

The Autonomy of Bureaucratic Organizations: An Organization Theory Argument

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The craft of international organizations is to a large extent supplied by the autonomy of its bureaucratic arm. The ambition of this paper is twofold. The first and most important ambition is to theorize conditions for the autonomy of bureaucratic organizations. The second ambition is to offer some minor empirical illustrations of autonomy among office holders in international bureaucracies. Benefiting from interviews with civil servants from three international bureaucracies, two illustrations are suggested. First, actor-level autonomy is present among civil servants within three international bureaucracies embedded in three seemingly different international organizations. Second, a theoretical lesson is that international bureaucracies may possess considerable capacity to shape essential behavioral perceptions among its staff in particular, and foster behavioral autonomization more generally, through the two causal mechanisms: behavioral and role adaptation through organizational rule following and behavioral and role internalization through “in-house” socialization processes. The paper also argues that future research programs are needed to provide larger-scale data sets that might complement these suggestive findings.

Introduction

This paper¹ argues theoretically and illuminates empirically that common political order necessitates the rise of *independent* administrative resources and capacities. One necessary, although not sufficient, factor in building common political order is the establishment of common institutions, including a permanent administration, independent of national governments serving the common interest (Trondal and Peters 2013). The rise of common political order through institutional capacity building and bureaucratic autonomization is seen as one key ingredient of state formation (Bartolini 2005). Order formation above nation-state structures, however, is much less studied and poorly understood. If one focuses on order formation in a European context, what matters is the extent to which a common European political order is in practice autonomous from key components of an intergovernmental order, *not* whether it is autonomous in general. The ambition of this paper is twofold: The first and most important ambition is to theorize conditions for autonomy of bureaucratic organizations. The paper argues that the autonomy of bureaucratic organizations is supplied within these organizations and not merely due to cost-benefit analyses (Lipsky 1980; Wilson 1989) or socialization processes outside bureaucracy (e.g., Hooghe 2007). The secondary ambition is to offer some minor empirical illustrations or footnotes on the autonomy among office holders in international bureaucracies.

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Modern governments daily formulate and execute policies with consequences for society (Hupe and Edwards 2012). With the gradual increased role of international bureaucracies, one unresolved question is to what extent and under what conditions such institutions may formulate their own policies and thus transcend a mere intergovernmental role. The craft of international organizations (IOs) is to a large extent *supplied* by the autonomy of its bureaucratic arm, that is, by the ability of international bureaucracies—and their staff—to act relatively independently of mandates and decision premises from member-state governments (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Biermann and Siebenhuner 2009, 2013; Cox and Jacobson 1973; Reinalda 2013; Trondal 2013). “International rules are prepared by top-rank administrators” (Papadopoulos 2013: 84). It is thus essential to know how autonomous these administrators are and what can explain it. “Autonomy is about discretion, or the extent to which [an organization] can decide itself about matters that it considers important” (Verhoest et al. 2010: 18–19). As an area of research, the extent to which and the conditions under which international bureaucracies are independent of member-state governments has become increasingly vibrant, however, still offering inconclusive findings (e.g., Beyers 2010; Checkel 2007; Moravcsik 1999).

The empirical focus of this study is *actor-level* autonomy as enacted by international civil servants. There are at least two rationales for applying an actor-level focus. First, the discretion available to bureaucracies is made real by individual office-holders (Cox and Jacobson 1973). Secondly, institutional transformation—as with the rise of relatively autonomous international bureaucracies—requires that international civil servants’ “preferences and conceptions of themselves and others” are affected (Olsen 2005: 13). Moreover, one often neglected proxy of actor-level autonomy is the extent to which they activate a supranational behavioral logic (hereby termed “actor-level supranationalism”). This paper argues and empirically suggests that international organizations in general, and their bureaucracies in particular, may possess considerable clout to form actor-level supranationalism among its personnel (Marcussen and Trondal 2011). Actor-level supranationalism denotes the rise of some shared norms, values, goals, and codes of conduct among international civil servants. A supranational logic entails that staff is loyal to the mission and vision of the IO and show this loyalty by guarding against attempts, either by member-state governments or other actors, to direct the organization in other directions. The civil servants are expected to become “defenders of the system” and to acquire collective behavioral perceptions independent of particular national interests. The appearance of actor-level supranationalism denotes actors’ feelings of loyalty and allegiance toward the IO as a whole—or toward parts of it (Deutch et al. 1957: 5–6; Haas 1958: 16; Herrmann et al. 2004: 6). In classic theories of European integration—such as neo-functionalism—it is assumed that one of the key driving forces of integration is the shift of individual loyalties from the national to the international level (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2006). International institutions are assumed to have a capacity to create a sense of community and belonging beyond the nation-state, i.e., they socialize staff (Checkel 2007). The enactment of a supranational role may imply that individuals report loyalty to and a sense of belonging to an IO, and share, and act according to some shared norms, ideas, beliefs, and goals of the organization. This paper thus poses two research questions:

- To what extent are international bureaucracies “hothouses” of actor-level supranationalism?
- To what extent are actor-level supranationalism formed within international bureaucracies? (Theoretically, two mechanisms of organizational studies are shown to matter in this regard: organizational rule-following and “in-house” organizational socialization.)

The observations reported benefit from a large and novel set of 121 interviews with civil servants working in three international bureaucracies: The secretariat of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the secretariat of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the European Commission (EC) administration. Comparing three seemingly different international bureaucracies in three IOs, this study suggests that bureau-

cratic autonomy may be fostered equally inside bureaucratic organizations if they supply fairly similar organizational capacities and in-house socialization processes. This study shows that actor-level supranationalism is present among civil servants in all three international bureaucracies studied. Interestingly, the EC is *not* substantially any different from the two other international bureaucracies in this regard. One theoretical lesson learned from this observation is that international bureaucracies may possess considerable capacity to shape essential behavioral perceptions among its staff through the two causal mechanisms: behavioral and role *adaptation* through organizational rule-following and behavioral and role *internalization* through in-house socialization processes. Future research programs are, however, needed to provide larger-scale data sets that might complement these suggestive findings.

The paper proceeds in the following steps: The next section outlines an organizational theory approach to public sector organizations to explain variation in actor-level supranationalism among international civil servants. The subsequent sections outline the methodology and data used to illuminate actor-level supranationalism, followed by an empirical section reporting key findings.

Theorizing Bureaucratic Autonomy: An Organization Theory Approach

A Weberian bureaucracy model assumes that bureaucracies possess internal capacities to shape staff through mechanisms such as socialization (behavioral internalization through established bureaucratic cultures), discipline (behavioral adaptation through incentive systems), and control (behavioral adaptation through hierarchical control and supervision) (Page 1992; Weber 1983; Yi-Chong and Weller 2004, 2008). These mechanisms ensure that bureaucracies perform their tasks relatively independently from outside pressure but within boundaries set by the legal authority and (political) leadership of which they serve (Weber 1924). Causal emphasis is put on the internal organizational structures of the bureaucracies. The Weberian bureaucracy model provides a picture of formal organizations as creators of “organizational man” (Simon 1965) and as a stabilizing element in politics more broadly (Olsen 2010). According to this model, bureaucracies develop their own nuts and bolts quite independently of society. The model implies that civil servants may act upon roles that are shaped by the organization in which they are embedded. The organizational structure of international bureaucracies consists of the bureaucratic structure, as well as how this structure is embedded in the wider IO structure. Organizational dynamics and decision-making behavior is framed by “in-house” organizational structures (Radin 2012: 17). Organizations create elements of robustness, and concepts such as “historical inefficiency” and “path dependence” suggest that the match between environments, organizational structures, and decision-making behavior is not automatic and precise (Olsen 2010). An organizational approach suggests that the supply of organizational capacities have certain implications for how organizations and incumbents act. This approach departs from the assumption that formal organizational structures mobilize biases in public policy, because formal organizations supply cognitive and normative shortcuts and categories that simplify and guide decision-makers’ search for problems, solutions, and consequences (Ellis 2011; Schattschneider 1975; Simon 1965).

There may be several reasons why international civil servants enact a supranational behavioral logic. This paper suggests two main mechanisms: *Adaptation* through organizational rule-following and *internalization* through “in-house” socialization processes. This paper makes an analytical distinction between actor-level supranationalism caused by the *internalization* of roles and behavioral perceptions on the one hand (e.g., Checkel 2007) and actor-level supranationalism caused by behavioral and role *adaptation* through control and discipline on the other (e.g., Trondal et al. 2008). Whereas much existing literature argues that actor-level supranationalism originate from outside of the international bureaucracies (e.g., Dehousse and Thompson 2012; Hooghe 2007; 2012), this paper argues that actor-level supranationalism may largely emerge from within the structures of international bureaucracies.

Lipsky (1980: 19) claimed that bureaucratic autonomy is driven by actors' conspicuous desire for maximizing their own autonomy. By contrast, it is argued here that bureaucratic autonomy is organizationally contingent. It is the formal rules established in a bureaucracy that regulate, constitute, and bias the decision-making behavior and role perceptions evoked by civil servants, ultimately advancing bureaucratic autonomy (Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 3). Civil servants live with a constant overload of potential and inconsistent information that may be attended to at decision situations. Formal organizations guide the decision-making behavior of civil servants due to the computational limitations and the need for selective search. Organizations provide collective order out of cognitive disorders by creating local rationalities among the organizational members (March and Shapira 1992). Formal organizations are systematic devices for simplifying, classifying, routinizing, directing, and sequencing information toward particular decision situations (Schattschneider 1975: 58). Formal organizations "are collections of structures, rules, and standard operating procedures that have a partly autonomous role in political life" guiding officials to systematically de-emphasize certain aspects of organizational realities (March and Olsen 2006: 4). Derived from this organizational approach, two organizational variables may systematically foster actor-level supranationalism: organizational rule-following and "in-house" organizational socialization.

Organizational Rule-Following

An organizational approach suggests that the supply of organizational capacities have certain implications for how organizations and humans act. An organizational approach assumes that organizational capacity-building supplies government institutions with leverage to act independently (Trondal and Peters 2013). This approach departs from the assumption that formal organizational structures mobilize biases in public policy, because formal organizations supply cognitive and normative shortcuts and categories that simplify and guide decision-makers' behavior (Schattschneider 1975; Simon 1965). The behavior role and identity perceptions evoked by international civil servants are expected to be primarily directed toward those administrative units that are the *primary suppliers* of relevant decision premises. In this study, international bureaucracies are arguably primary suppliers of relevant decision premises for international civil servants.

Organizations tend to accumulate conflicting organizational principles through horizontal and vertical specialization (Olsen 2005). When specializing formal organizations horizontally, one important principle (among several) has been suggested by Luther Gulick (1937): Organizations by major *purpose* served—like research, health, food safety, etc. This principle of organization tends to activate patterns of cooperation and conflicts among incumbents along *sectoral* cleavages (Egeberg 2006). Coordination and contact patterns tend to be channeled within sectoral portfolios rather than between them. Arguably, organization by "major purpose served" is likely to bias decision-making dynamics inward toward the bureaucratic organization where preferences, contact patterns, roles, and loyalties are directed toward sectoral portfolios, divisions, and units. This mode of horizontal specialization results in less than adequate horizontal coordination *across* departmental units and better coordination *within* units (Ansell 2004: 237). This principle of specialization is uppermost among most international bureaucracies. For example, the EC is a horizontally pillarized administration, specialized by purpose and with fairly weak organizational capabilities for horizontal coordination at the top through presidential command (Dimitrakopoulos and Kassim 2005). The WTO and OECD secretariats are horizontally specialized administrations consisting of divisions or directorates responsible for different areas of cooperation (such as agriculture, environment, development, statistics, etc.) (Trondal et al. 2010).

Essentially, international bureaucracies serve as the primary organizational affiliation for international civil servants, rendering them particularly sensitive to the organizational signals and selections provided by this organization. As argued, the horizontal specialization of inter-

national bureaucracies by major purpose is conducive to autonomization of the behavioral dynamics of incumbents. This argument derives the following hypothesis:

H1: International civil servants embedded within international bureaucracies and specialized by purpose are likely to evoke supranational enthusiasm based on the stated purpose of the IO and the underlying and linked purpose of the specialized bureaucratic unit. In other words, we assume that formal organizational structures matters regarding the civil servants' enactment of supranational roles.

"In-House" Organizational Socialization

A vast literature reveals that the impact of *pre*-socialization of actors is modified by organizational *re*-socialization (e.g., Checkel 2007). Officials entering international bureaucracies for the first time are subject to an organizational "exposure effect" (Johnston 2005: 1039) that may contribute to such re-socialization. Socialization is a dynamic process whereby individuals are induced into the norms and rules of a given community. By this process, individuals come to internalize some shared norms, rules, and interests of the community (Checkel 2007). Socialization processes are conducive to "autonomization" of the socialized, because the one socializing may educate, indoctrinate, teach, or diffuse his or her norms and ideas to the one being socialized. The socialization argument also claims that behavioral autonomy is conditioned by enduring experiences with institutions, accompanying perceptions of appropriate behavior (Herrmann and Brewer 2004: 14). The potential for socialization to occur is assumed positively related to the *duration* and the *intensity* of interaction amongst the organizational members. Chief to the neo-functional approach, the potential for re-socialization to occur ("shift of loyalty toward a new center") is assumed positively related to the duration and the intensity of interaction among actors (Haas 1958: 16). This claim rests on socialization theory that emphasizes a positive relationship between the intensity of participation within a collective group and the extent to which members of this group develop perceptions of group belongingness and an *esprit de corps*. Intensive in-group contact and interaction is conducive to the emergence of relative stable social, normative, and strategic networks that provide autonomous impact on the participants' perceptions of strategic and appropriate behavior (Atkinson and Coleman 1992: 161; Börzel 1998: 259; Hay and Richards 2000; Knox et al. 2006: 120). Often, such networks resemble "ego-networks" "between a given individual and his or her 'alters'" (Knox et al. 2006: 118). The literature suggests that networks are transformative entities that considerably bias the behavior of the participants (Börzel 1998: 258; Windhoff-Héritier 1993). However, as an explanatory tool-kit, network approaches have to be supplemented by more generic causal mechanisms, such as socialization mechanisms, in order to explain behavioral implications (Marin and Mayntz 1991: 44).

In sum, the length of stay in international bureaucracies—or the individual seniority of incumbents—may foster socialization toward a supranational behavioral pattern. Hence, behavioral and role autonomy is fostered by the sheer quantity and quality of actor-interaction inside international bureaucracies. Ultimately, such actor-interaction contributes to the surfacing of tight networks inside international bureaucracies rather insulated from member-state influence. This argument derives the second hypothesis:

H2: International civil servants with long seniority within international bureaucracies are likely to evoke a "general" or diffuse supranational enthusiasm. In other words, we assume that long tenure among employees and, thus, persistent interaction with the norms and values of the IO (formal and informal), increase the capacity of the organization to create defenders of the system and supranational enthusiasts.

Data and Methodology

The empirical illustrations benefit from synchronized comparative studies of permanent officials in the EC administration, the WTO secretariat, and the OECD secretariat. The

study is synchronized in the sense that the same interview guide has been applied to all three bureaucracies and with respect to the selection of administrative subunits within each bureaucracy. The seventy-one interviews were semi-directed, using a standardized interview guide that was applied flexibly during interviews. The interviews were carried out during 2006 and 2007 in Brussels, Geneva, and Paris. All interviews were taped and fully transcribed. All interviewees were treated with full anonymity. Consequently, quotations from interviews are referred to as follows (EC 2, WTO 15, etc.). The questions posed in the interviews were directed at measuring the behavioral perceptions among the civil servants. Key themes covered during interviews were interaction patterns, the role of nationality, the development of esprit de corps, the emergence of shared perceptions of identity among staff toward different institutions and actors, and the role perceptions deemed important by staff when doing daily work (see Appendix).

Interviewees were selected from similar administrative subunits in all three international bureaucracies in order to control for variation in policy sectors. These subunits were first trade units (such as DG Trade in the EC and the numerous trade units in the OECD and WTO secretariats) and second the general secretariats (such as the secretariat-general of the EC, the offices of the deputies of the director general in the WTO secretariat, and the general secretariat of the OECD). General secretariats represent the bureaucratic centers of international bureaucracies, and the trade units represent one among several policy sectors of international bureaucracies. Finally, interviewees were selected from different levels of rank in these subunits—from director generals to executive officers. However, by concentrating on officials at the “A” level, we aim to study officials who are involved in policy-making activities. Two general caveats are warranted: First, the selected cases are merely illustrative devices to examine actor-level supranationalism within international bureaucracies; second, these cases also merely illuminate causal mechanisms. Table 1 summarizes the interviews conducted.

Table 1. List of interviewees among permanent officials by formal rank

	Top managers (director-generals, deputy director-generals, or equivalent)	Middle managers (directors, heads of unit, deputies, or equivalent)	Desk officials (advisors, counsel- lors, case handlers, analysts, officers, or equivalent)	Total
The EC	1	9	14	24
The OECD Secretariat	0	10	18	28
The WTO Secretariat	2	4	13	19
Total	3	23	45	71

Empirical footnotes from international bureaucracies

Organizational Rule-Following

Socialization sometimes cannot fully occur if the mechanisms of internal and external control and discipline operate alone (Checkel 2007; Gheciu 2007). This section shows that control and discipline, through supervision, incentives, and rewards, do shape both what we have termed supranational sector enthusiasts and general supranational enthusiasts among international civil servants. Reflecting the latter, one aspect of actor-level supranationalism among international civil servants is related to external representation of the IO. The enactment of a supranational role—as a representative of the IO as a whole—is evident in the following quote:

It is obvious that when we are operating outside the WTO, in other intergovernmental organizations, then we are representing the WTO as an institution, and we have to be aware of that. (WTO 1)

The WTO official indicates in this quote that one *has* to be aware of the supranational role; it is considered mandatory to represent the WTO as a whole. In their external representation, civil servants report that if they act in conflict with core rules of the organization they may be subject to sanctions, internally from the bureaucratic leadership and externally from the member states. When asked about how to behave when representing the WTO externally, one WTO official responded:

Yes, of course you have to be careful not to say weird things and things that are totally just not acceptable, or contentious. To say things about the negotiations sort of . . . on some contentious issues . . . or to express a strong opinion that you support one view or another—that is dangerous and it is not to be tolerated. But it’s not a question of asking permission. Now of course, to speak at conferences you have to get permission, for obvious reasons. But it’s not so much that you send your statement to your boss to check. (WTO 13)

When asked about the possible sanctions for going against these norms, the same official said, “You are fired . . . or you are called in.” (WTO 13)

Another official was asked, “Even though the assessments are made according to the WTO rules, do you, as a secretariat official, have to be careful about making formulations such as ‘This is the best solution according to what I believe?’ Because if that sentence is there, is there a risk that the paper will just be ‘shot down’ by the member states?” The official responded:

Oh yes, oh yes, there are things you have to be aware of and, you know, sometimes you get caught by surprise. There’s a sensitivity that you weren’t aware of and somebody reacts very strongly to something and you . . . “Oh. Where did that come from?” (WTO 15)

This quote shows that civil servants have to “tread a careful path” because of the awareness and control of member-states. The following quotes from OECD officials are also illustrative:

As an OECD person, you should be kind of neutral. I’m not working for the French or U.S. government, I am working for the OECD. Period. (OECD 26)

It is quite imperative not to be biased by your nationality. (OECD 15)

So I am aware of the OECD line and agreed position, and I know it is incumbent upon me to reflect that agreed line and the conclusions of the work that we have done. It’s not my position to bolster independent opinions on some policy issues that we have not done any research on or where my research hasn’t been done as part of an agreed OECD process. (OECD 17)

When asked if they all consider themselves international civil servants, one OECD official responds: “Yes. You have to, in that job; you wouldn’t last long otherwise. We are not here to represent our own countries in any way” (OECD 2). In sum, external and internal control and discipline seem to enhance the adoption of the supranational enthusiasts among international civil servants. Some officials seem to enact a supranational role in the form of “guardians of the system.” A quote from one WTO official illustrates this. The official was asked whether the WTO agreements amount to a kind of constitution that the civil servants have to relate to at all times:

Exactly! But I don’t really think . . . I don’t think I will ever come across someone who doesn’t really believe in that. But some people have different views about . . . you know, some people look at it more from a developing-country perspective and other people from other perspectives. Some of the people might think that some of the rules are more or less equitable. (WTO 1)

The observations from the interviews show that even though civil servants may become “guardians of the system” and have to constantly relate to the organization’s rules, they do not necessarily believe in or agree with all of the rules. Internal control from the bureaucratic leadership and external control from the member states, in addition to discipline through career

opportunities, may foster a supranational role among civil servants in the sense of appearing as “guardians of the system.” Civil servants gain authority and credibility through their expertise and impartiality against particular national interests and through their emphasis on the aims and rules of the organization—what in this context appear to them as the “common good.” In this way, the bureaucracy may gain autonomy within the boundaries set by the vision and mission of the IO. However, the degree to which the norms of the organization have been internalized among the civil servants may still vary. Some are true believers. For others, the defense of the system is conditional. Still, both these groups are shaped and socialized into following the same basic codes of conduct: to represent, defend and follow the logic of the system, not particular national interests.

“In-House” Organizational Socialization

Civil servants may share the norms of IOs even before entering. These civil servants are pre-disposed to become loyal to the organization’s vision and mission quite quickly upon arrival. Moreover, if such pre-socialization is salient, there is a potential for a biased (self-) selection among the respondents. In line with the idea of representative bureaucracy, the international bureaucracy will in such cases be representative mainly of the enthusiasts and true believers in the organization. Some civil servants indeed start working for an IO because they truly believe in the organization. It is, however, less clear from our data how such beliefs affect actual decision-making behavior among staff. Thus, pre-socialization might indeed happen but would also be fairly unimportant in order to understand decision-making behavior among international civil servants. The need to be dedicated to the organization is emphasized in the following quotes from two WTO officials:

We are the guardians of the book. We have to believe in what is in here, because if we don’t believe, nobody believes. Then we might as well go home. (WTO 9)

I think we have to be committed to what the WTO is as an institution, which basically is for trade liberalization, and so clearly you have to believe in that. Otherwise it could be very difficult, personally, if you don’t believe in the goal of your organization, that the WTO is an institution which basically is a force for good—you know, the goals of the WTO.” (WTO 3)

One OECD official was a general supranational enthusiast for a long time, not in relation to the OECD in particular but in relation to IOs in general. Another OECD official indicated that enthusiasm toward the OECD comes from prior experience in private sector:

I think there was probably something philosophical in the beginning, because when I finished university I was very attracted by the international organizations: the values, the mission, things like that. (OECD 27)

I am the treasurer of the OECD, and I have a business card. And I am proud of the OECD. That is one of the things I like about working at the OECD: I like what the OECD does. It has a positive influence in the world. Coming from the private sector as an American, I am very much in favor of a lot of the things the OECD does—like free trade, like intelligent government policy over business, over taxation, having environment regulations that work, that businesses and people can work with. That governments can promote better policies in areas such as taxation, thanks to the work that the OECD does, is very positive. (OECD 23)

One WTO official believed in the GATT/WTO before starting working there but emphasized particular aspects of the organization’s mission:

I believed that market access for products, and how countries become less dependent on money by helping them to sell abroad . . . I believed in that . . . but across the border, random trade liberalization . . . when I came, no I didn’t think. . . . But the GATT never stood for that either. The GATT was not about free trade, the GATT was about, the WTO is about, breaking down certain barriers and trade-distorted measures so that countries at least have more opportunity to sell abroad. (WTO 2)

These observations illustrate pre-socialization toward a general supranationalist enthusiastic orientation toward the vision and mission of an IO. As indicated above, socialization may take several forms. One important distinction runs between the “true believers”—those who believe in the overall mission of the organization, even as a “force for good”—and the “sector or portfolio enthusiasts”—those who believe in particular issues that the organization deals with and in the organization’s role in solving and handling these issues.

Even though pre-socialization remains as a factor to be considered in relation to supranational enthusiasm, an important finding in this study is that the civil servants are further shaped by the organization setting in which they operate. Our data clearly shows that international civil servants are affected by internal factors, i.e., they are shaped and socialized toward supranational enthusiasm through experience. This form of socialization is linked to the Weberian bureaucracy model, i.e., socialization within organizations. In the following, we look in particular at how experience from working within an international bureaucracy may affect civil servants’ commitment and loyalty to the organization. Pre-socialization, however, does not exclude the effect of re-socialization: Someone who shares the norms of the IO before working there may be further socialized within the organization. To illustrate this dual mechanism, one civil servant responded:

Oh yes, I am convinced. As a junior diplomat I participated in the making of this organization. I saw this organization being born. I was here in Geneva when the organization was created, and I was here in Geneva when these agreements were negotiated. So I truly believe in the ideas. (WTO 9)

This official relates beliefs in the organization to the close contact with the WTO in previous jobs. One EC official also mentioned that commitment to the EU began a long time before joining the EC, “But I always bore in mind the possibility to work for the institutions, maybe not from sixteen years old but certainly from twenty-two years old.” (EC 20)

When asked if it was a wish early on to come to the EC, the official replied:

I was very much conscious of the project of building Europe. . . . And I knew about Jean Monnet . . . and I thought “It’s a big project, an important project, and it is a project *qui vient fédérer les états*.” It’s politically a very difficult project, but it is certainly a project I want to work for with my very small means, my very small competencies and capacities. (EC 20)

One official was asked: “Is it easy to follow that vision—your European vision—in your day-to-day work?” and responded:

Yes, because the vision is very strong. My vision of what I want to do and of what the commission wants to do is very coherent. They match one another. But also that vision is stronger than, let’s say, the everyday life and problems I can have. That is my view. Some other people are more concerned with their own career. (EC 20)

These observations illustrate how pre-commitment to the vision and mission of an IO can enhance the subsequent enactment of general supranational enthusiasm after being hired. The following quote from an OECD official illustrates how *long tenure* in an international bureaucracy may nurture socialization of staff toward a general supranational enthusiasm:

Fundamentally, my impression is that when people have joined the OECD, and they have worked here for a while, they no longer behave as nationals of any particular member country, but they serve the interests of the organization. And it doesn’t really matter whether they are Canadian, Australian, or Belgian—they work toward the common aim of the organization. (OECD 11)

When asked about the general commitment to the goals of their organization, two officials responded as follows:

Yes, I think so. I mean I’ve spent thirty plus years of my life here, so it would be bizarre if I did not. I do feel commitment to the organization. . . . Yes, I feel a commitment. I think it would be difficult if you didn’t believe in an open-rules-based trading system, that it was in the basic interest of humanity. (WTO 1)

But, as I said, I think that being an international civil servant and the more years you do that type of job, the more you tend to represent the organization rather than individuals or divisions or whatever. (OECD 16)

Socialization into the norms of the organization may also be illustrated by the following response from a WTO official when asked what advice to offer the members: “Of course it has to be WTO-friendly, and then after a while you get . . . you cannot go against the philosophy of what this institution stands for” (WTO 2). When asked to what extent the WTO secretariat should be the “guardians of the treaties,” one WTO official confirmed having taken on the role of a “guardian.” However, the official also includes a more proactive role as an agent for improving the system:

I think this is what has been agreed, but I have my views, and I think there are things that should be changed in this agreement to make it fairer, to make it more effective, and I will be happy to defend my views. But I think it has to be changed by negotiation in this organization. You are not going to change it by destroying the WTO. That is the message. I am the guardian of the book. The book is not perfect. So my task is to convince people that this book should be improved, here. That is the mission. The mission is to make a multilateral trading system which is fair, which is fair to the developing countries, and which is better than what it is now. (WTO 9)

This observation illustrates both a sense of commitment to the organization and at the same time seeing the secretariat’s role as being more than a neutral facilitator. This WTO official emphasizes the role as a defender of the system but includes in the role the task of suggesting needs for change. Socialization within international bureaucracies may also strengthen civil servants’ feeling of being part of a collective, being part of something “beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” (Selznick 1957: 17). In-house socialization like this tends to foster general supranational enthusiasm among staff. Two EC officials also report supranational enthusiasm by emphasizing that their feeling of belonging is aimed toward European integration generally and not toward particular EU institutions or member-states:

Definition-wise, I am working for the European Commission and, in a broader sense, for the Union. So I wouldn’t have any ideological problems working for the council secretariat, for example. (EC 11)

Well, it is the community interest in the matter which is prime, and this interest of the community is not necessarily identical with the interests of any single member state—even if you take them all together. (EC 14)

This last quote indicates that the civil servant sees the EC interest as something more than the aggregate of member-state collective interests. It alludes to a general belief in a supranational interest—a collective EU interest relatively independent of member-states. Another EC official illustrates beliefs shaped by the organization. However, in this case, socialization within the EC seems to have caused *less* dedication to the “EU project”:

I am more focused on what I do. I am very happy with the job I have, with the colleagues I have, I couldn’t be happier. I have to struggle to remain faithful to Europe. I am still, but when I joined the commission I was for a very long time enthusiastic. I mean I was very proud working in the commission. Not only proud, I thought we were going to take us very far. But today I am much more skeptical. (EC 24)

This quote illustrates that socialization within organizations may sometimes result in less enthusiastic attitudes toward the organization. Socialization should not be conflated with the emergence of “pro-norm behavior” (Zurn and Checkel 2007) or “pro-social” behavior (Lewis 2007). Lack of organizational enthusiasm may more easily emerge when organizations face periods of enlargement or internal reforms, potentially challenging pre-existing norms and long-cherished beliefs among the personnel (see Ban 2013; Bauer 2012: 469; Dehousse and Thompson 2012: 126). “Socialization processes do not necessarily entail harmony and the absence of conflicts” (Beyers 2010: 912).

Conclusion

This paper shows that “supranational actors” are present among civil servants both in the WTO secretariat, the OECD secretariat, and the EC administration. The EC is not any different in this regard when viewed from the perspective of civil servants’ behavioral perceptions. This study substantiates that international bureaucracies may possess considerable capacity to act relatively independent of member-state governments. This capacity is demonstrated when international civil servants develop a supranational mind-set through mechanisms of discipline and control, as well as through behavioral and role internalization and adaptation.

The most important ambition of this paper is to theorize two conditions for bureaucratic autonomy. The empirical illustrations above suggests that actor-level supranationalism tends to arise foremost through processes internal to IOs. As a consequence, a larger variation in actor-level supranationalism is observed within, rather than between, international bureaucracies. What is surprising is not the observation of a supranational behavioral logic but the fact that the same behavioral logic among international civil servants is observed almost to the same extent within three international bureaucracies embedded in three seemingly different IOs.

Thus, one theoretical lesson learned is that international bureaucracies may possess considerable capacity to shape essential behavioral perceptions among its staff in general, and foster behavioral autonomy in particular, through the two causal mechanisms: behavioral and role *adaptation* through organizational rule-following and behavioral and role *internalization* through “in-house” organizational socialization. In line with the Weberian model of bureaucracy, international bureaucracies have the capacity, through socialization as well as discipline and control, to create codes of conduct and senses of community and belonging that are relatively independent of constituent states. Future research projects are needed to provide data that might offer firm tests of the theoretical hypotheses offered by this paper.

There is a growing literature on the “public administration turn” to IO studies that support the findings reported here (Trondal 2007). Studies demonstrate that international bureaucracies, not only the EC, may have powers to autonomize its staff. Barnett and Finnemore (2004: 3) demonstrate that the secretariat of IMF, the UN high commissioner for refugees (UNHCR), and the UN secretariat “were not simply following the demands issued by states but instead acting like the bureaucracies that they are.” Similarly, Lewis (2007) observes organizational socialization inside the COREPER whereby national officials internalize new community roles. Conzelmann (2008) shows that international secretariats may have some leeway in organizing and structuring debates and, moreover, that secretariats may gain influence and authority in IOs based on their expertise in technical, complex areas. Others have also stressed the importance of the (legal) expertise of international bureaucracies (Marcussen 2004; Mathiason 2007; Schmeil 2004; Yi-Chong and Weller 2008). As Mathiason (2007: 16) has phrased it, “The source of legitimate power is essentially legal.” Yi-Chong and Weller (2004: 278–79) conclude their study of GATT/WTO by stating that secretariats “provide the continuity and the cement, the credibility and the connections. . . . The final decision may not be theirs, but the creativity surely is.” Finally, Johnston (2005: 1037) observes, “Some evidence that those individuals most directly exposed to intensive social interaction are more likely to have a positive attitude toward multilateralism.” Thus, international bureaucracies tend to foster supranational defenders of the system “from within.”

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APPENDIX

Interview guide to officials at the European Commission, the WTO secretariat, and the OECD secretariat.

Background

- Nationality?
- What is your educational and professional background?
- For how long have you worked in your current institution, unit, or portfolio?
- When, why, how and from where were you recruited to this institution?
- What are the main differences between working here and in previous positions?

General Institutional Questions

- How would you generally describe your daily work?
- Currently, what issues are central in your work?
- What is your current position, rank, or unit?
- Do you have a clear-cut work description?
- Inside your unit, division, or portfolio, what issues cause divisions of opinion or conflicts? (Are these large or minor conflicts?)

Behavioral Questions

- With whom do you regularly interact at work?
 - Colleagues in your unit or division
 - Other units or divisions
 - Head of unit
 - The top administrative leadership of your institution
 - Domestic government institutions—ministries or agencies (within your own portfolio or across portfolios)
 - External experts, universities, or research institutions?
 - Industry, consultancies, etc.
 - Other international secretariats or organizations
- With whom do you regularly interact outside office?
 - Colleagues in your unit or division
 - Own nationals
 - Other nationals
- In general, what would you consider to be the most important contacts in your position?

Personal Perceptions

- Does your nationality or the nationality of your colleagues “matter” with respect to your daily work?
- Has an *esprit de corps* developed within your unit or division?
- Explain to what extent you identify with, or feel a personal attachment toward the following:
 - Your unit or portfolio
 - Your organization as a whole
 - Your profession or educational background
 - The member-state administrations
- What kind of roles do you regularly emphasize at work?
 - Representative for the institution as a whole
 - Representative for the unit or portfolio
 - Representative for your professional expertise
 - Representative for the member states or for your own country of origin
- What considerations are vital for you?
 - Your institution as a whole (e.g., goals, mission, etc.)
 - Your unit or division
 - Your profession or expertise
 - The member states
 - Your policy sector or portfolio
 - Formal rules and procedures within your institution or unit