaucracies are designed to manage uncertainty through routine and standardization, such strategies are unequal to this kind of pervasive uncertainty. There is therefore some incentive to leave just enough room for interpretation within policy guidelines to allow for creative adaptation in the face of an uncertain future. Whereas Luhmann emphasizes the ways in which uncertainty tends to produce ignorance, my analysis points to the equally important role of ambiguity as an institutional response to the challenges of an unknowable world.

Second, organizations are faced by a tension between their tendency to develop standardized practices that treat everything alike, and their need to apply such policies to particular situations that do not always fit those categories (Barry 2002: 274-5). While policy rules and guidelines may be relatively unambiguous, their application always involves a measure of interpretation and judgment. Organizations may seek to avoid such ambiguities by being very specific or exhaustive when defining their policies; yet such precision can become a form of rigidity that produces exceptions to the rule in cases that do not fit the criteria. On the other hand, rules may incorporate some intentional ambiguity—in the form of discretion, room for judgment, or equivocal phrasing—in order to allow for a more flexible application to diverse cases. In either case, ambiguities persist.

Finally, organizations face a methodological, or even epistemological, dilemma. Much organizational culture is driven today by efforts to quantify goals, practices and outcomes through the development of ever more sophisticated indicators. This "will to quantify" does have important performative effects as, for example, university professors change their research and publishing practices to score better in research assessment exercises (Power 1996). Yet such efforts run into difficulty as they face complex realities that resist straightforward measurement. One organizational strategy for dealing with the limits of quantification is to develop ever-newer ways of modeling, formalizing and calculating (hence, to follow through on the example of research assessment, we find that the various systems for assessing research quality are always being revised).[10] Yet there also exists an alternative strategy: relying less on "hard" quantitative approaches and more on fuzzier, more qualitative and ambiguous forms of measurement.

Together, these three institutional dilemmas suggest that bureaucratic organizations are likely to be more than ambiguity-reducing machines, and that we might expect a more *ambivalent* attitude to ambiguity from organizational actors, as they seek to balance the tensions between their will to standardize and their recognition of the challenges posed by uncertainty, diversity and complexity. Will institutional actors be aware of such ambiguities—and *reflexive* in their efforts to control or encourage them? My anecdote about the doctor suggests that there may be some awareness of the issue. What we can more easily presume is that ambiguity is likely to be *persistent* within organizations' documents and policy practices—either because of the unintentional effects of applying narrowly defined rules to messier cases, or because of the intentional introduction of ambiguities into policies to allow for flexible interpretations. Finally, if ambiguities do play such a central role in organizations, we should not be surprised if we find that they are the object of internal power struggles. Because ambiguities allow for flexibility in interpretation, they can be used *strategically* by those in the best position to take advantage of that interpretive power. At the same time, the polivalency of ambiguous policies are by definition difficult to control: thus, we would expect that the ambiguities contained in inscriptions would also sometimes leave room for creative mis-recognitions, eluding the control of those who seek to manage them.

The Ambiguities of the IMF and World Bank

How do these broad postulates regarding the potential role of ambiguity in organizational culture actually play out in practice? An examination of the IMF's conditionality policy and the World Bank's good governance agenda provide us with important insights. Drawing on archival documents and interviews, it is possible to examine the internal debates in both organizations—on the IMF Executive Board and among World Bank Directors—tracing how organizational actors perceived and responded to the ambiguities within their own policies.[11] Both policies have been ambiguously defined throughout their history, enabling the policies to be interpreted and applied in different ways. This ambiguity has facilitated the gradual expansion of the scope of the policies. And while both the vagueness of the policies and their expansion has been contested, particularly in recent years, many ambiguities continue to persist.

The World Bank's good governance agenda

The first major report at the World Bank to make "good governance" a key issue was a 1989 document assessing development successes and failures in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bank 1989: xii). The report's authors sought to explain the persistent failure of development efforts in the region over the previous decades, concluding that the source of the difficulties lay in bad public management at the domestic level – which they labeled as a "crisis in governance" (Bank 1989: 60). This new emphasis on governance shifted the focus of development efforts more deeply into the country's internal affairs, addressing highly political matters such as public sector management, "rule of law", government "accountability," and more recently corruption (Bank 1991: ii, 4; Bank 2007).

How was an organization like the World Bank, with a mandate that forbad it from engaging in political matters, to expand its scope in this way? A series of creative interpretations of the concept of good governance played a key role in enabling this transformation. The first of these began with the initial choice of the term "governance"; as Kathryn Weaver has documented, earlier drafts of the 1989 report had talked about "kleptocratic elites" and framed the problem in much more explicitly political terms, a move that was opposed by senior managers and borrowing members (Weaver 2008: 104). The published version opted instead for the language of "governance," which was seen as more neutral. Just a few years later, the Bank's General Counsel, Ibrahim Shihata, was asked to provide a legal opinion on "Issues of Governance in Borrowing Members," outlining what the institution could and could not do in this area (Shihata 1990). Senior management encouraged Shihata to come up with a flexible definition of the policy, in spite of his reservations (Weaver 2008: 106). In the end, Shihata argued that the Bank could only seek to effect change on matters of "good order" that had a direct bearing on economic development (Thomas 2007: 732-3). The 1991 governance report defined governance as "the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development" (Bank 1991: 1): although the World Bank could not be involved in partisan matters, or favour one kind of political system over another, as long as staff could show a direct link between political order and economic development, they could pursue policy in this area.

With this "narrow yet ambiguous definition" (Weaver 2008: 106) established, good governance policies became increasingly influential in the 1990s. Although the actual boundaries between governance and non-governance-related policies are difficult to determine with any certainty, a 1994 report on the Bank's experience of governance programs noted that the volume of governance-related lending was significant and increasing, with as many as 68% of lending operations containing some kind of governance dimension (Bank 1994: xv). The ambiguity of the policy's definition allowed it to morph over time, taking on various theoretical colourings—beginning with a public-choice cast in its early days (Bank 1989; Bank 1992), taking on more institutionalist inflections in the mid-1990s (Bank 1997), reorienting more towards poverty-reduction in the late 1990s (Bank 2000; Bank 2002), and taking a distinctly neoconservative shade in the 2000s (Bank 2007).[12]

Throughout these different incarnations, good governance policy gradually expanded its scope: the most important of these expansions occurred in 1995, as the new President, James Wolfensohn redefined good governance to include anti-corruption efforts—an issue that had previously been seen as too political for the Bank to touch. In 2005, his successor, Paul Wolfowitz, went a step further, seeking to make governance and anti-corruption (GAC) the centrepiece of his mandate. Yet Wolfowitz stretched the elasticity of the concept of good governance a little too far—and exploited that ambiguity a little too visibly—for the organization's staff and membership to accept. Not long into his tenure, Wolfowitz began to "get tough" on corruption, cutting off aid to several countries deemed corrupt, including Kenya, Cameroon and India (Duncan 2006). Critics raised serious concerns not only about the lack of consultation with senior staff responsible for those programs, but also about the extent to which these policy decisions were motivated by American political interests.

When Wolfowitz brought his proposal for a new GAC strategy to the organization's Development Committee in 2007, he was forced to back down on some of his central proposals, and to promise to consult the Executive Board more thoroughly on the policy's development and implementation (Duncan 2006).[13] In their presentations to the Development Committee, country members expressed concerns with the scope of the Bank's policy and sought to limit overly "subjective" interpretations (Jha 2006). Yet, as I will discuss further below, even those most intent on limiting Wolfowitz's discretion to interpret the GAC policy recognized the limits of creating a rigidly rule-based system, particularly given the difficulties involved in measuring good governance. Even at a moment when key actors were focused on the task of reigning in the scope of the policy and ensuring greater clarity in its definition, they remained aware of the difficulties involved in pinning down such an ambiguous concept, allowing many of them to persist.

The IMF streamlines conditionality

The IMF's conditionality policy—the conditions that it imposes on borrowing members in return for financial assistance—has also been subject to significant debate since its formalization in the early 1950s.[14] Executive Board debates in 1968 and 1978 sought to clarify the policy and limit its scope by agreeing on guidelines. Yet after each of these debates, the policy continued its expansion, moving from monetary to fiscal policy in the 1970s, and continuing into structural conditionality, including trade liberalization and privatization, in the 1980s and 1990s. While part of the explanation for this expansion lies in changing economic conditions as well as the rise of economic ideas that saw structural reform as essential to economic improvement, the guidelines themselves also played an important role: they were always sufficiently ambiguous to allow for such expansive interpretations. Even as they sought to limit performance criteria, for example, Directors did not set an absolute limit but instead adopted guidelines that suggested that only those "necessary" should be included as conditions (IMF 1968a; IMF 1979). Not surprisingly, the staff's interpretation of "necessary" conditions proved to be elastic.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as the number and scope of structural conditions continued to grow, the Fund began to rely increasingly on more ambiguous conditions—introducing structural benchmarks, for example, which were far less precise than pass-fail performance criteria, and relying increasingly on subjective performance reviews to assess a country progress throughout a loan's term (IMF 2001a: 12-14). This tendency towards the increase in the number and complexity of IMF conditions reached its peak with the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997-98, when some stand-by arrangements included over a hundred conditions. In the aftermath of this excess, there was a broad-based reaction against the growing number of conditions and their increasing ambiguity.

Spurred on by a new Managing Director, Horst Köhler, the Executive Board once undertook a systematic evaluation of conditionality policy in 2002 (IMF 2002; Köhler 2000). This time staff and most Directors agreed that the conditionality policy was too ambiguous. The staff noted that "The measures that matter for program reviews and those that do not count are generally not distinguished, creating ambiguity about the boundaries of conditionality" (IMF 2001a: 17). The Board ultimately proposed to streamline conditionality by focusing only on "macro-critical" conditions. Yet this term turned out to be as ambiguous as "necessary" before it: a review of structural conditionality by the Independent Evaluation Office in 2007 found that the overall number of conditions had not changed, while many non-critical conditions were still being imposed (IMF 2007).

In the aftermath of the recent financial crisis, the IMF Executive Board reconsidered its conditionality policy once again. This time, they decided to eliminate all quantitative structural performance criteria, replacing them with more flexible that they hope will reduce the stigma of borrowing from the IMF (Andersen 2009).[15] Fund staff and Board members have thus sought once again to integrate more ambiguity into their policies.

The pressures towards ambiguity

Rather than seeing a relentless drive to quantify and standardize practice, what we see in these two cases is a more accommodating, if ambivalent, relationship with ambiguity. Institutions like the IMF and World Bank face many of the contemporary dilemmas discussed above that help to foster an ambivalent attitude to ambiguity. For the IMF, uncertainty plays a particularly important role in shaping its conditionality policy.[16] The political economic environment is constantly changing in unexpected ways, forcing off-course a set of conditions that may have seemed reasonable at the time that a loan agreement was arranged. At the same time, the two main parties to each agreement—the borrowing country and the Fund itself—are always uncertain about each other's intentions. Conditionality policy faces a dilemma regarding how best to respond to these different kinds of uncertainty: clearer, less ambiguous conditions will provide borrower and lender with more certainty; yet this kind of rigid conditionality is not particularly suited to adapting to broader uncertainties in the political and economic environment.

For both the IMF and World Bank, the challenges of diversity also tend to encourage a more ambiguous policy approach, in spite of the pressures to standardize. The common bureaucratic dilemma of dealing with diversity takes a particular form at these organizations because of their institutional culture (Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Vetterlein 2007; Weaver and Leiteritz 2005). The fact that mainstream economic theory is the intellectual lifeblood of the organizations means that its staff and Directors are committed to the idea that certain economic tenets are universally applicable.

At the IMF, while staff may officially deny the charge that they follow a "one size fits all" macroeconomic model, some will privately admit that there is a tendency to take a "cookie cutter approach" to programs for developing countries.[17] One would expect this kind of intellectual culture to be hostile to policy ambiguity. Yet even here, this culture of economic standardization coexists with a second, more pragmatic culture that recognizes, at least to some extent, the political challenges of putting economic policies into practice in a wide array of countries. While the idea of fostering "country ownership" of programs is only recent, there is a much longer history within the Fund of recognizing (however imperfectly) the political "realities" of implementing IMF programs.[18]

At the World Bank, even those Directors most concerned about Wolfowitz's arbitrary application of anti-corruption guidelines argued for the importance of balancing fairness of treatment with a respect for the fact that, in the words of the French Minister of Finance, there is "no unique path to good governance" (Benn and Brown 2006; Breton 2006: 5). Similarly, the Korean representative noted "decisions on how the Bank and other donors should engage with countries where governance or corruption is either improving or deteriorating rapidly will likely *prove impossible to reduce to 'standard operating procedures*'" (Kwon 2006: emphasis added). At both institutions, there therefore exists a more pragmatic approach to policy which provides a rationale for ensuring that guidelines are ambiguous enough to allow for a flexible application depending on local circumstances.

The third, epistemological, dilemma is also at the heart of both the Fund's and the Bank's efforts to measure and evaluate their policies. There is a clear preference within both organizations for quantifying everything possible: numbers are the ultimate standard of truth. This will to quantify is shared by staff and Directors from developing and industrialized countries alike: clear, quantitative conditions such as credit ceilings and objective indicators of good governance provide everyone with a sense of certainty. Yet both organizations have found themselves struggling with the limits of such rationalizing efforts. At the IMF, as narrowly monetary and fiscal conditions have not had the desired effects, the organization has moved deeper into increasingly complex policy domains. As the Fund has adopted structural conditionality, it has found itself faced with policies that cannot be effectively measured or evaluated with quantitative methods alone: hence the growing adoption of more qualitative, subjective, and ambiguous evaluation methods (IMF 2001a).

At the Bank, efforts to make governance measurable have also run into difficulties. From the earliest days of the policy, senior management and Directors have recognized that good governance was, in President Conable's words, "a difficult, nebulous subject"(Conable 1991). More recently, there has been a push within the organization to develop quantitative indicators of governance performance—in order to determine who are the good and bad performers (Kaufmann and Kraay 2008). Yet, once again, although Directors have generally agreed with the principle of developing clear governance indicators, many have also insisted on the difficulties of measuring governance and corruption (Breton 2006; Jha 2006), pointing out, for example that "measurements often report perceptions as much as the country reality" (Kwon 2006). Some Bank staff members are also aware that governance indicators are, in the words of one senior staff member, "subjective and atheoretical."[19] Thus efforts to standardize and quantify World Bank governance indicators and IMF conditions have met significant resistance.

Bureaucratic ambiguity

Given these institutional dilemmas, we should not be surprised to find that ambiguity plays a central role in both organizations' policies. IMF and World Bank policies reveal the extent to which institutional actors' are both *reflexive* about the central role of ambiguity and *ambivalent* about it. They also help to shed some light on the *persistence* of ambiguity in the various iterations of the policies and their application. Finally, they also provide us with some insights into the *strategic* uses of ambiguity and its limits. It is worth taking these aspects of ambiguity in turn.

While concerns about ambiguity were generally implicit, it is nonetheless remarkable the extent to which staff and Directors at both organizations appeared *reflexive* about the central challenge posed by ambiguity. The IMF staff in 2002 were both aware of and concerned about the degree of ambiguity that had been allowed to persist in the guidelines. In the course of that Board debate, the Australian ED pointed to the persistence of ambiguity in their discussions, noting that, "In reading the statements, Directors were interpreting words, some slightly differently, particularly key words such as saying 'conditions have to be critical'. . . . if Directors had problems in interpreting those words, then he sympathized with the staff in the problems that they had in having to put them into practice" (IMF 2001b: 107). This remark proved prescient, given that staff did indeed interpret the meaning of "criticality" in ways that allowed for minimal change in their application of the policy.[20]

World Bank staff, senior management and Directors were also aware of the ambiguity of the concept of good governance. In a memo to Bank managers in 1991 that introduced a discussion paper on "Managing Development: the Governance Dimension," President Barber Conable noted "the difficulty of drawing neat lines in this area" (Conable 1991). A few years later, when James Wolfensohn took over as Bank President, he sought to exploit this ambiguity in the policy by redefining governance as including anti-corruption. Wolfensohn explained how he proceeded in a speech on fighting corruption:

> It is true that when I came to the World Bank. . . I was then told that there was one word I could not use, which was the "C" word, the "C" word being "corruption". Corruption, you see, was identified with politics, and if I got into that, I would have a terrible time with my Board.
>
> Well, I then visited quite a number of countries, and *I decided in 1996 that I would redefine the "C" word not as a political issue but as something social and economic* (Wolfensohn 1999: : italics added).

Actors at both the IMF and World Bank were not only aware of the central role of ambiguity in their policies but were also *ambivalent* about it. In the earliest discussions in 1968, the IMF Executive Board members had sought to ensure that the guidelines were open enough to interpretation to allow for the policy to be adapted in the face of "unforeseen circumstances" (IMF 1968d). Yet even then, the Directors disagreed on which aspects of the policy should be left open and which should be more carefully defined (IMF 1968c: 18). This ambivalence continued to shape later discussions on the guidelines, as Directors debated the right balance between precision and open-endedness. Staff and Directors at the World Bank faced similar challenges. In early discussions of the governance policy, borrowing countries both recognized the necessarily vague character of the concept and raised concerns the possibility that the ambiguity of the policy could result in interference in domestic political affairs (Conable 1991). This ambivalence remained a theme in recent debates around Wolfowitz's proposed governance strategy, particularly around the thorny question of how to measure governance.

Finally, although staff and Directors at both institutions may have been ambivalent about the role of ambiguity in these policies, they did ultimately ensure that ambiguities *persisted* and even proliferated. IMF Directors avoided setting precise limits on the number of performance criteria and where they did seek to constrain the expansion of conditionality, they relied on ambiguous terms such as "necessary" and "critical" which were open to varying interpretations. And in the most recent set of policy revisions, they have actually embraced further ambiguity through their increased reliance on subjective reviews. In spite of successive efforts to clarify and constrain the Bank's definition of governance, beginning with Shihata's legal opinion in 1990, the policy has remained ambiguous enough to accommodate a wide and evolving range of policy actions. While there is more effort today to find ways of making governance calculable, the issue remains contested.

I have until this point discussed the evolution of IMF and World Bank policies in relatively neutral language, examining what has occurred without commenting on the stakes involved. Yet the fact that both conditionality and good governance guidelines have been consistently interpreted to allow the expansion of the policies' scope—or, in the most recent debates at least to prevent its narrowing—suggests that there is also an important *strategic* dimension involved, as ambiguity can be used as a source of institutional power (Eisenberg 1984). The persistent ambiguity of these organizations' policies have provided them with certain key advantages, both in absolute terms and relative to the countries who borrow from them. The open-ended character of the guidelines has allowed the institutions to adapt to changes in the global economy, in economic theory and in the leadership's pet issues. Over time, the capacity of IMF and Bank staff and Directors to interpret the guidelines to allow for more intrusive conditionality and more expansive good governance provisions has also arguably contributed to their mission creep, as both organizations have expanded beyond their "core" areas of expertise {Babb, 2004 #524; Best, 2012 #11948}.

There is a second strategic dimension to these ambiguous policies—one that captures some of the institutions' internal and external power dynamics. Both good governance and conditionality policies have always been contested. Although in these internal debates most of the key institutional actors agreed to the value of some kinds of ambiguity, they often differed on the question of which kinds of institutional ambiguity were appropriate. Directors from developing countries often sought to reign in what they perceived as excessive discretion and overly-creative forms of interpretation on the part of the staff, believing (often correctly) that they would allow for more arbitrary and extensive conditions. On the other hand, senior management, staff and industrialized country Directors often advocated for more room for staff judgment in interpreting the guidelines—a move generally resisted by developing country Directors. In each of these cases, different actors sought some strategic advantage from particular kinds of policy ambiguity. They sought to retain the forms of ambiguity that would allow them to define the policy in the way that best suited their interests, while resisting those that would put them at a disadvantage {Best, 2012 #11948}. Developing country Directors did not lose all of these conflicts, but they did lose far more than they won—which helps to explain why the particular character that institutional ambiguities have taken in these organizations has tended to reinforce rather than unsettle existing global asymmetries.

Yet the very ambiguity of these policies means that efforts to control them to suit particular interests are always provisional, as persistent ambiguities foster unintended consequences. Thus, for example, the IMF and World Bank's mission creep has created a backlash over the past decade, eroding both institutions' legitimacy to the point that many have questioned their relevance, at least until the recent financial crisis (Best 2007). Ambiguity thus remains a useful, but unpredictable, strategic tool in institutional battles.

Conclusions

The cases of the IMF's conditionality policy and the World Bank's good governance agenda point to the ways in which not just ignorance but also ambiguity can play a useful role in organizational life, as well as providing some interesting insights into the ways in which organizational actors cope with the double-edged character of institutional ambiguity.

The fact that ambiguity persists, even thrives, in these highly economistic institutions suggests that we need to avoid any overly simplistic assumptions about bureaucracies, and recognize the less-than-rational side of these rationalizing institutions. As McGoey has pointed out, the power of Weber and Foucault's critique of bureaucratic domination can blind us to these institutions' limits—whether that takes the form of ignorance or ambiguity (McGoey 2007: 218). Luhmann points to institutionalized ignorance and risk-management as strategies for managing the pervasiveness of uncertainty in the contemporary world. This article suggests that ambiguity can be understood as one more coping mechanism for organizational actors faced with the unknown.

Moreover, an attention to the role of ambiguity need not only point us to the limits of bureaucratic power, but can also reveal some its more interesting forms. Weber suggested that "[b]ureaucratic administration means fundamentally domination through knowledge" (Weber 1976: 225). What about the possibilities of domination through ambiguity? If ambiguities are not only impossible to eliminate but can actually be a source of authority through the power to interpret, then we would no longer expect organizations to be purely ambiguity-reducing machines. And we would not be surprised to find a more ambivalent attitude towards institutional ambiguity—not only at the IMF and World Bank, but in hospitals and government ministries, in companies and universities.

An attention to the social role of ambiguity might therefore be a useful tool for understanding the complexities of organizations behaviour and the practices of governing. More importantly, it should also help us to develop a more nuanced conception of the social production of meaning—by building on those moments in the work of social theorists like Callon, Law and Barry that point to the limits of our efforts to translate, calculate and frame the world. The persistence of ambiguity—and its potential role as a kind of interpretive lubricant in an uncertain world—suggests that we need to pay a little more attention to the slippages and gaps in these meaning-making processes. Ambiguity invites us to consider what gets lost in translation, and to discover what other possibilities are let loose in those moments of miscommunication and reinterpretation.

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Notes

1 A number of studies have pointed to the tensions between institutional efforts to standardize the delivery and evaluation of health services on the one hand, and the ambiguities that face certain kinds of health management, such as the treatment of chronic illnesses and the provision of palliative care, on the other (Abma 2000; Lutfey and Freese 2007).

2 Stephen Collier has made a similar argument about how Foucault's concept of governmentality has been read through epochal lenses, ignoring the looser, more topological tendencies in some of his later lectures. (Collier 2009)

3 I have elsewhere engaged with Knight and Beck as foils in my development of a conception of ambiguity. This same text also provides a much more sustained discussion of the distinctions among risk, uncertainty and ambiguity: (Best 2008).

4 (Luhmann 1998a; Luhmann 1998b) For excellent discussions of these essays, see: (McGoey 2007; Rabinow 2004)

5 Luhmann's definition of uncertainty as linked to an unknown and incalculable future is one that he shares with other social theorists including Knight and O'Malley (Knight 1946: 233; O'Malley 2004).

6 McGoey (2007) considers the implications of this insight for institutional practice—notably in the area of health policy.

7 I have provided a more comprehensive discussion of the role of ambiguity in Foucault's *The Order of Things* in: (Best 2008).

8 The literature on the practice turn is vast. See, for example: (Bourdieu 1990; McMillan 2008; Schatzki 1996; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and von Savigny 2001)

9 (Pocock 1971: 29) Organizational texts are in fact particularly prone to this kind of ambiguity, as they are often run through a multitude of committees and drafts.

10 One way of characterizing the increasingly sophisticated strategies of calculation is the concept of "qualculation" used by Law, Callon and Nigel Thrift: (Callon and Law 2004; Thrift 2008: Ch.5).

11 I am therefore focusing exclusively on the role of ambiguity in driving institutional dynamics in the IMF and World Bank. It would also be worthwhile to consider the implications of these ambiguities on the ground in borrowing countries; however, that is a task beyond the scope of this article.

12 Interview with senior World Bank staff member, May 10, 2007, Washington, DC.

13 The IMF and World Bank have formally similar governance structures. Both institutions' activities are overseen on a day-to-day basis by an Executive Board made up of twenty-four Directors, representing the largest members or "shareholders" in the Fund (the smaller countries are technically represented by the larger ones – so that, for example, the Canadian Director represents Ireland, Barbados and several other small island nations). Twice a year, at Annual General Meetings, all of the members meet to form the Boards of Governors of the institutions. The Development Committee, a joint committee of the IMF and World Bank, also convenes during these meetings.

14 The following discussion of debates around IMF conditionality policy draws on a much more detailed account in: (Best 2012).

15 Interview with senior IMF staff member. Washington, DC, June 14, 2010.

16 Staff were sometimes quite explicit about the challenges posed by uncertainty. See for example: (IMF 1968b: 2; IMF 1986: 16; IMF 2001a: 14)

17 Interview with senior IMF staff member, Washington, DC, May 11, 2007.

18 Interview with IMF Executive Board member, Washington, DC, May 10, 2007.

19 Interview with senior World Bank staff member, Washington, DC, May 11, 2007.

20 Interview with senior IMF staff member, Washington DC, May 11, 2007.

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