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**Knowledge and Knowing in Policy  
Work: A case study of civil servants  
in England's Department of Health**

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PhD  
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**Declaration of originality**

I, Jo Maybin, declare that the work presented in this PhD thesis is my own, and that it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Abstract

Contemporary English health policy is saturated with claims about what the world is like and how it might be otherwise. These claims span the wide range of subject matters covered by health policy, from hospital waiting times to our preparedness for major disease outbreaks; from structures for the planning and purchasing of healthcare to requirements around the sharing of patient records.

Despite this, empirical studies of health policymakers working at the national level in the UK suggest that research evidence plays only a very limited role in policy development (Lavis et al. 2005; Dash 2003; Dash et al. 2003; Innvær et al. 2002; Petticrew et al. 2008). This apparent contradiction was the starting-point for this project. If civil servants are not drawing on research knowledge in their work, how is it that they are able to devise policy about such complex and technical policy issues? Policy-making requires knowing the world in some way in order to act upon it. My research asks, what kinds of knowledge are civil servants in England's Department of Health using in their work, and what forms does this use take?

This thesis is situated in an emerging field of interpretive policy analysis which treats policymaking as realised in the daily work practices of communities of individuals (Wagenaar & Cook 2003; Wagenaar 2004; Colebatch 2006; Colebatch et al. 2010; Freeman et al. 2011). I have adopted an ethnographic approach, conducting 60 hours of original data collection in the form of interviews and meeting observations among mostly mid-ranking civil servants working on various high-profile health policies in 2010-11. By analysing my fieldwork experiences and the resulting data, and by relating these to insights from theoretical resources in sociology, psychology and philosophy, I offer an account of the different forms of knowing and knowledge entailed in the practice of policy-making.

I identify three forms of knowledge and knowing that were integral to the work of the civil servants I studied: the 'practices of knowing' by which they came to understand the objects of their policies and think through the possibilities for their reform; the 'pragmatic use of knowledge claims' in which facts, figures and stories were invoked to generate support for policies and to defend decisions taken; and the 'know-how of policymaking', which was the most important form of knowledge for the civil servants' professional identities. In the conclusion, I reflect on the aspects of knowledge and knowing which are shared by the civil servants' practices and my own work in producing this thesis.

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## Introduction

*'we do worry, and think a lot about where we get knowledge from.'* Senior civil servant, Department of Health, 2011

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Policies are distinctly knowledgeable phenomena. Policy documents are saturated with claims about what the world is like and how it might be otherwise. They are put together by highly educated individuals, sitting in organisations which collect and produce immense volumes of data about the worlds they seek to order. And yet public administrators are consistently criticised for not knowing enough about the objects of policy; and for not making sufficient use of expert knowledge and evidence when formulating policies. In evaluation after evaluation, in both the UK and abroad, the practices of policymakers are found wanting. Policy-making seems to be knowledgeable, but not in the right ways.

How does knowledge use by policymakers look if we set aside normative models, and start instead with policymakers' practices? This thesis asks, how *do* policymakers use knowledge in their work, and why?

### Knowledge in Policy

In the British context, the notion that public administrators should provide the knowledge and expertise required for policy formulation can be traced back to the foundation of the modern civil service. In their seminal report to Parliament on *The Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service*, the nineteenth-century reformers Stafford Northcote and C.E. Trevelyan wrote:

It may safely be asserted that, as matters now stand, the Government of the country could not be carried on without the aid of an efficient body of permanent officers, occupying a position duly subordinate to that of the Ministers... yet possessing sufficient independence, character, ability and experience to be able to advise, assist, and, to some extent influence, those who are from time to time set over them.

(Northcote & Trevelyan 1854, p.3)

In modern British government, Ministers provide the authority for policy-making, and civil servants, the necessary knowledge and skills to 'advise [and] assist' them. And yet in the century and a half since the Northcote-Trevelyan report was published, reviews of the civil service function have consistently concluded that civil servants are insufficiently knowledgeable about policy issues, and not sufficiently guided by available expert knowledge in carrying out their functions. The 1918 report by the Machinery of Government Committee, chaired by Viscount Haldane, concluded that:

in the sphere of civil government the duty of investigation and thought, as preliminary to action, might with great advantage be more definitely recognised. It appears to us that adequate provision has not been made in the past for the organised acquisition of facts and information; and for the systematic application of thought, as preliminary to the settlement of policy and its subsequent administration.

(Haldane 1918, para.12)

Haldane and his colleagues 'urge[d] strongly... that in all Departments better provision should be made for enquiry, research, and reflection before policy is defined and put into operation' (1918, para.14). Half a century later, the *ad hoc* Committee on the Civil Service led by Lord Fulton also concluded that civil servants' knowledge of the subject matter of policies was inadequate (Fulton 1968). The committee's inquiry found that:

many [civil servants] lack the fully developed professionalism that their work now demands. They do not develop adequate knowledge in depth in any one aspect of the department's work and frequently not even in the general area of activity in which the department operates. Often they are required to give advice on subjects they do not sufficiently understand or to take decisions whose significance they do not fully grasp.

(Fulton 1968, para.40)

In addition to calling for a greater number of professional specialists, such as medics, to be recruited to Departments and to be given a stronger role in decision-making, the report also recommended that civil servants should focus their careers in one of two broad policy areas (economic, industrial and financial; or the social) in order to be able to develop the 'basic concepts and knowledge relevant to their area of administration' (1968, para.55), thus also enabling more 'fruitful relationships' between civil servants and subject specialists (1968, para.52).

In the 1990s, a Civil Service Code was developed, articulating a set of expected standards of professional conduct for civil servants, which now forms part of the terms and conditions of their employment (Civil Service Commission 2012). *Objectivity* is one of the four organising principles of the code. Under this section, civil servants are directed as follows:

You must:

- provide information and advice, including advice to Ministers, on the basis of the evidence, and accurately present the options and facts;
- take decisions on the merits of the case; and
- take due account of expert and professional advice.

You must not:

- ignore inconvenient facts or relevant considerations when providing advice or making decisions.

(Cabinet Office 2010, para.10–11)

By the time the new Labour government came to power in 1997, this concern with the role of knowledge in governing, which had hitherto been the preserve of special committees on the civil service and public administration, entered mainstream policy debates. In the vein of Anthony Giddens' text *Beyond Left and Right* (1994), post-Thatcherite politics had evolved in such a way that ideology was no longer seen as an appropriate means of organising the design and delivery of policies. Where the objectives of a policy should properly be determined by values and ideals, according to this new politics the means for attaining those objectives should be shaped by evidence. As the then Secretary of State for education David Blunkett famously told an audience at the Economic and Social Research Council, the Labour government was offering a 'clear

commitment that we will be guided not by dogma but by an open-minded approach to understanding what works and why' (Blunkett 2000).

The *Modernising Government* white paper published by that government in 1999 included commitments to improve 'our use of evidence and research so that we better understand the problems we are trying to address' (Cabinet Office 1999a, para.2.6); and in a subsequent Cabinet Office missive, 'using evidence' was established as one of the nine core competencies for 'professional policy making' (Cabinet Office 1999b, para.7.1). A host of initiatives followed. A newly formed Centre for Management and Policy Studies based in the Cabinet Office was tasked with strengthening policy-making in line with the commitments of the Modernising Government agenda and with building the skills base of the civil service (Haddon 2012). A new version of the Treasury's *Green Book*, which 'constitutes binding guidance for Departments and Executive Agencies' on how to appraise policy proposals which involve committing public funds, was published in 2003, prescribing that such appraisals should be based on cost-benefit analysis, the data for which should be based on research and consultations with experts (HM Treasury 2003, p.17).

Also as part of this programme, a series of *Capability Reviews* of government departments was run by the Cabinet Office between 2005 and 2009, for which (in the case of the first two rounds) external assessors were brought in to provide 'honest and robust assessments of future capabilities to identify the specific measures that are needed if central government departments are to play their part in enabling the UK to meet the considerable challenges of the future' (Civil Service Capability Reviews 2007, p.1). One of the ten assessment areas required Departments to be basing policy choices on evidence.

Statements by the current coalition Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, which came to power in May 2010, demonstrate an on-going public commitment to the idea that policy formulation ought to be informed by evidence. In the first month of the new government, the then Secretary of State for universities and science David Willetts confirmed that the coalition was committed to evidence-

based policy-making, within the framework of the political values and manifesto commitments on which he said they had been elected (Willettts 2010). The latest Civil Service Reform Plan (2012b), issued jointly by the Minister for the Cabinet Office and the head of the civil service, establishes an intention to further improve policy-making capacity, recommending:

a clear focus on designing policies that can be implemented in practice, drawing on a wider range of views and expertise. At the same time, policy makers must have the skills and tools they need to do their jobs. And they should have a clear understanding of what works based on robust evidence.  
(HM Government 2012b)

This century long sequence of commitments to improve and increase the use of particular forms of knowledge in policy-making points to the problem of knowledge in policy. Each new pledge and set of guidance follows a lament about the inadequacies of existing practices. Indeed, inquiries by governments and evaluations by academics have consistently found performance in the light of such commitments to be wanting. In the case of health policy-making, on which this thesis focuses, ‘bas[ing] choices on evidence and customer insight’ has been identified as either a ‘development area’ or ‘an urgent development area’ in all three of the Capability Review assessments of England’s Department of Health, conducted between 2007 and 2011 (Civil Service Capability Reviews 2007; Civil Service Capability Reviews 2009; Department of Health 2012a).

Recent academic studies and reviews of national policymakers in health also find evidence playing a limited role in health policy-making in the UK, and echo the findings of empirical studies from North America and elsewhere in recording a host of obstacles to civil servants making better use of evidence in their work (Lavis et al. 2005; Dash 2003; Dash et al. 2003; Innvær et al. 2002; Petticrew et al. 2008). A study published last year by the Institute for Government, which examined the use of evidence and analysis by civil servants across Whitehall concluded that:

attempts to improve policy making have all suffered from a gap between theory and practice. Either they have presented unrealistic models of policy making, or have failed to provide the support to turn desired practices into reality... As a result, civil servants often know what they *should* be doing, but experience difficulties putting it into practice.  
(Rutter et al. 2011, p.5, original emphasis)

## Knowledge in Practice

So, this much we know: civil servants do not use knowledge in accordance with the espoused theories of governments and others. And yet, government policies are full of implicit and explicit knowledge claims. When I began this doctoral project, I was working as a junior researcher for a health policy think-tank in London. I spent much of my time at work summarising and analysing newly-released Department of Health policy documents, and I was struck by the breadth of the topic areas they took in, and, in some cases, by the technical and complex nature of their content. From health promotion and the management of infectious disease to the organisation and funding of social care, and the management of the NHS (the largest employer in Europe and the fourth largest organisation in the world), the Department's remit seemed vast.

The knowledge claims contained in the Department's policy documents related to an impressive range of phenomena, including the human body; interpersonal relationships; buildings; professional identities; diseases; finances; organisational forms; systems and processes; principles, rules and regulations. I knew from social contacts and university peer networks that some of the individuals writing these documents were people like me: they were of a similar age (or perhaps just a few years older) and were from a similar educational background, and they too sat in open-plan offices in front of computers, just a few miles down the road from my own place of work. I wondered, what were they using to help them understand and be able to write about these complex social phenomena? How was it that they did their job?

I started, then, in a different place from much of the empirical work in this area. Rather than beginning with the idea that policymakers ought to use research evidence to inform policy development, and examining the extent to which they do so, I was interested in understanding the kinds of knowledge civil servants do use in their work, and the different forms such use takes. Stepping back from a narrow and prescriptive focus on *evidence*, I was committed to understanding what the civil servants themselves treated or used as *knowledge* to help them navigate the work of policy-making. I was also open in my approach to understanding what policy work actually entails. Consequently, the project was guided by an intentionally open and broad research question: 'How do policymakers use knowledge in their work?' In searching for an answer, I adopted ethnographic methods to conduct an in-depth case study of civil servants' practices inside England's Department of Health.

In the following chapters I set out an account of this research and its findings. In Chapter 1, I review existing literature in the field, describing how the role of knowledge in policy-making was a central concern for the founding figures of policy studies, and providing a guide to the extensive literature on the role of evidence in policy-making. In the second half of that chapter I draw on authors in the philosophy and sociology of knowledge to delineate the different ways in which scholars have conceptualised the nature of knowledge and knowing, in order to provide a series of sensitising concepts for my own research. In Chapter 2, I locate my project within a body of research in interpretive analysis that examines policy work as practice, and describe why this focus necessitates an ethnographic approach to data collection. I outline the parameters of my case, and offer an account of the details of my data collection and analysis, reflecting on the ways in which the challenges of fieldwork taught me about the object of my inquiry.

In the following four chapters I set out the main findings of my research. Chapter 3 reports on where civil servants turned when seeking to learn about a policy issue. I identify people as critical sources of knowledge and consider how and why the civil servants selected some individuals and groups to converse with

over others. Chapter 4 focuses on why face-to-face interactions seemed to be such an important site for knowledge mobilisation, and explores the different kinds of meetings and encounters the civil servants engaged in, and the different knowledge functions they each served. I draw on work in psychology to consider what happens to people and knowledge in interaction that might explain the importance of face-to-face encounters in this context.

In Chapter 5, I explore the role of analysts and analytical work in my data, identifying how certain kinds of numeric analyses seem to be principally used as a means of performing legitimate decision-making, while other forms of analytical work, in which the civil servants sought to represent the objects of their policies, played an important role in rendering the world thinkable such that it can be subject to intervention.

In Chapter 6, I approach the question of knowledge use from a different angle. This chapter takes as its initial focus what seemed to be the most important aspects of policy-making work for the civil servants, and then examines how the civil servants used knowledge in that context. I identify the pragmatic ways in which policymakers invoke authoritative knowledge claims in seeking to construct connections between their policy proposal, powerful individuals and groups and dominant policy agendas, and set out the different ways in which these policy-making practices can themselves be considered knowledgeable.

In the final chapter, I reflect on the ways in which my own knowledge practices in undertaking this research project have mirrored those of the project's participants. I go on to identify three forms of knowledge and knowing in policy work, which flow through the four results chapters:

- The practices of knowing by which the civil servants come to understand and think about the world they seek to act upon;

- The pragmatic use of knowledge, in which knowledge claims and forms of knowing are invoked for the purposes of persuasion, defence and legitimation; and
- The policy know-how that is required by and generated through policy-making practices.

I conclude that the ways in which civil servants come to know the world, and how they perform knowing the world are two different things. To understand how and why civil servants *do knowledge* as they do, we need to engage more fully with understanding the character of the policy work towards which such knowing is directed; and move beyond a pre-occupation with authoritative knowledge forms to take more seriously the informal practices which shape practitioners' ways of seeing the objects of their policies.

## Chapter 1 Knowledge and Policy in the Literature

How have theorists conceived of the relationship between knowing and governing? What can past research tell us about how policymakers might use knowledge in their work and, indeed, what *knowledge* and *using it* might constitute in this context? In this chapter I show how these questions were a central concern for foundational authors in the policy sciences, and how in the last three decades they have been taken up with a particular focus by authors writing on the relationship between evidence and policy-making.

The work of these authors points to the importance of social interactions and context to understanding evidence use in policy formulation. Since my interest is in the role of knowledge and not just *evidence* in policy-making, I draw on the philosophy and sociology of knowledge to delineate different types and forms of knowledge, distinguishing between *know-how* and *know-that*, tacit and explicit knowledge; and identifying how knowledge might be located in people, artefacts, cultures and actions.

Building on insights offered by these first three sets of literatures, in the final section of the chapter I turn to work on learning in social theory, organisation studies and science and technology studies. This work explores the ontological implications of taking seriously the critical role of social interaction and context in understanding knowledge, and foregrounds the importance of tacit knowledge and know-how in organisational work. The authors of this work establish a conception of knowledge as *knowing*, characterised as under-determined, and realised in activity, in interactions with others, in particular cultural settings, in support of the completion (or continuation) of some particular task. I conclude by identifying the implications for my research of allowing for the possibility that knowledge may take this form, establishing as the object of my inquiry the *practices* of policymakers.

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## Policy-making as a Knowledge Problem

The role of knowledge and knowing in the work of governing was a central concern for foundational authors in the policy sciences. Writing in the early twentieth century, Max Weber identified the spread of rational forms of thought and inquiry as integral to the emergence of a modern form of bureaucracy. According to Weber, modernity was defined by the ‘disenchantment’ of society, and the increasing ‘intellectualization and rationalisation’ of all spheres of social life (Weber 1918b, p.139). This new basis for social order meant that:

principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation... One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service.  
(Weber 1918b, p.139)

In the context of government, the demands of large-scale democracies made the modern bureaucratic model, with its ‘rational, technical specialisation and training’, both necessary and ‘inescapable’ (Weber 1918a, p.156). In fact, Weber concerned himself with how the tendency for administrations to assume total rule might be held in check (Lassman & Speirs 1994, p.xix). Thus, in Weber’s writings, bureaucracies take their legitimacy, and their power, from their capacity to render the world knowable.

The rationality that Weber, and subsequent economic theorists of decision-making, attribute to administrators is subjected to considerable scrutiny in a number of seminal texts in the policy sciences. Herbert Simon’s work on decision-making in public administrations emphasised the cognitive and contextual limitations to administrators acting wholly rationally (Simon 1947).

Writing against an image of 'economic man', who assesses all available options and chooses that which will most efficiently deliver some agreed objective, Simon describes the real 'administrative man' as limited by practicalities: he cannot have 'a complex knowledge and anticipation of the consequences that will follow on each choice. In fact, knowledge of consequences is always fragmentary' (Simon 1976, p.81). Furthermore, he does not assess all possible alternative options when making a decision, for 'in actual behaviour, only a very few of these possible alternatives ever come to mind' (1976, p.81).

In the introduction to the second edition of his text, Simon went on to describe this state as one of 'bounded rationality', and to articulate an account of administrative man's work as driven by a logic of 'satisficing', rather than 'maximising' (Simon 1957, p.xxvi). Within this bounded rationality, the administrator accepts that 'the world he perceives is a drastically simplified model of the buzzing, blooming confusion that constitutes the real world', and is content to work with 'a simple picture of the situation that takes into account just a few of the factors that he regards as most relevant and crucial' (Simon 1957, pp.xxv-xxvi). Thus, 'administrative man is able to make his decisions with relatively simple rules of thumb that do not make impossible demands upon his capacity for thought' and, in so doing, seeks a course of action which is 'good enough' (Simon 1957, pp.xxv-xxvi). For Simon, it was critical that writers in administrative science developed a better understanding of the realities of decision-making in organisations,<sup>1</sup> which meant recognising the limitations placed on knowledge and knowing in practice.

A similar theme was taken up by Charles Lindblom, in his article on administrative decision-making as 'The Science of Muddling Through' (Lindblom 1959). Lindblom emphasised the fact and necessity of administrators adopting an incremental method of analysis when developing policy, in contrast to

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<sup>1</sup> In the first edition of *Administrative Behavior*, Simon sees this as a necessary part of a broader project to make administrators better rational maximisers, but by the introduction to the second edition, he seems to have dropped this aspiration and focuses instead on advocating for a better understanding of this behavior in practice (see Banfield 1957).

existing 'rational-comprehensive' models of decision-making (Lindblom 1959, p.81). The latter models assume that policy formulation begins with clarity over values or objectives, and then proceeds with a comprehensive review of all the possible means or instruments for pursuing that goal, before selecting the means that best maximise the agreed end (1959, p.79). Lindblom argues that this model assumes 'intellectual capacities and sources of information that men simply do not possess' (1959, p.80); as well as being unrealistic in the context of the time and resource constraints within which administrators must act. Such models also neglect the political and legal constraints which effectively restrict administrators' attention 'to relatively few values and relatively few alternative policies among the countless alternatives that might be imagined' (1959, p.80).

Lindblom offers an account of policy-making as following an incremental path, in which 'value goals and empirical analysis [are]... intertwined'; and 'the test of a "good" policy is typically that various analysts find themselves directly agreeing on a policy (without their agreeing that it is the most appropriate means to an objective)' (1959, p.81). He describes administrators as following a logic of 'successive limited comparisons', in which they develop policies in small steps, which (if managed well) enable them to avoid major mistakes, and gather 'knowledge about the probable consequences of further, similar steps' (1959, p.86). There is a sense in which this process offers a 'systematic alternative to theory' (1959, p.87), by entailing a process of 'classifying [and]... subsuming one experience under a more general category of experiences' (1959, p.87).

Taking up the same subject twenty years later, Lindblom called on administrators and their academic colleagues to abandon aspirations to 'impossible feats of synopsis' (1979, p.518), and instead to aspire to developing more systematic versions of this practice logic in order 'to make the most of our limited abilities to understand' (1979, p.519). He also argued that politics could be made more 'intelligent' through attention to improving (rather than curbing) 'partisan analysis' in which 'participants make heavy use of persuasion to influence each other; hence they are constantly engaged in analysis designed to find grounds on which their political adversaries or indifferent participants

might be converted to allies or acquiescents' (1979, p.524). In Lindblom's account, the impossibility of complete analysis by administrators prescribed a focus on 'strategies for skilful incompleteness' (1979, p.524), and the use of knowledge for rhetorical purposes which presented an opportunity for the injection of more intelligence into the policy process.

Subsequent writers took up the concept of 'learning' to explore how policymakers use knowledge in their work. In a seminal contribution to policy studies in the 1970s, Hugh Heclo sought to challenge dominant accounts of the policy process as a process of conflict resolution, and to present it instead as one of 'political learning', emphasising how governments 'puzzle' as well as 'power' (1974, p.303). For Heclo, learning is what governments do in response to changes in their environment; it is a process that comprises a 'relatively enduring alteration in behavior that results from experience' (1974, p.306). Heclo also recognised 'non-learning' (1974, p.312), where governments are unable or unwilling to adopt or respond to new information. In his study of the evolution of income maintenance policies in Britain and Sweden, Heclo identified the importance of civil servants in the learning process, who are not only a permanent fixture on the scene, but also the actors to whom 'has fallen the task of gathering, coding, storing and interpreting policy experience' (1974, p.303). These policymakers puzzle on society's behalf.

In Heclo's account, learning is shaped by three forces: (i) individuals; (ii) organisations and their inter-relationships (the administration, political parties, committees and interest groups); and (iii) past policies. He also emphasised the significant role played by 'networks of policy middle men' (1974, p.311). These individuals, who are at the 'interfaces of various groups' and have 'access to information, ideas, and positions outside the normal run of organisational actors' (1974, p.308), are identified as especially influential in the learning process. Interest groups, committees and political parties figure as the significant organisations to whom administrators must relate. Heclo's account incorporated learning about both the substance, and the process, of governing; policymakers

are concerned not just with what was done by past governments, or by foreign administrations, but also with *how* it was done.

Peter Hall went on to develop a theory of 'social learning' as the 'deliberate attempt to adjust the goals or techniques of policy in the light of the consequences of past policy and new information so as to better attain the ultimate objects of governance' (Hall 1988, p.6; cited in Bennett & Howlett 1992, p.276). He illustrated his account with an analysis of the shift from Keynesianism to Monetarism in UK economic policy in the 1980s (Hall 1993). Here, Hall distinguishes three main orders of learning. Within the normal run of policy-making, there is first order change, which involves adjustments to the instruments of governing, and, less commonly, second order change, which involves selecting different policy instruments to reach the specified goal. Changing the goals of policy, and the way in which a problem itself is conceptualised, constitutes a third order change, which amounts to a paradigm shift (Hall 1993, pp.278–80); the changes to macro-economic policy he describes exemplify this type of policy learning. Explicitly drawing on Thomas Kuhn's notion of scientific paradigms, Hall posits that:

policymakers customarily work within a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing. Like a *Gestalt*, this framework is embedded in the very terminology through which policymakers communicate about their work, and it is influential precisely because so much of it is taken for granted and unamenable to scrutiny as a whole.  
(Hall 1993, p.279)

According to Hall, significant paradigm-shifting events are more sociological than rational or scientific in character. Though such shifts might be prompted by the emergence of anomalies which cannot be explained within the existing policy paradigm, an apparently more important prerequisite for a shift in policy paradigm is a prior and significant change in the 'locus of authority over policy' (Hall 1993, p.279). In Hall's account, puzzling is not sufficient; there must be powering too.

For all these authors, questions of how policymakers use knowledge, or engage in learning as they develop policy were central to an understanding of administrative decision-making. The knowledge or knowing they described took a number of different forms; rational thought and technical calculation (Weber); the development of simplified representations and 'rules of thumb' (Simon) or pragmatic forms of analysis (Lindblom); the influence of ideas and ways of thinking, and the changes to those ideas that we call learning (Hecklo and Hall). Since the 1970s, the role of one particular type of knowledge in policy-making has received considerable attention in the literature: that of *evidence*.

### The Evidence and Policy Literature

In the late 1970s, a literature review by Carol Weiss identified seven different models which were commonly invoked by academics seeking to describe how social science research is used in public policy (1979, p.426). The 'problem solving' model, which Weiss identifies as the 'prevailing imagery of research utilization' (1979, p.427), assumes that policymakers either go out looking for (or come across) existing research to help them with a particular problem, or that they specifically commission research to fill a particular 'knowledge gap' (1979, p.428). 'Knowledge-driven' accounts, which are rooted in the natural sciences, describe how 'basic research discloses some opportunity that may have relevance for public policy; applied research is conducted to define and test the findings of basic research for practical action; [and] if all goes well, appropriate technologies are developed to implement the findings; whereupon application occurs' (1979, p.427).

By contrast to these rational, technocratic accounts, a 'political' model describes how policymakers use research findings which cohere with their policy objectives as ammunition in debates (recalling Lindblom's 'partisan analysis'), and the 'tactical' model emphasises how policymakers may use the fact of research having been commissioned (as opposed to the substance of its conclusions) to demonstrate their responsiveness to a policy issue; as a delaying

tactic; or as a means of deflecting criticism of a particular policy route pursued (1979, p.429).

'Interactive' accounts understand the relationship between research and policy not as a linear process in which research informs policy, but as a 'disorderly set of interconnections and back-and-forthness that defies neat diagrams' (1979, p.428). The conception of 'research as part of the intellectual enterprise of society' (1979, p.430) depicts the social sciences and policy-making as enterprises which are continually influenced by one another and 'larger fashions of social thought' (1979, p.430). In a similar vein, the seventh model, describes an 'enlightenment' function for research, in which 'social science generalizations and orientations percolat[e] through informed publics and com[e] to shape the way in which people think about social issues' (1979, p.429).

Some three decades on, a re-working of Weiss's classification helps to organise subsequent research and commentary in this field into two loose groups. The first, which principally assumes a rational-instrumental relationship between research and policy-making, is concerned with how to better enable the flow of knowledge from one domain to the other (aspiring to the 'knowledge-driven' and 'problem-solving' models). A second orients around the social nature of the knowledge-policy relationship, identifying the multiplicity of actors involved; the iterative, and socially mediated or constructed nature of their communication (resonating with Weiss's 'interactive' and 'enlightenment' models of research use); and the political character of evidence and evidence-use (echoing the 'political' and 'tactical' accounts). In the next two sections of the chapter, I provide an overview of the main findings and ideas put forward by authors in these two groups.

### **Rational-instrumental models: bridging the two communities**

Early models of the evidence-policy relationship assume policy formulation to be a rational process in which research findings might be applied to help solve society's problems. This is the model which underpins much of the declared

political enthusiasm for evidence-based policy-making in the UK set out in the Introduction to this thesis. In this body of research, the distinction between empirical description and normative prescription is sometimes elided. After early empirical research found that linear, rational models of the way in which research moves into policy bear little resemblance to practice, subsequent authors in this tradition have concerned themselves with understanding the obstacles to such research use by policymakers, and how these might be overcome.

Writing in 2001, John Landry and colleagues elaborate on Weiss's knowledge-driven and problem-solving models to characterise the two dominant, early models of the evidence-policy relationship. 'Science push' models present advances in research as the principal stimulus for knowledge use by policymakers and others (Landry et al. 2001). In their review of the field, Landry and colleagues describe how writers who ascribe to this model have focused on how utilization is affected by the particular attributes of the research, such as whether it is quantitative or qualitative; its 'technical quality', complexity, 'divisibility' and 'applicability' (2001, p.334). The 'demand pull' models identify policymakers and other research users as more or less formal directors or commissioners of research, in some cases generating a 'customer-contractor relationship where the practitioners and decision makers behave like customers who define what research they want, and where the researchers behave like contractors who execute contracts in exchange of payments' (Landry et al. 2001, p.335).

For Landry and his colleagues, the weakness of these approaches lies in their failure to focus on the *process* by which research is taken-up by policymakers. They argue that the science-push and knowledge-driven models assume this knowledge transfer happens of its own accord, where in fact it relies on actors taking responsibility for its execution; and that these models ignore the extent to which research results must be translated into something 'usable' for decision makers. The authors also conclude that the demand-pull or problem-solving model is too focused on the interests of the users of research, and neglects the

importance of interactions between producers and users of research findings. The authors build on the findings of existing empirical literature to argue that it is a lack of *interaction* between research producers and users that is the main cause of research being under-utilized.

A key characterization underpinning all three of these models (knowledge driven, problem solving and interaction) was articulated by Nathan Caplan in the late seventies as the 'two communities' thesis (Caplan 1979). In this account:

social scientists and policy makers live in separate worlds with different and often conflicting values, different reward systems, and different languages. The social scientist is concerned with "pure" science and esoteric issues. By contrast, government policy makers are action-orientated, practical persons concerned with obvious and immediate issues.  
(1979, p.459)

This set of assumptions can be found in much of the subsequent literature. Authors in this tradition have identified barriers to evidence use presented by the different priorities and values of policymakers and academics respectively; found that personal interactions between members of the two groups is the most important enabler of evidence use; and described or prescribed the importance of various bridging roles to serve as conduits between the two worlds.

Two systematic reviews of the factors influencing research use by health policymakers published in the early 2000s find that, of the two dozen studies covered in each (with only a couple of overlaps), personal contact between researchers and policymakers is the most cited enabler of evidence use, followed by the timeliness and relevance of research (Innvær et al. 2002; Hanney et al. 2003). Sandra Nutley and colleagues' comprehensive review of the field published in 2007 also concludes that models which focus on the interaction between researchers and policymakers 'integrate our best current knowledge about the kinds of factors that seem to support the use of research' (Nutley et al. 2007, p.119).

This literature on knowledge exchange has been most extensively developed in Canada. Writing there in the mid-1990s, political scientist Jonathan Lomas

argued that policymakers and research-producers need a better understanding of the constraints within which the other works, and that there needs to be 'more opportunities for researchers and decision makers to engage in ongoing exchange throughout their two processes' (Lomas 1997, p.439). He advises academics to know the information-predilections of their various audiences (legislators are interested in ideas and justifications, he writes, while administrators have more specialist knowledge and are more open to rational-instrumental uses of research), and calls for the development of a 'new breed of health care personnel' in the form of a 'knowledge broker'. 'Trained in both research and decision-making skills, such a person would act as a bridge between the two communities, able to translate the opportunities, constraints and findings from one setting to the other' (1997, p.440).

Also writing in Canada, Réjean Landry and colleagues similarly concluded from their review of the literature and the findings of their own large-scale survey of social scientists, that 'interaction' is a better predictor of research utilization than traditional 'push' or 'pull' models (Landry et al. 2001). However, these authors argue that interactive models alone are not sufficient for understanding utilization, since the research users' context also has a strong influence. As a consequence, they conclude that the particularities of each context means that this variable is resistant to neat modeling: 'Factors regarding the users' context are contingent on the particular situations of the users and, as a consequence, are difficult to include in a deductive theory of knowledge utilization' (Landry et al. 2001, p.346). This recommends the distinctive contribution to be made by in-depth case studies in beginning to unpick the work that 'context' is doing in these processes.

Studies of public administrators in Canada also published in the early 2000s reached similar conclusions. The findings of a separate study by Réjean Landry and colleagues, based on a survey of provincial and federal public administrators, found that 'links between researchers and users, and users' organizational contexts are good predictors of the uptake of research by government officials' (Landry et al. 2003, p.192). A study of provincial healthcare

policymakers by John Lavis and others finds that 'sustained interaction' between researchers and policymakers is a key enabler of research use, and also calls for greater attention to the context of research use, including the type of policy under consideration, the different forms that 'use' takes, and the impact of research in the context of other influences on policy development (Lavis et al. 2002).

Back in the United Kingdom, Sandra Nutley and colleagues' 2007 review of the field found that 'context... seems to be the key to whether and how research gets used' (2007, p.89). These authors recommend an attention to these 'contextual and cultural mediating factors' when seeking to improve research use by policymakers (2007, p.308), and concluded that:

Simple surveys of what seems to support or inhibit the use of research can only take our understanding of the research use process so far. This means we need to attend in more depth to the ways in which these different "factors affecting" interact, in complex and dynamic ways, in complex and dynamic contexts.  
(2007, p.89)

So although this academic field begins with simplified, rational models of research use, the findings of its more recent authors prescribe attending to a multiplicity of actors, to the importance of interaction for research mobilisation, to the different forms research 'use' might take, and to the significance of context in understanding how and why research is used. In doing so, these authors establish an agenda for studying research use as a complex social process.

### **Research use as a social and political process**

A second body of research has been concerned with understanding the social structures and processes that shape research use by policymakers. This work tends to be more critical and analytical: these authors emphasise the deeply social and political nature of these processes, often eschewing the rational assumptions and normative commitments that unite many of the first set of authors. Instead of focusing on how to overcome obstacles to rational research use by policymakers, these researchers question some of the principal assumptions underpinning early work in this field by populating their accounts

with new actors and querying the boundaries between the 'two communities' narrowly conceived. They re-examine the form and qualities of the evidence that is the object of exchange, and describe the various non-rational ways in which this evidence is used by policymakers.

#### *Who is involved? New actors, questioned boundaries*

Some authors have focused on the distinctive characteristics of those actors who are successful at influencing policymakers with their research. For example, in her study of academics and policymakers working on health inequalities in England and Scotland, Katherine Smith finds that the differing success of an idea's journey from research into policy is, in part, attributable to the characteristics of the idea's promoter (Smith 2008). Drawing on research by Mel Bartley in the 1980s, which invoked Latour and Woolgar's theory of 'cycles of credit' (Latour & Woolgar 1986), Smith argues that the success of ideas is contingent on the extent to which their promoter possesses attributes which persuade others to believe in them, though she points out that requirements for credibility vary across the worlds of academia and policy.

Writers have also identified a number of other groups and individuals whose roles fall outside the two communities of academics and policymakers as traditionally described, and who apparently play a significant role in the research-use process. In international relations, Peter Haas has described the influence of 'epistemic communities', which comprise networks of experts to whom governments and others turn for information as the increasing complexity of 'monetary, macroeconomic, technological, environmental, [and] health' (Haas 1992, p.12) issues leaves policymakers in conditions of uncertainty, and unable to identify their own interests. These communities include not just scientists, but also individuals from regulatory agencies, think-tanks and government policy research bodies (1992, p.31), who share common criteria of validity in relation to research, and whose apparently apolitical and non-interested status holds a distinct appeal for politicians (Haas 2001). Other authors have also drawn attention to the proliferation of groups such as consultants and lobbyists who play an important role in moving research findings into policy (Brooks & Gagnon 1990).

Some accounts have focused on the significant role which is (or could be) played by particular individuals in promoting research for policymakers; actors who are described variably as 'middlemen' (Bailey 1969; Hecllo 1974), 'policy entrepreneurs' (Kingdon 1995) and 'knowledge brokers' (Lomas 1997). For example, in a recent article, Francesca Gains and Gerry Stoker identify politically-appointed special advisers in the Westminster government as playing 'a "brokering" role... between the social science, bureaucrat and political decision-making worlds' (Gains & Stoker 2011, p.495).

While these accounts introduce new actors and groups to the scene, many leave relatively unaltered the notion that there are (also) two distinct communities of government policymakers and academics. However, the governance turn in policy studies and, in particular, the development of theories of network governance have prompted some authors to question the relevance of these traditional, professional categories. For example, in a recent article Katherine Smith and Kerry Joyce point out that:

the policy networks literature pays little attention to professional divisions, contending instead that it is groups of actors (potentially including researchers, policy makers, practitioners and others) bound together through shared value systems (or political interests) that provide the key to understanding policy change. Viewed through this analytical lens, the most important boundaries lie not between research producers and "users" but between different epistemological outlooks or political ideologies.  
(Smith & Joyce 2012, p.58; see also Newman 2011)

Haas's theory of epistemic communities described above offers an early model for such an approach, though it still maintains the distinction between those within and those outside of government. Maarten Hajer's description of 'discourse coalitions' is also relevant here (Hajer 1993). Hajer describes politics as a process in which 'different actors from various backgrounds form coalitions around specific story lines' (1993, p.47) and analyses how particular discourses (defined as 'ensemble[s] of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena' (1993, p.45) that are represented in storylines or narratives) come to dominate political life.

John Kingdon's theory of 'policy communities' also provides an account of groups of specialists working on a particular policy area, who are located both within and outside of government. Describing a health policy community in America, Kingdon writes of staff in Congressional agencies, planning officers, academics, consultants and analysts for interest groups, that:

they have in common their concern with one area of policy problems. They also have in common their interactions with each other. People in the [US federal] health community know each other's ideas, proposals and research, and often know each other very well personally.  
(Kingdon 1995, p.117)

However, Kingdon describes this group as being separate from the political community, and quite powerless without it.

#### *The form that 'evidence' takes*

Advocates of evidence-based policy-making have often argued that research findings must undergo some form of translation if they are to be usable for policymakers; that they should have a clear structure which is easy to scan, for example, (Lavis et al. 2005), and contain a summary and recommendations (Innvær et al. 2002; Hanney et al. 2003). But other empirical studies have suggested that, when policymakers do engage with research, the knowledge that moves between research and policy-making can take a different form altogether.

For example, in the late 1970s, large-scale US studies found that the impact of research on policy officials was best described as a *longue durée*, conceptual effect (Weiss & Bucuvalas 1980; Knott & Aaron Wildavsky 1980): what the officials were 'receiving' was a new way of seeing and thinking about the world. More recent studies of health policymakers in the UK have found that it is 'stories' (Petticrew et al. 2004) or 'ideas' (Smith 2008), rather than research results narrowly-conceived, which influence policy-making, echoing the findings of both Peter Hall and Maarten Hajer. Evert Lindquist, writing about Canada in the 1980s, argues that the form evidence takes will likely vary by context (Lindquist 1988). Lindquist described a relationship between the characteristics of decision-making situations and the forms of information that are likely to be

used. When decision-making is specialised and policy-making institutionalised, he argued, it is 'information' which is used; but when controversies and struggles dominate a policy area, knowledge must take the form of 'argument' if it is to carry influence.

Alternative commentaries claim that evidence is always necessarily a form of argumentation. Writing on the role of policy analysts in the late 1980s, Giandomenico Majone put it this way: 'Evidence is not synonymous with data or information. It is information selected from the available stock and introduced at a particular point in the argument in order to persuade a particular audience of the truth or falsity of a statement' (Majone 1989, p.10). Drawing on the work of Deborah Stone which describes the role of ideas in political struggle (Stone 2002), Trisha Greenhalgh and Jill Russell present policy-making as 'rhetorical action', in which 'the bounds of rationality extend to what is *plausibly* true – that is, "evidence" is whatever will convince a reasonable audience' (Greenhalgh & Russell 2006, p.36).

There has been relatively little writing in the evidence and policy literature on how the substance of research findings might be transformed in the process of their transfer and use. In an exception to this rule, Sandra Nutley and colleagues argue that 'research is more likely to be adapted than simply adopted' (2007, p.303), because the process 'involves two-way rather than unilinear flows of knowledge, in which researchers and research users each bring their own experience, values and understanding to bear in interpreting research and its meaning for local contexts' (2007, p.305). However these authors resist a fully constructionist account of evidence or knowledge, remaining committed to a positivist concept of truth which is necessary to make sense of their promotion of research use by policymakers and practitioners (2007, p.305).

#### *The role of the political and discursive context*

Another group of writers attends to the significance of the political and discursive context in which actors are operating, and how these contexts limit the kinds of evidence that can influence policy. For example, John Kingdon's

theory of agenda setting finds that ideas for policies are only considered viable if they fit with dominant values, have political support, are technically feasible and workable in budgetary terms (Kingdon 1995). This viability is only then translated into significant policy change when the 'policy stream' (offering strategies and solutions) becomes coupled with a 'problem stream' (an issue which has been identified as a problem amenable to policy action) and a 'political stream' (made up of the 'national mood', the views of the particular administration in power and interest group pressure) (1995, pp.19–20). In turn, such 'couplings' are only likely when 'policy windows' become open, which is usually the result of developments in the problem or political streams.

Consequently, a piece of research which proposes some new policy solution may only have the chance of influence if other conditions are right, and if it meets certain political criteria. Mark Exworthy and colleagues use this model to explain the last UK government's ambivalent commitment to reducing health inequalities (Exworthy et al. 2003), finding (among other obstacles) tensions between the value sets of the researchers and the Labour administration of the day. Similarly, Katherine Smith found in her research on this policy area that it was ideas from research that had metamorphic qualities, and that did not challenge existing institutional ideas, which were most likely to influence policy (Smith 2008).

This perspective also recalls Hajer's theory of 'discourse coalitions', under which research claims might only be acceptable to policymakers where the claims share a 'discursive affinity' (a similar way of conceptualizing the world) with dominant, institutionalised discourses (Hajer 1993, p.47).

### *The forms that evidence 'use' takes*

Moving beyond accounts of research use grounded in rationalist conceptions of policy-making, researchers have highlighted the diffuse ways in which research might influence the thinking of policymakers, and the deeply political functions it can be made to serve.

The sections above described how research has been found to serve a conceptual function, over longer time-scales, helping policymakers to think differently about the problem at hand (Weiss & Bucuvalas 1980; Knott & Aaron Wildavsky 1980). A similar 'enlightenment' function for research is identified by Harold Wilensky in his review of the field in 1997:

While the immediate practical relevance of social research, both applied and basic, is limited, in the long run it does shape both mass and elite perceptions of social and political reality. Along with novelists and philosophers, social scientists shape the verbal environment of leaders and rank-and-file alike. (Wilensky 1997, pp.1257-58)

A decade later, Sandra Nutley and colleagues' similarly concluded from their review that:

on the ground, research is often used in more subtle, indirect and conceptual ways, to bring about changes in knowledge and understanding, or shifts in perceptions, attitudes and beliefs: altering the ways in which policymakers and practitioners think about what they do, how they do it, and why. (Nutley et al. 2007, p.301).

Another strand of literature highlights the symbolic, political and tactical uses of evidence by policymakers. Elements of this are evident in Majone (1989) and Greenhalgh and Russell's (2006) accounts of policy-making as a process characterized by argumentation. Carol Weiss has described how policymakers use evaluations in part to 'justify policies, to show their knowledge and modernity' (Weiss 1999). In his review of the field, Claudio Radaelli points out that acknowledging the political nature of this role should not mean dismissing its importance: 'even if we assume [...] that power [rather than knowledge] directs policy choice, knowledge plays a fundamental justification function: political actors must persuade and convince, because politics is not sheer "powering"' (Radaelli 1995, p.174). Indeed Majone distinguishes between knowledge used for 'discovery' and that which is used for 'justification' and argues that it is entirely rational that we might use different forms of knowledge to serve these two distinct functions (Majone 1989).

Christina Boswell explores the political functions of expert knowledge in her research on immigration policy (Boswell 2009; Boswell 2008). In a study of

policy-making in the European Commission, Boswell finds that in addition to expert knowledge playing an instrumental role, it is also used to perform two symbolic functions: a legitimising function for the bureaucratic organisation itself; and a substantiating function, in which, in conditions of political contestation, it is invoked to lend authority to particular policy positions in line with organisational preferences (Boswell 2008). Which of these functions the knowledge is used to perform in any given case is, she argues, dependent on the type of organisation developing the policy (whether it gains its legitimacy from talk and decisions, or from actions) and of the policy topic in question.

Boswell suggests that political rather than action-orientated organisations will be more interested in legitimizing (versus instrumental-rational) forms of knowledge use, and that the substantiating function of knowledge is more likely to be employed in policy areas which are highly contested. While her empirical work offers some evidence for this, she also finds that knowledge is used differently by actors within a single organisation, and that particular forms of use do not necessarily reflect articulated strategies. Forms of use can and do shift over time, 'through a rather erratic process of trial and error' (Boswell 2008, p.486).

### Summary

The evidence and policy literature outlined in this section suggests that personal interactions are a key site of knowledge mobilisation; that there may be multiple actors and groups involved in these processes beyond the two communities of policymakers and researchers narrowly conceived; and that evidence may take different forms as it moves between actors and locations. These authors also describe how the acceptability of evidence may be determined by the political and discursive contexts within which it is mobilised, and that its 'use' may take symbolic or political as well as instrumental or conceptual forms.

Taking stock of this literature in the context of earlier work within the policy sciences brings into relief its relatively narrow focus. With some notable

exceptions (Kingdon, Hajer, Majone and Smith, for example), many of these writers have restricted their analyses to uses of research evidence, where the attention of the earlier authors was broader in its range, incorporating studies of rationality, calculation, ideas, analysis and learning as a means of better understanding the nature of administrative decision-making. I am interested in taking an open and inclusive view of the different kinds of knowledge that civil servants might be drawing on in their work. In the next half of this chapter, I outline the ideas from the philosophy and sociology of knowledge that together provide a set of conceptual resources and sensitising distinctions which have helped to guide my fieldwork and analysis.

### Conceptualising Knowledge

There are extensive literatures on the philosophy and sociology of knowledge; I do not seek to provide an overview of them here (they are too large, and much of the work is not directly relevant to my focus). Instead, I present three different ways in which theorists have suggested understanding the different forms knowledge takes, which together offer a point of departure for my own research.

#### Ryle on *know-how* and *know-that*

Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (Ryle 1949) introduced the concept of *know-how* as a distinct and important, but much neglected, form of knowledge. Writing against what he termed the 'intellectualist' account of knowledge which privileges propositional knowledge, theorising and the 'private, silent or internal' operations of the mind (1949, p.27), Ryle emphasised the important role played by know-how in our everyday lives. Know-how is not simply the practice that follows from mental theorising (I think how to build a chair, then I build the chair), but is rather its own distinctive form of knowledge, or knowing, manifest as intelligent capacities, dispositions and performances:

In ordinary life... we are much more concerned with people's competences than with their cognitive repertoires, with the operations than with the truths that they learn. Indeed even when we are concerned with their intellectual excellences and deficiencies, we are interested less in the stocks of truths that they acquire and retain than in their capacities to find out truths for themselves and their ability to organise and exploit them, when discovered.  
(Ryle 1949, p.28)

Ryle claims that, although we may not be able to articulate in theoretical terms the maxims guiding such actions ('The wit... knows how to make good jokes and how to detect bad ones, but he cannot tell us or himself any recipes for them.' (1949, p.30)), know-how is more reflexive and active than 'blind habit'. He offers the following example to demonstrate his point:

After the toddling-age we walk on pavements without minding our steps. But a mountaineer walking over ice-covered rocks in a high wind in the dark does not move his limbs by blind habit; he thinks what he is doing, he is ready for emergencies, he economises in effort, he makes tests and experiments; in short he walks with some degree of skill and judgement. If he makes a mistake, he is inclined not to repeat it, and if he finds a new trick effective he is inclined to continue to use it and to improve on it. He is concomitantly walking and teaching himself how to walk in conditions of this sort. It is of the essence of merely habitual practices that one performance is a replica of its predecessors. It is of the essence of intelligent practices that one performance is modified by its predecessors. The agent is still learning.  
(Ryle 1949, p.42)

Know-how is thus acquired through reflective-doing; through following examples and adjusting one's behaviour in response to criticism and error. A particular advantage of know-how over propositional knowledge is that it enables intelligent or knowledgeable action beyond the necessarily limited range of what can be specified by propositional rules or principles:

the reason, or maxim, is inevitably a proposition of some generality. It cannot embody specifications to fit every detail of the particular state of affairs. Clearly, once more, I must be sensible and not stupid, and this good sense cannot itself be a product of the intellectual acknowledgement of any general principle.  
(Ryle 1949, p.31)

In Ryle's work, know-how provides the means for our intelligent negotiation of the infinite specificity of everyday tasks.

Ryle does not elaborate his conception of *know-that*, since he sees it as the concept of knowledge which has dominated the existing literature. Indeed, this form of knowledge has been the focus of much of the work in both the philosophy and sociology of knowledge. Theories of knowledge within philosophy have been principally concerned with studying the conditions under which a know-that claim might be said to be true, for example on the grounds that it corresponds to some external reality, or that it is logically consistent with or entailed by some other already-accepted truth claim, respectively termed 'correspondence' and 'coherence' theories of truth (Grayling 1998; Marian 2009; Young 2008). Sociologists of knowledge have been concerned to demonstrate the socially-determined nature of such knowledge claims (McCarthy 1996); Michel Foucault, for example, sought to demonstrate the relative and socially-constructed nature of a society's 'regimes of truth', which determine what can function as a legitimate claim to truth (or know-that) in that context (Foucault 1980, p.131).

#### **Polanyi on *tacit* and *explicit* knowledge**

There is some overlap between Ryle's theory of know-how, and Michael Polanyi's theory of tacit knowledge. However, abstracted from the tenor of their source texts these ideas provide two distinct sets of analytical tools; I show how at the end of this section.

Polanyi's account of tacit knowledge is anchored in the observation that '*we can know more than we can tell*' (Polanyi 1967, p.4, original emphasis). For Polanyi, teaching, learning and all forms of knowledgeable practice (driving a car, reciting a poem, conducting a scientific experiment), draw not only upon 'explicit' knowledge, which we can articulate verbally or in writing, but also upon 'tacit' knowledge, which is not amenable to articulation, and yet makes possible knowledgeable acts of communication, interpretation and skilled performance.

Polanyi draws on *Gestalt* psychology to illustrate tacit knowledge in action. In one example, he describes an experiment in which human subjects are asked to

read a list of nonsensical syllables, and after some (but not all) of the syllables, they are given an electric shock. The experimenters find that, as this process continues, the subjects begin to show signs of apprehension when the particular shock-related syllables are read out, and yet, when questioned afterwards, the subjects are unable to list the syllables which were associated with the shocks. Polanyi argues that, for the subjects, these syllables are only meaningful in terms of their relation to the electric shock: '*we know the first term [the syllables] only by relying on our awareness of it for attending to the second [the electric shock]*' (1967, p.10, original emphasis). Our tacit knowledge seems to comprise this 'hidden' knowledge of the syllables, together with our ability to apply that hidden knowledge in particular, relevant instances: 'thus achieving an integration of particulars to a coherent entity to which we are attending' (1967, p.18).

For Polanyi, tacit knowledge is at the root of the 'hunches' which help to guide knowledgeable action, and offers a solution to the classic knowledge paradox set out by Plato in *Meno*. Plato argues that searching for a solution to a problem is absurd, because either you know what you are looking for, in which case you do not need to search for the solution, or you do not know what you are looking for, in which case how will you ever settle on a finding? Polanyi argues that:

the *Meno* shows conclusively that if all knowledge is explicit, i.e. capable of being clearly stated, then we cannot know a problem or look for its solution. And the *Meno* also shows, therefore, that if problems nevertheless exist, and discoveries can be made by solving them, we can know things, and important things, that we cannot tell.

(Polanyi 1967, p.22)

Ryle and Polanyi's theories overlap at this point. When Ryle emphasises how the knowledge that is present in actions (know-how) cannot be fully articulated in propositional form (recall his example of 'the wit'), he seems to be alluding to an account of tacit knowledge. But Ryle concertedly focuses his account on action and performance over mental activity (on the 'how' of 'know-how'), whereas Polanyi attends to the ontology of tacit *knowledge* itself, and is explicit that what he terms 'practical' and 'theoretical' forms of knowledge (similar to Ryle's know-how and know-that) *both* have tacit dimensions (Polanyi 1967, p.7).

Furthermore, although Ryle's position is to emphasise the non-propositional (or tacit) nature of know-how in contrast to intellectualist accounts, he acknowledges that competencies (or know-how) might in fact be acquired through the imparting of propositional knowledge (Ryle 1949, p.49). His point is not to say that this is impossible; but rather to point out that it is often otherwise.

For the purposes of my study, it is analytically helpful and theoretically meaningful to consider that knowledge might comprise know-that, or know-how, and that each of these types of knowledge might be tacit, or explicit.

### **Knowledge forms: how knowledge is found in people, artefacts, cultures, systems and action**

A number of authors have considered the various *forms* in which knowledge is manifest, usually in pursuit of understanding when, why and how knowledge moves between people and sites. Harry Collins' 1993 paper 'The Structure of Knowledge' is seminal here, distinguishing between (i) knowledge that is capable of being rendered in symbolic form; (ii) 'embodied knowledge' (comprising abilities contained in the body, like the tennis-playing knowledge of a tennis champion); and (iii) 'embrained knowledge' (comprising cognitive capacities connected to the physicality of the brain) (Collins 1993, pp.96-97, 116). Collins also identified all knowledge as possessing a social component (knowing what it means to be a tennis champion today involves knowing about the latest fibreglass rackets and that some players grunt); knowledge is thus also (iv) 'encultured'.

Each form has different characteristics. For example, where symbolic knowledge can be easily transferred, this is not the case for embodied and embrained knowledge. These categories, only lightly sketched by Collins himself, have since been taken-up, elaborated and refined by a number of other authors, most notably Frank Blackler (1995) and Alice Lam (2000), writing in organisational studies, and Richard Freeman and Steve Sturdy (2011) writing in policy studies.

'Embrained' knowledge is described as 'dependent on conceptual skills and cognitive abilities (what Ryle 1949, called know that)' (Blackler 1995, p.1023), and as theoretical, explicit and individually held (Lam 2000, p.492). Both Lam and Blackler acknowledge the privileged place this type of knowledge tends to be afforded in Western culture, including by scholars. 'Embodied' knowledge by contrast, is presented as equivalent to Ryle's know-how; as 'action orientated' (Blackler 1995, p.1024) and context-specific ('its generation cannot be separated from [its] application' (Lam 2000, p.493)); and as partially or wholly tacit (Blackler 1995, p.1024; Lam 2000, p.492).

Freeman and Sturdy's (2011) concept of 'embodied' knowledge brings these two categories into one, incorporating both 'practical and gestural knowledge, deeply embedded in bodily experience and incapable of expression in verbal form' and 'the kind of knowledge that sits in the mind and finds expression in words' (Freeman & Sturdy 2011, p.6). By developing a single category for embodied knowledge, Freeman and Sturdy explicitly uncouple know-how from tacit knowledge, and know-that from explicit knowledge, pointing out the possibility of alternative pairings: 'Certain kinds of know-how may be expressed in words as instructions and rules', and 'in real-world situations, the mobilisation or expression of verbal knowledge invariably involves an element of tacit knowledge' (Freeman & Sturdy 2011, p.7).

'Encoded' knowledge is 'information conveyed by signs and symbols' (Blackler 1995, p.1025). It is conceived as highly mobile, enabling control and co-ordination in organisations, though for Lam it is 'inevitably simplified and selective, for it fails to capture and preserve the tacit skills and judgement of individuals' (Lam 2000, p.493). Freeman and Sturdy (2011) use 'inscribed' to describe knowledge that is written down or represented in a document or a diagram, but also extend the concept to include knowledge which is 'expressed in the making of a tool' (2011, p.7). Echoing Lam's characterisation of encoded knowledge as a means of control, for Freeman and Sturdy, knowledge is 'inscribed in objects and artefacts the purpose of which is to mediate and inform our interactions with the world rather than represent it' (2011, p.7). Drawing on

Bruno Latour, Freeman and Sturdy emphasise the distinctive qualities of inscribed (as opposed to embodied) knowledge: it is stable (documents or tools don't change jobs or forget things, like people do), easily reproducible and highly mobile, which accounts for its significance in governance, through plans, budgets and guidelines (Freeman & Sturdy 2011, p.8). But these authors also take seriously the role of interpretation in meaning-making and, in their account, inscribed knowledge is always necessarily undetermined, and as such open to (mis)interpretation.

Frank Blackler introduces a distinction between 'encultured' and 'embedded' knowledge. For him, 'encultured knowledge' refers to the 'process of achieving shared understandings [which]... are likely to depend heavily on language, and hence to be socially constructed and open to negotiation' (1995, p.1024). 'Embedded knowledge', on the other hand, 'resides in systematic routines'. Studies of this type of knowledge are concerned with systems, with the significance of social relationships and with material resources (1995, pp.1024–25), rather than with negotiations over meaning. Lam uses only the second of these categories, defining embedded knowledge as 'the collective form of tacit knowledge residing in organisational routines and shared norms ... [it] is relation-specific, contextual and dispersed. It is organic and dynamic: an emergent form of knowledge capable of supporting complex patterns of interaction in the absence of written rules' (Lam 2000, p.493). Going back to Ryle, this might be understood as a kind of collective know-how.

The distinctive contribution of Freeman and Sturdy to this strand of literature is their emphasis on the extent to which all knowledge (whether embodied or inscribed) must be 'enacted' in order to be made apparent as knowledge. They write that: 'thoughts unspoken, skills not exercised, texts unread and instruments unused are indistinguishable from ignorance or nonsense. It is only when it is enacted that knowledge, whether embodied or inscribed, becomes significant' (2011, p.8). The authors describe this enactment 'phase' of knowledge as '*definite*', 'in the sense that embodied and inscribed knowledges are indefinite, underdetermined, enactment serves to specify what we know at

the point at which it is occasioned' (2011, p.8); '*transient*', in that 'it endures only as long as the enactment itself' (2011, p.8); and '*collective*', because meaningful action 'is almost always interaction. As such, [enacted knowledge] is constantly monitored and regulated through the mutual surveillance and sanctioning of all those involved at any moment' (2011, p.9).

The typologies described in this section are summarised in Table 1.1 Typologies of Knowledge Forms.

**Table 1.1 Typologies of Knowledge Forms**

<b>Collins (1993)</b>	<b>Blacker (1995)</b>	<b>Lam (2000)</b>	<b>Freeman &amp; Sturdy (2011)</b>
Embrained	Embrained	Embrained	Embodied
Embodied	Embodied	Embodied	
Symbol-type	Encoded	Encoded	Inscribed
Encultured	Encultured	-	-
	Embedded	Embedded	
-	-	-	Enacted

Freeman and Sturdy's concept of enactment resonates with the emphasis in the evidence and policy literature on contextually-grounded interactions as critical sites of knowledge mobilisation. But those authors were principally concerned with examining explicit forms of know-that. What might it mean to pursue the collective insights of these literatures, and understand knowledge as comprising know-how as well as know-that, as being tacit as well as explicit, and as not only carried in bodies or texts, but also as realised in particular interactions in particular contexts? An 'invisible college' (Star 1992, p.398) of authors writing on knowledge and learning in social theory, organisation studies and social studies of science and technology have developed just such a conception, in which knowledge is understood as *enacted* rather than possessed, and the focus of research is directed towards *knowing* as a situated, social activity (Lave 1988; Seely Brown et al. 1989; Lave & Wenger 1991; Star 1992; Blackler 1995; Weick & Westley 1996; Cook & Seely Brown 1999; Cook & Wagenaar 2012).

## From Knowledge to Knowing

For this group of authors knowing is not an individual, cognitive act, but is rather a collective, social achievement. Writing in the early 1990s, the sociologist of science, Susan Leigh Star, identifies Vygotsky's theory of the 'zone of proximal development' as a foundational influence upon these alternative accounts of cognition and problem solving. In Vygotsky's account, a child's full learning potential can only be fully realized *collectively*, through adult guidance and collaboration with more able peers (Star 1992, p.404). Thinking, or learning, is thus conceived as a distinctly social activity. In a similar vein, Jean Lave's seminal work on *Cognition in Practice* (1988), which draws on ethnographic research on cognition in every day life, describes cognition as not just socially influenced or shaped, but as *socially distributed*:

The point is not so much that arrangements of knowledge in the head correspond in a complicated way to the social world outside the head, but that they are socially organized in such a fashion as to be indivisible. "Cognition" observed in everyday practice is distributed – stretched over, not divided among – mind, body, activity and culturally organized settings (which include other actors).  
(Lave 1988, p.1)

Knowing is not only a product of an individual and the actors with whom they are engaged, but also the social or cultural setting they inhabit, and the activity they are pursuing. Thus for Lave, and her some-time collaborator Etienne Wenger, knowing and learning are conceived of as *situated* (Lave & Wenger 1991). In this framework, knowledge (or knowing) takes its meaning from, and so is partially constituted by, the social and cultural circumstances in which it is enacted. Organisational sociologist John Seely Brown and colleagues express a similar point when they claim that: 'All knowledge is ... like language. Its constituent parts index the world and so are inextricably a product of the activity and situation in which they are produced' (Seely Brown et al. 1989, p.33). Analytically we can breakdown the 'situatedness' of knowing into a number of constituent parts. For this loose collective of writers, to say that knowing is

situated, is to say that it is collaborative, or socially distributed; culturally embedded; task orientated; realised in action; and interested. As a consequence of many of these qualities, it is also emergent, or under-determined, and it is ubiquitous (see Table 1.2 The Characteristics of Knowledge as Knowing).

**Table 1.2 The Characteristics of Knowledge as Knowing**

<b><i>Knowing is...</i></b>	<b><i>and not ....</i></b>
Collaborative	Solitary
Task-oriented	Abstract
Culturally embedded	Universal
Realised in action	Mental, internalised
Emergent, underdetermined	Fixed, complete
Interested	Neutral
Ubiquitous	The preserve of 'knowledge workers'

For a number of these theorists, learning is culturally embedded not just in the sense that it always takes place within some particular cultural context, which provides meanings and beliefs through which knowledge may be interpreted, but also because culture itself (manifested in organisations, or in communities) entails knowing and learning. The categories of culture and learning are therefore mutually constitutive. For example, in their review of the state of the field of organisational learning, Weick and Westley (1996) criticise their predecessors for a failure to engage fully with the *organisation* aspect of organisational learning, and recommend two key resources for future work. First, Dvora Yanow and S.D. Noam Cook's conception of organisations as cultures (1993). Culture, in Yanow and Cook's account, can be understood as:

[a] set of values, beliefs and feelings together with the artifacts of their expression and transmission (such as myths, symbols, metaphors and rituals), that are created, inherited, shared and transmitted within one group of people and that, in part, distinguish that group from others.  
(1993, p.379),

As such, understanding organisations as cultures locates learning at the very heart of what it is to organise (1993, p.442). Weick and Westley also hold up

Donald Schön's account of organisations as repositories of cumulatively built up knowledge (comprising 'principles and maxims of practice, images of mission and identity, facts about the task environment, techniques of operation, stories of past experience' (Schön, 1983, p.242 in Weick & Westley 1996, p.443), as a way of thinking about how organisations learn. This deposited knowledge is drawn upon, amended and supplemented through activity; knowing is thus required *and* generated by everyday organisational work.

Lave and Wenger use the concept of 'communities of practice' rather than 'organisation' to delineate the relevant social-cultural space within and with which knowing or learning takes place (1991), but they effectively describe a similar relationship between knowing and organisation. In their account, 'communities of practice' comprise practitioners with a 'shared domain of interest', engaged in joint activities and 'relationships that enable them to learn from each other' (Wenger 2006). Over time, and through interaction, a community develops a 'shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems' (Wenger 2006). Thus for Lave and Wenger, and for Weick and Westley, learning (or developing knowing) is realised through participation in a particular organisation or community. It is realised in action.

In taking seriously the ways in which knowing takes place in action, S.D. Noam Cook and John Seely Brown (1999) and, more recently, Cook and Hendrik Wagenaar (Cook & Wagenaar 2012) have distinguished 'knowledge' from the 'knowing' involved in practice. They argue that the above descriptions of knowledge as a thing which is accreted as part of an organisation's culture, however tacit and collective that knowledge might be, still involve conceiving of knowledge as something 'possessed' and 'static' (Cook & Seely Brown 1999, p.387). For these authors, such accounts fail to capture the 'dynamic, concrete, relational' (1999, p.387) nature of knowing that is an aspect of action itself; what they term the 'epistemological dimension' of practice (1999, p.387).

Accordingly, in the terms of the classic example of riding a bike, Cook and Seely Brown say that riding entails tacit knowledge (which, for example, tells you which way to turn the handlebars when you begin to fall), and explicit knowledge (which tells you that if you keep peddling and keep the handle-bars straight, the forces of gravity should keep you up), but that together these types of knowledge are not sufficient to account for all the epistemic work involved in riding. They argue that: 'The actual act of riding (or trying to)... *does distinct epistemic work of its own*' (1999, p.387). This knowing is found in the interaction between the tacit and explicit knowledge held by the rider, and the act of riding itself. The act of deploying these knowledges in the navigation of some task, is in itself knowledgeable.

This notion of an epistemic dimension of practice has recently been further developed by S.D. Noam Cook and Hendrik Wagenaar (Cook & Wagenaar 2012). They emphasise how more recent conceptualisations of knowledge that take into account practice nonetheless tend to treat knowledge as ontologically prior to practice. Cook and Wagenaar challenge this assumption, pointing to how, in practice, actors have to engage with endlessly particular, uncertain and complex situations, of which they have no prior experience. For these authors, implicit cultural rules and tacit skills, 'knowledge possessed', are never sufficient to account for how actors judge how to act in some specific instance. They write:

This is a situation that no one can escape. It is our nature as human beings that we are always standing at the edge of the present, venturing into an uncertain future, guided by an ambiguous history of experience, convention, artefact, and habit – and empowered by a capacity, as dazzling as it is fallible, for imagining the unrealized and then judging what we ought to do and how best to do it. (Cook & Wagenaar 2012, p.17).

These authors claim that a theory of knowledge and practice must be able to account for 'how [in such situations] we are able so often to go beyond what we already know and perceive' (2012, p.18). Conceiving of practice as having an epistemic element, not something possessed but something performed in interaction with people and things in some particular context in pursuit of some particular task, within what they term the 'eternally unfolding present' (2012, p.21), offers one such explanation.

Both the knowing identified as cultural rules, and the epistemic dimension of practice described by S.D. Noam Cook and colleagues, are not drawn upon or realised in just any action, but in action that is orientated towards some particular task in which an actor is engaged. As Donald Schön writes: 'When a manager reflects-in-action he draws on this stock of organisational knowledge, adapting it to *some present instance*' (1983, p.242 in Weick & Westley 1996, p.443, my emphasis). Similarly, for Cook and Wagenaar, the practices they describe, and the knowing that is a part of them, are directed towards judging what to do in practice, in the 'unfolding present'. Knowing, for these authors, is conceived as pragmatic.

A related point is made about *knowledge* in an earlier article by Seely Brown and others, who conclude that conceptual knowledge might be thought of as 'similar to a set of tools' (1989, p.33) which are applied to particular tasks. In this conception, knowledge is not deterministic: 'The community and its viewpoint, quite as much as the tool itself, determine how a tool is used' (1989, p.33), and 'The adequacy of the solution [the community members] reach becomes apparent in relation to the role [that solution] must play in allowing activity to continue' (1989, p.36). Susan Leigh Star traces this line of thinking back to pragmatic conceptions of knowledge as indeterminate, insofar as: '*the meaning of knowledge is given in its consequences*, in a community of listeners, not in its *a priori* analytic specification' (1992, p.402, original emphasis). In this way knowledge is *underdetermined*; knowing emerges in particular interactions, in particular cultural contexts, in pursuit of particular tasks.

In his 1995 review article for *Management Studies*, Frank Blackler cites many of these authors in calling for a new ways of thinking about knowledge and knowing in organisation studies, but he also introduces a new characteristic of knowledge which he says must be recognised if we are to consider knowledge in terms of social and culturally embedded knowing; that is that knowing is always *contested*. Drawing on the writing of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, Blackler argues that: '[since] social systems are fundamentally unequal... any

theory of knowing as a cultural activity must acknowledge the, often self-reproducing, dynamics of domination and subordination that are a feature of everyday life' (Blackler 1995, p.1040).

Finally, in the work of many of these authors, knowing is *ubiquitous*. A consequence of conceiving of knowing as bound up with community or organisational membership, and with practice is that: 'all individuals in all organisations, not just so-called "knowledge workers" or "knowledge organisations", are knowledgeable' (Blackler 1995, p.1026). In these accounts, the task-orientated activities of situated actors are all saturated with knowing.

In this project, I am committed to allowing for the possibility that knowledge may be under-determined, and realised in activity, in interactions with others, in particular cultural settings, in support of the completion (or continuation) of some particular task. To capture knowledge in this form, I will need to observe it as it is invoked and produced in action, in context. I therefore need to take as the object of my inquiry policymakers' work *practices*. In the next chapter, I locate my project in a body of research that is concerned with understanding policy as *work*, and set out the implications of this approach for my research design.

## Chapter 2 Studying Practices in the Department of Health

In this chapter I situate my research in the context of a body of work in interpretive policy analysis that examines policy work as *practice*, and contend that studying the knowledge practices of civil servants necessitates an ethnographic approach to empirical research. I describe the epistemological underpinnings of an interpretive approach to analysis, and identify a set of criteria by which others might assess the validity of my study. I identify my project as providing a case study of policymakers engaged in governing a complex field, which requires using a variety of different kinds of knowledge, and describe how the delineation of my case has been an outcome of, as well as a prior requirement for, my fieldwork. I go on to offer an account of the challenges of obtaining fieldwork access, and report on how overcoming these obstacles involved learning to think and act like my participants. I set out the detail of my data collection, and reflect on the particular ways in which I combined interviews and observations to get a better view and understanding of the civil servants' practices.

In the final section of the chapter, I tell the analytical story of my research, including an account of the critical juncture at which I abandoned my provisional detailed research questions and adopted a more open approach to fieldwork; and how, in the final analysis, I developed a set of criteria by which to assess emerging themes.

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## An Interpretive Approach to Policy Analysis

### Practice as an object of study

In the previous chapter, I set out how various social theorists have conceived of knowledge as *practised*. This turn to a practice approach can also be seen across a wide range of other fields in social theory, as well as in philosophy, cultural theory and science and technology studies (for overviews of these literatures, see Schatzki 2001; Postill 2010). Rooted in theoretical developments in the humanities and social sciences in the twentieth century, the practice approach has been subjected to renewed attention in the 1990s and 2000s. Though this is a loose body of work which includes a range of sometimes conflicting ontological and epistemological positions, I follow Theodore Schatzki in taking as its defining characteristic an understanding of the social world as made up of ‘embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity’ (Schatzki 2001, p.2), which are at once both guided by and (re)constitute a shared practical understanding (or ‘know-how’) about how things are done in a particular community.

The practice approach has also been taken up by a group of writers in interpretive policy studies, who share an interest in understanding the nature of policy-making and implementation as *work* (Noordegraaf 2000; Wagenaar & Cook 2003; Wagenaar 2004; Colebatch 2006; Colebatch et al. 2010; Freeman et al. 2011). It is within this literature that I seek to locate my study. Interpretive policy analysts share many of the intellectual roots of practice theory, emphasising the ‘meaningfulness of human action’ (Yanow 2000, pp.22–23), and conceiving of meanings and beliefs to be ‘constitutive of [those] actions’ (Schwartz-Shea 2006, p.109). The interpretive approach is characterised by an interest in ‘ferreting out... that mental framework’ which ‘stands under’ (Yanow 2006b, pp.10–11), or in a mutually constitutive relationship with (Freeman et al. 2011; Cook & Wagenaar 2012), those actions.

This group of authors, explicitly concerned with conceiving of policy as practiced, foreground different aspects of practice in their work. For example, Hal Colebatch and colleagues are principally concerned with the *accounts* of policy work developed by practitioners and researchers respectively and the functions these narratives serve (Colebatch 2006; Colebatch et al. 2010). A similar approach is taken by Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes (2003; 2006). Hendrik Wagenaar and S.D. Noam Cook (2003), and Richard Freeman and colleagues (Freeman et al. 2011) are more concerned with what it is that policymakers *do* when they engage in policy work, though with diverging points of focus. It is in this second field that I seek to situate my own research. Wagenaar and Cook (2003) and Wagenaar (2004) attend to the practical judgement involved in the every-day coping required of public administrators at work. They write that practice has:

its own logic (pragmatic, purposeful), its own standards of knowing (interpretive, holistic, more know-how than know-that), its own orientation towards the world (interactive, moral, emotional) and its own image of society (as a constellation of interdependent communities).  
(Wagenaar & Cook 2003, p.141)

Wagenaar (2004) emphasises the situated and social nature of practice, and the emergent nature of the understandings and meanings by which these practices can be made comprehensible.

Richard Freeman and colleagues define practices as ‘specific configurations of action, norms and knowledge’ (Freeman et al. 2011, p.128), sharing with Wagenaar and Cook an emphasis on the distinctly social nature of individual actions; but also foregrounding the at once repetitive and improvised nature of practice, and the ways in which these activities ‘both entail and reproduce particular knowledge of when and how they are to be performed’ (2011, p.129). Together these authors are concerned with opening up the ‘black box’ of everyday policy work to reflect on what it is that actors do when they ‘make’ or ‘implement’ policy, as well as with identifying the know-how or understandings which are invoked and produced in these activities. My own research seeks to

pay particular attention to the *knowledge* practices of policymakers. My aim is to describe these knowledge practices, as an analytic sub-set of policy practices; and to elucidate the know-how by which they are organised.

But studying practices sets up some distinct methodological challenges. Firstly, practices are *situated*. Hendrik Wagenaar describes this in terms of the 'indexicality of... human action' (2004, p.648); the meaning of a practice is entwined with its context, with social interaction and with the nature of the task towards which it is directed. Attempting to extract a practice from its situation in order to subject it to closer and cleaner inspection according to some experimental logic would transform the practice beyond recognition. Practices must be studied *in situ*. Practices are also *emergent*. This is not the Weberian conception of a modern bureaucracy that 'administers according to rationally devised regulations' (Weber 1918a, p.147); practices cannot be known by simply reading standard operating procedures. They have a distinctive contemporary quality, in which each instance of a practice is carried out for 'another first time' (Garfinkel 1967; cited in Freeman et al. 2011, p.129), in an 'eternally unfolding present' (Cook & Wagenaar 2012). This means they need to be studied in real-time, as they occur.

The distinctive qualities of practice also prescribe the use of observation, as well as interview. Firstly, the know-how by which they are organised may often be tacit, and not easily available for reflection by the actors themselves. Secondly, the nature of practice in some contexts may be in direct tension with organisational narratives about ways of working: in Chris Argyris and Donald Schön's terms, practices constitute an organisation's 'theory in use', which often stands in tension with its 'espoused theory' (Argyris & Schön 1974). In this sense, practice may be un-discussable. It is what goes without saying, and sometimes, what must not be said.

### Methodology: Ethnography as a means of studying practice

These characteristic features of practice mean that, in order to study it, the researcher needs to *be there*, in context, as the action unfolds in real-time. After all, this is how practitioners themselves become accomplished actors in communities; by watching and engaging at the margins of a practice (Lave & Wenger 1991). The researcher must do the same, using the interpretive skills she possesses as a social actor to get a feel for the tacit rules which guide and emerge from practice while, all the time, maintaining a 'a self-conscious awareness of what is learned, how it is learned, and the social transactions that inform the production of such knowledge' (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, p.101). An ethnographic approach is therefore especially well placed to capture practice.

There are various and varying definitions of the ethnographic method and its epistemology (Atkinson et al. 2007), but ethnographies commonly include a focus on 'culture' in the sense of the patterns of behaviour, ideas and beliefs which characterise a particular group; the use of participant-observation as a method of data collection; a holistic approach to data collection in which data from different sources are collected and synthesised to represent some social whole; and an attention to the contexts in which data are collected or generated (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995; Lofland 1995; Stewart 1998; Atkinson et al. 2007; Fetterman 2010).

To learn about and interpret the group or culture under study, the ethnographer uses her capacities as a social actor to make sense of what she observes; seeking to achieve a balance between the outsider (*etic*) perspective she brings to the study, with an emerging insider (*emic*) perspective she develops through observing and interacting with the community under study (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, p.111); being both 'close up' and 'analytic' in her approach (Lofland 1995, p.34). This approach seeks to make the 'accepted, unspoken, tacitly known, commonsensical, taken-for-granted, local "rules" of

action and interaction stand out as, in some way, different, thereby opening them up for reflection and examination' (Yanow 2006b, p.19).

Ethnographers also draw on insiders' own accounts using more or less formal interview techniques. There are a range of approaches to eliciting such accounts, and to conceptualising the nature of the data obtained; I follow Hammersley and Atkinson's view of interview data as both a 'resource' and a 'topic' for analysis (1995, p.126). This recognises that interviews can generate information about events which are difficult to observe, *and* that such accounts are necessarily constructions shaped by the interviewee's perspective and interests, the role of the interviewer, and the context of the interview situation. As Holstein and Gubrium emphasise in their theory of the 'active interview' (1995), in taking seriously (rather than attempting to eliminate) the extent to which meanings that emerge in interviews are jointly constructed by both the interviewer and the interviewee, the interviewer can take an active role in seeking to stimulate the interviewee's reflective capacities (Holstein & Gubrium 1995, p.17).

Writers on ethnography tend to prescribe long and/or immersive periods of fieldwork, which permit the development of a deep and intimate familiarity with the setting under study (see for example, Lofland 1995, pp.44–45; Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, p.1; Yanow 2000, p.76). The length of time, or degree of intensity, required of fieldwork in order for it to qualify as 'ethnography' are rarely articulated. The limits to access in the case of my own research made comprehensive and extended immersion impossible, and yet, as I describe later in this chapter, my experience did meet the qualitative criteria ethnographers use as markers of 'saturation'.

### Validity

By its very nature, interpretive policy analysis 'generates explanation that is context specific, rather than a set of generalized predictive laws' (Yanow 2006b,

pp.10–11). Writers in this school argue that the transferability of findings from one setting to another is ‘the responsibility of the person who seeks to “transfer” those findings to the new setting’, though the author of the original study can facilitate this process by providing a rich description of his or her case and its context (Schwartz-Shea 2006, p.109). Interpretive accounts can also contribute to wider theory development through an abductive logic (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012). The concept of abduction as an approach to social research was developed by Charles Peirce and Albert Schutz, and has more recently been described by Norman Blaikie, as a research strategy employed to:

describe and understand social life in terms of social actors’ motives and understandings... [in which researchers] discover everyday lay concepts, meanings and motives... [then] produce a technical account from lay accounts...[and go on to] develop a theory and test it iteratively.  
(Blaikie 2007, p.8)

Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow describe the abductive process in interpretive research as beginning with a ‘puzzle, surprise or tension’, which stimulates further inquiry into local concepts or ways of doing things (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p.27). They describe the researcher moving back and forth between observing (and interacting with) these phenomena, and developing possible explanations for them through comparisons with the research literature, as well as to other data collected within the same study (2012, p. 27).

Blaikie writes that the understanding of practices generated by the application of social scientific categories or ‘typifications’ in abductive approaches may, in turn, become part of ‘more systematic explanatory accounts’ (Blaikie 2007, p.8). For Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, such processes do enable the production of explanations, but these explanations are rooted in the situation under study, in contrast to the generalizable propositions pursued by inductive and deductive reasoning (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p.28). In both accounts, abduction describes how interpretive, ethnographic descriptions of particular communities in particular settings can be used to generate understanding and

explanation, and indicates the part that such studies might play in contributing to theory development.

Schwartz-Shea has articulated an (inductively-developed) set of evaluative criteria by which researchers adopting an interpretive approach seek to demonstrate and assess the internal validity of their study; that is, the reliability of the researcher's account of the action, and the inferences or interpretations of meaning which she draws from that account (Schwartz-Shea 2006). From these criteria, I have selected three principles against which I have sought to assure the validity of my own research:

1. **'Thick Description'**: the researcher offers a 'nuanced portrait of the cultural layers that inform the researcher's interpretation of interactions and events' (Schwartz-Shea 2006, p.101). The term 'thick description' is from cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who called on the ethnographer to understand the meaning of signs within the culture under study, so that they may determine whether the 'wink of an eye' is a participant merely 'rapidly contracting his right eyelid', or whether it constitutes 'practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion' (Geertz 1973, p.7).
2. **'Trustworthiness'**: this is exhibited through transparency about the processes by which data is accessed and analysed; a 'way [of talking] about the many steps that researchers take throughout the research process to ensure that their efforts are self-consciously deliberate, transparent, and ethical' (Schwartz-Shea 2006, p.101). Theorists of ethnography have described in similar terms the need for researchers to provide detailed accounts of the nature of the data collected (who they spoke to and when), and to demonstrate 'theoretical candour' (Sanjek 1990 in Lofland 1995, p.49) by providing 'a chronological, intellectual and personal account of how the analysis evolved' (Lofland 1995, p.49).

3. **'Multidimensionality'**: a re-working of the concept of 'triangulation', emphasising the 'complexity and richness' which comes from working with different genres of data (Schwartz-Shea 2006, p.103), and the benefits of 'multiple observational "points"... [for providing] endless opportunities for comparison of ideas from different vantages, checking idiosyncratic interpretation' (Yanow 2006a, p.77). This echoes the commitment of ethnographers to holistic accounts of social worlds.

Interpretive approaches to policy analysis often share a normative agenda that might serve as a further criterion for assessing the value of a study. This seeks 'to make silenced stories and silenced communities speak: to bring them, their values, and their points of view to the conversation' (Yanow 2000, p.92), in order to enable more constructive and meaningful communication between communities. But silence is ambiguous; a community might be silent because its members do not have the power or the 'right' to speak. These are the sorts of silenced communities I think Dvora Yanow has in mind. However, a community's silence might, in other circumstances, be an expression of its power; the manifestation of a corporation, an agency or a government choosing to keep secret the details of its inner workings. I see the civil servants I studied as silent in *both* of these senses: they re-enact the powerful secrecy of the Department, but as civil servants they are also denied the right to speak about much of their work in public, even after they have left their posts.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of these restrictions on civil servants, and their enactment of cultural practices of secrecy around policy formulation, their voices have been largely absent from popular and academic debates on evidence-use in policy-making. Much of the last thirty years or so of academic work on evidence and policy takes as its starting point an academy-based logic (why are you not using

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<sup>2</sup> Section 7 of The Civil Service Code states that civil servants 'must not disclose official information without authority' (Cabinet Office 2010), a duty which continues to apply after an individual has left the civil service. This has been interpreted by the Chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life to include information about internal debates on policy (House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee 2009, p.5).

research to solve society's problems?); I was interested in starting from the other side, with the civil servants' story. By asking how civil servants *do* use knowledge, and what kinds of knowledge, and why, and using these findings to better inform debates among both academics and civil servants, this study seeks both to give voice to a relatively silent community, as well as to render the practices of actors in this powerful institution open to scrutiny.

### A Case Study Design

A case study is an 'empirical inquiry which investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Yin 2009, p.18). Case studies are thus particularly suited to 'how' and 'why'-type research questions (as opposed to questions about 'what', 'who', 'how many' or 'how much' (Yin 2009, pp.8–9)). Case studies usually involve multiple means of data collection, and are intended to 'represent the case', rather than 'the world' (Stake 1994, p.245); in this way, they are consistent with an interpretive, ethnographic approach. Some authors present the case study as a *methodological* choice, one which incorporates claims about appropriate means of data collection, analysis, and criteria for internal and external validity (see Yin 2009, for example). I use the design in a narrower sense, as an articulation of 'a choice of object to be studied' (Stake 1994, p.236), and a means of selecting that 'phenomenon (located in time/space) about which data are collected and [...] analysed, and that corresponds to the type of phenomena to which the main claims of a study relate' (Hammersley 1992, p.184).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, interpretive claims about the possibility of applying findings from these studies to other in-depth studies, and the abductive principle which supports the building and refinement of theory based on rich, empirical data align with common claims about the epistemological status and benefits of case studies; namely that the transferability of case-study findings rests on 'describing the case in sufficient detail so that the reader can make good comparisons' (Stake 1994, p.241), and that case-studies enable analytical generalisations to theory, rather than statistical generalisations to wider populations (Mitchell 1984, p.239; Yin 2009, p.15).

Robert Stake develops a heuristic distinction (1994, p.238) between *instrumental*, *intrinsic* and *revelatory* case studies. In instrumental studies, 'a particular case is examined to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory. The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supporting role, facilitating our understanding of something else' (1994, p.237). In intrinsic studies, 'one wants a better understanding of this particular case...because, in all its particularity and ordinariness, this case itself is of interest' (1994, p.237); and in revelatory case studies, the studies offer an opportunity to analyse some phenomenon which has not previously been accessible for study in that way (Stake 1994, p.237; see also Yin 2009, p.48). Stake recognises that, in practice, when pursuing research 'we simultaneously have several interests, often changing, there is no line distinguishing intrinsic case study from instrumental' (1994, p.237).

By using a case study design I have sought to invoke all three of these functions. Firstly, I seek to give an account of the *how* and *why* of knowledge use in some particular policy-making community, aiming to provide a trustworthy presentation of the quotidian and necessarily context-specific practices of a selection of policymakers. In addition, in line with the principles of abduction and interpretive transferability, my aim is for this account to be sufficiently rich and persuasive that it can contribute to theoretical debates about how we might conceive of the complex, social processes of knowledge use in this context, and offer comparative material for other scholars seeking to produce equivalent representations in other contexts. Given the relative secrecy of the Department in relation to its inner workings, and the unusualness of gaining observation access, it could also be argued that my case falls into Stake's third category of studies, the 'revelatory case'.

Since I am not claiming a representativeness which could support statistical generalisations, my selection of a case was guided by seeking an 'opportunity to learn' (Stake 1994, p.244), and a "'telling" case', which has the potential to 'make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent' (Mitchell 1984,

p.239). Following the principles of interpretive analysis, within the case itself I have sought to engage with a range of different perspectives, seeking to map and capture variety or 'multi-dimensionality'. However, as I describe below, the selection of a case, and of the data points within that case, was also shaped by limits to fieldwork access, something which case study theorists recognise as an inevitable influence in this type of research (Yin 2009, p.26; Stake 1994, p.244).

## The Case

My case needed to offer an instance of policymakers governing a complex field using knowledge they could not be assumed to possess themselves. The Department of Health was a logical place for me to start. Through my professional roles as a health policy analyst in the media and for a think-tank, I had become aware of the often technically complex nature of the policy documents these civil servants produced, and the many different types of knowledge which were invoked in debates around such documents.

My professional experience also provided pragmatic reasons to focus my research in the Department of Health; I had a reasonable grasp of the policy background and frameworks the civil servants were working with, which would make it easier to follow the logic of meetings or descriptions in interviews, and help to establish my credibility with civil servants. I also estimated that my professional position as a researcher in a health policy think-tank with strong links to the Department, would improve my chances of securing access to what seemed to be a relatively closed organisation.

The Department is a large organisation with over 2,500 staff, spread across five sites in London as well as an office in Leeds, and with responsibilities for a wide range of policy areas (from NHS waiting-time targets to domestic violence; vaccination policy to adult social care services) and a variety of policy functions. At the time of my research, these functions ranged from fairly direct management of the health service, to answering Parliamentary questions, to developing high-level strategy documents (see Appendix A for an account of the

Department's structure and responsibilities during my fieldwork). So, while I had quickly identified the Department of Health as a promising context for my project, the real task of case selection was a matter of identifying where to focus my attention *within* the Department. How might I draw a line around a set of activities which could be called *policy-making*?

### Conceptualising policy-making

My first approach to conceptualising policy-making was to begin with the artefact of the policy document. Policy documents can be seen as critical technologies in the work of contemporary governing, serving as both a means and an end (Riles 2006) or a site and a product (Freeman 2006) of policy work; as well as depersonalising and objectifying the actions of government (Goody 1986; D. Smith 2001). Sociologist Michel Callon has also highlighted the relationship between documents and knowledge, arguing that it is the fact of having to produce documents in organisations which initiates and orders processes of 'collecting, constructing [...] and calculating information' (Callon 2002, p.191).

Although the *content* of policy documents is a common focus for policy analysis, very few researchers have examined how these documents are put together. I conducted a literature review of the ways in which articles in policy studies use policy documents in their research, finding that 96% of the 322 articles reviewed focused on the substantive content or the discourse in policy documents, rather than considering the processes by which they were produced (Freeman & Maybin 2011). In the same way that sociologist of science Bruno Latour calls on researchers to 'follow the actors' (Latour 2005, p.12), I intended to 'follow the document', taking its construction as my case. However, the difficulty of obtaining access for *ad hoc* fieldwork observations, let alone pursuing a document from start to finish, proved too challenging (see Fieldwork Access, below).

In fact, a consequential benefit of having to abandon this particular approach was that my data related to a wider variety of policy-making activities. In their study of mid-ranking Westminster civil servants, Ed Page and Bill Jenkins (2005) distinguished between three types of policy work in which their interviewees were engaged:

- **‘Production’** or ‘project’ work, which ‘produces some form of draft, statement or document. It is concerned with a one-off task, usually with a written document... as its final product’ (Page & W. Jenkins 2005, p.60), and in which ‘officials have direct responsibility for developing specific aspects of policy’ (2005, p.67).
- **‘Maintenance’** work, which involves ‘tending a particular regime or set of institutions – making or recommending day-to-day decisions about how a particular scheme or set of institutions should be handled... maintenance jobs have no end point’ (2005, p.60). This was sometimes referred to by the participants in my study as ‘programme’ work.
- **‘Service’** work ‘involves giving advice or other assistance to an individual or a body, usually on a continual basis’ (2005, p.60), such as a Minister, or an *ad hoc* committee or inquiry.

These categories offer an apt description of the range of different policy-making activities my participants were engaged in. The majority of interviewees described activities related to production work; some were involved in maintenance work; and a couple described their experiences of service work. My observations related to the first two categories only.

### Locating a policy-making community in the Department of Health

I needed to identify a community within the Department in which to focus my research. Although I was not ultimately able to follow the development of one particular document, I still found thinking about the process of the construction of policy documents as a useful way to draw a line around a set of activities which could be called ‘policy-making’. I used discussions with professional contacts and obtained internal directories and organigrams to identify the

Policy and Strategy Directorate as the directorate that was most frequently responsible for developing high-profile policy documents (strategy documents, green papers, white papers and legislation). The Directorate's role was described in the 2009 Departmental report as being 'to develop Departmental-wide policy and strategy, lead on health system reforms policy, and improve the Department's capability in strategy, analysis and policy' (Department of Health 2009, p.23).<sup>4</sup>

In terms of identifying points of interest within that directorate, I sought to incorporate variety, and managed to interview staff from five of the Directorate's six main groups (see Appendix A). Staff are also structured according to a civil service-wide grading system, which distinguishes between senior and non-senior civil servants (see Appendix A). Among the non-senior civil servants are two or three main groupings: mid-ranking 'policy leads' who sit just below the senior grades; and staff on lower grades, some of whom are on the fast-track training scheme. Though the majority of non-administrative staff are what I have loosely termed 'policy-making civil servants', the Department also has a small group (n.165) of professional analysts, made up of economists, statisticians and operations researchers (see Appendix A).

As I describe in more detail below, I included interviews with staff from a range of grades, though I focused the majority of my research on mid-ranking policy leads, who were sufficiently senior to be in charge of making daily decisions about work, but not so senior that they were focused on strategy or management and no longer engaged in day-to-day policy work. I interviewed

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<sup>4</sup> At this early stage in my research I also identified that staff from the Cabinet Office were sometimes directly involved in the same or similar high-profile policy documents on health policy. I included two staff from there in my early interviews, and although the findings from those interviews were not significantly different from those of participants from the Policy and Strategy Directorate (P&SD) in the Department of Health, it became clear these were two very distinct communities. I decided to focus my subsequent fieldwork in the P&SD, and in the following chapters I only draw quotes from the Cabinet Office interviews where they articulate well a finding which was also present in the main data from the Department of Health.

both policymakers and analysts, and analysts were participants in some (though not all) of the meetings I observed.

One of the many challenges of studying contemporary communities and their practices within organisations is that their structures and ways of working are often undergoing change. Following the election of the Coalition Government at the start of my fieldwork in 2010, the Department was entering a period of significant reforms, which would affect its responsibilities, structure and size (see Appendix A). This created considerable uncertainty for the participants. It also raised questions about how and where I should focus my attention at these changes progressed, and about whether the particular Departmental functions I was studying would continue to exist following the reforms.

As part of this reform programme, the Policy and Strategy Directorate was effectively disbanded midway through my fieldwork, though its constituent teams continued to operate in very similar ways, albeit under the umbrella of different directorates. I therefore continued to use this selection of teams as the loose frame for my data collection. It also became clear that although much of the Department's NHS-management and public health work was to be moved to new executive agencies and non-Departmental public bodies, the setting of national policy and strategy would, for the foreseeable future, reside within the Department (see Appendix A).

### **The case as outcome, as well as starting point**

In writing this chapter towards the end of my project, I am able to define my case as the knowledge practices of civil servants engaged in national policy development in the Policy and Strategy Directorate of England's Department of Health, during 2010-11. In terms of the construction of this thesis, I am also able to place this description prior to the account of my findings and analysis, implying a particular logical, chronological research process. But this conventional representation of the research process as beginning with the

identification of a case (or in interpretive terms, a community and its practices, language and artefacts) elides the iterative work that goes into establishing where the boundaries of the case lie, and what activities or which individuals within the case ought to be the proper focus of the research. Establishing working assumptions on these questions was essential to being able to start the fieldwork, but what followed was a continual process of using my emerging findings to reflect on whether my data collection strategies still made sense, and to adjust them accordingly. Being able to define the case, the community and its practices was an outcome of, as well as a starting point for, my research. As Robert Stake puts it, 'A case study is both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning' (Stake 1994, p.237).

## Generating Data

### Fieldwork access

Securing research access was a progressive process, in which the more I understood of the work of the civil servants and the world of the Department, the more successful I became at securing time with relevant individuals and observation opportunities. In turn, the more access I gained, the better I understood the Department and its work. Getting access was time consuming and laborious, and despite the virtuous learning cycle I can identify in retrospect, at the time of my field research, the opportunities I secured always felt *ad hoc* and precarious. My plan to follow the development of a single policy document from conception to publication proved over-ambitious in the context of the obstacles to accessing the Department and its work.

How and why is it difficult to conduct research in the Department? The closed nature of the Department manifests itself in a number of ways. One is the anonymity of its staff. While the names, job titles and email addresses of senior staff are available in the Civil Service Year Book published by The Stationery Office, as with other government Departments the identities and responsibilities of mid-ranking and junior staff are invisible to the outsider.

Secondly, the Department is secretive about the content of high-profile policies in development, and about the ways in which some policy decisions were reached. In a particularly strong example of this, the then Secretary of State for Health Andrew Lansley vetoed a decision by the Information Commissioner which would have forced the Department to publish an analysis of the risks associated with the Government's NHS reform programme. He did so on the grounds that publication of the 'health transition risk register' would undermine the 'safe space' in which civil servants are currently free to advise Ministers on policies, and that such internal documents would be 'open to misinterpretation and misuse' (Hansard 2012).

In this context I had pragmatic as well as ethical reasons to offer civil servants who agreed to participate in the study anonymity and confidentiality in relation to any policy content we discussed. I also decided not to audio record my first set of interviews. Perhaps because of these assurances, securing interviews with mid-ranking civil servants proved relatively unproblematic. Once I had managed to obtain an internal directory for the Directorate from a sympathetic contact, I was able to identify staff of the relevant grade working across the various groups of the Directorate, and emailed them directly. Of the 26 individuals I approached for an interview (including two staff in the Cabinet Office), 23 participated, with only two non-responders and one refusal. As I describe below, getting permission to observe meetings (let alone to conduct a detailed study of a particular policy in development) proved much more difficult.

Throughout my fieldwork, and particularly in these early stages, I collected internal and external documents as a further resource to help me to understand who to talk to, and how to ask about what I was interested in. These included internal directories and organigrams, staff newsletters and bulletins, and guidance documents; as well as publically available reports, including data on

the Department's size and make-up,<sup>5</sup> staff survey results,<sup>6</sup> the results of government reviews of the Department's performance,<sup>7</sup> and reports by academics, consultants and a former senior civil servant on the Department's ways of working.<sup>8</sup> I also read major policy documents which provided a backdrop to the civil servants' work at the time of my research,<sup>9</sup> as well as documents specific to the particular policy areas which were the subject of the meetings I observed.

My initial strategy for securing observations was to ask interviewees with whom I felt I had built a rapport whether I could attend any of their meetings. However, these mostly mid-ranking participants appeared distinctly uncomfortable at this request and none felt able or willing to agree. A number suggested that I ought to secure a senior sponsor in the Department, who could then instruct policy teams to grant me access to observe their meetings. Following this advice, I asked a senior work colleague with good connections in the Department to contact a senior civil servant in the Directorate on my behalf, setting out my hope to follow the development of a particular policy in some detail. This civil servant agreed in principle to discuss the possibility with me, but never returned my emails or phone calls. A second contact did offer a single day of observation with one team, but was not available to discuss the terms of my access, and so I treated the day as a pilot which provided me with vital background information, though not with data which I could cite directly.

The breakthrough in securing observations came twelve months after I had initiated the process. I had interviewed a senior civil servant and asked at the

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Civil Service (2010a), Office for National Statistics (2010).

<sup>6</sup> See Civil Service (2010b).

<sup>7</sup> Including by the Government Office for Science (2008), the Analytical Coordination Working Group (2008), the Civil Service Capability Review teams (Civil Service Capability Reviews 2007; 2009) and by the Department of Health (2012a).

<sup>8</sup> (See: Jigsaw Research 2009; Jarman & Greer 2007; Jarman & Greer 2010; Day & R. Klein 1997; Smee 2005; Berridge 1997; Berridge 2008; Alvarez-Rosete & Mays 2008; Page & W. Jenkins 2005; Rhodes 2005; Rutter et al. 2011).

<sup>9</sup> (Secretary of State for Health 2010; Department of Health 2010b; Secretary of State for Health 2011b).

end whether I might shadow him to any meetings. He suggested I would learn more from observing his boss. Although that individual was more senior than my target group, I took the opportunity to follow him to a number of meetings (which were also attended by mid-ranking civil servants) and, through building a rapport with this senior civil servant, I managed to secure an interview with him. I then used the interview to make my pitch, setting out my emerging findings and seeking to persuade him of why a more sustained observation was necessary to really understand the work of the Department. The interviewee agreed in principle to my following one of his teams to a number of meetings over the course of several months. Each meeting I observed with this team still involved a monthly chasing of the team's leader and awkward translations between what I was seeking to understand, and the kinds of meetings she thought I would find useful and/or was willing to invite me to.

Only when I had conducted my last observation, and my last interview, did the work of securing research access feel complete. The particular ways in which access was difficult, the advice I received from civil servants about how to secure observations, and the success of some of my strategies all provided further data about the Department and its ways of working. For example, some of the most reluctant interviewees were those with responsibilities relating to the Department's formal structures for knowledge use, which hinted at a tension between the organisation's 'espoused theory' and 'theory in action' (Argyris & Schön 1974). Mid-ranking civil servants who were professionally charged with considerable policy-development responsibilities did not feel suitably empowered to grant me observation access, which indicated the strength of the Department's hierarchy, and perhaps the strength of concern over preserving its reputation.

The difficulty I experienced in securing access to meetings, particularly internal meetings, compared to securing agreement to interviews, combined with other pieces of evidence to suggest that meetings were where the 'real work' gets done in this context; they would and could not be controlled for the purposes of

presenting a particular impression to an observer. Finally, the strategies that ultimately proved successful resonated with (and were informed by) the working practices of the civil servants. For example, I had to seek high-level sponsorship to make sustained observation possible (see Chapter 6), and I had to become a contact of an internal colleague in order for a potential high-level sponsor to give time and attention to my requests (see Chapter 3).

## Interviewing

### *Interviewee characteristics*

I conducted a total of 23 interviews: two with Cabinet Office employees working on health policy, and the remaining 21 with Department of Health staff. Of the Department staff, 8 were analysts and 13 were policymakers. In the following chapters, quotes are allocated a particular code; either DH or CO to indicate Department of Health or Cabinet Office; followed by P or A to denote policymaker or analyst; followed by a number to distinguish between the interviewees sharing those characteristics. So a quote by DHP6, is a quote by Department of Health policymaker, who I have labelled with a number 6 to differentiate her from other Department of Health policymakers.

Around half the interviewees were employed at mid-ranking grades (7 & 6); and the remaining half were split equally between senior civil servants (grade 5 and above) and more junior staff and staff on the fast-stream training programme. The vast majority of the Department of Health interviewees worked in what was then the Policy and Strategy Directorate, though two were working on high-profile policies in other directorates. The majority of the interviews were conducted between July 2010 and August 2011 (two were conducted earlier in November 2009 and March 2010); and most were conducted face-to-face (two were by telephone). Two thirds of the interviews took place in Department of Health buildings; the remainder were conducted at The King's Fund, at a university, in a café, and in the temporary place of work of a civil servant who was on secondment at the time of our interview. On average the interviews

lasted an hour; the shortest was 40 minutes and the longest 1 hour, 40 minutes (variations were dictated by the amount of time individual participants were willing and able to make available). In the case of two interviewees, our initial interview was supplemented by further follow-up conversations. Altogether I collected 28 hours of interview data.

### *Interview topics, structure and approach*

The interviews were semi-structured, and incorporated a range of more and less directive questions (Richardson et al. 1965). Through a process of trial and error in my early interviews, I developed a series of three open-ended questions which I used to structure each of the remaining interviews. These were orientated around (i) the participants' current roles and project(s); (ii) the roles and projects they had worked on (as civil servants) in the past; and (iii) the pattern of their working life in the three to four weeks preceding the interview. These were posed as 'I would like you to tell me about...', or 'could you talk me through...' questions. In the majority of interviews, at least one of these questions yielded an extended account of working practices. During these narrative-type responses, I was less directive in my questioning, encouraging the participant to continue with their description, or elaborate further with prompts such as 'yes, I see,' and 'can you tell me more about that?'

These longer accounts offered by interviewees were necessarily particular constructions of the events and practices they described, shaped by the interviewees' perceptions of my interest; the kinds of stories they were interested in telling; and their understandings of what constitutes a proper topic of conversation for research interviews. In Holstein and Gubrium's terms (1995), interviewees are not 'passive vessels of answers' needing to be 'tapped', but are 'active' meaning-makers in interview situations (1995, p.7). But although interviews are necessarily constructive occasions, they do nonetheless involve the communication of the 'what's' of social experience (Holstein & Gubrium 1995, p.5). The elements of the 'what' which are foregrounded or omitted may change across contexts, but there is still valuable 'content'

contained in the respondents' answers. In this way, responses to these questions helped me to gain a sense of the nature of the civil servants' work practices.

Responses to these more open questions also enabled me to learn the 'language' of the Department and its work; to observe what the participants presented as important or relevant to their work (and conversely, what was absent); and provided accounts of particular events or experiences which I could then use as anchor points for more directive follow-up questions. I used follow-up questions to probe the narratives in relation to my research interests: 'how much did you know about that issue when you began work on it?'; 'how did you get up to speed on that topic?'; 'why did you want to meet with that person?'; 'what did you take from that meeting?' and so on. I also developed a series of techniques for encouraging interviewees to describe mundane aspects of their practices and to reflect on the tacit logics that underpin their ways of doing things.

#### *Reflecting on practices through interviews*

Some of the defining features of practices, the boring detail of daily routines and the tacit nature of rules about how things are done, appear at first glance to be inaccessible to the interviewer, and in some cases, to the interviewee. How can individuals report on the activities that are so common to their daily activities they have forgotten that things might be otherwise? Even if they can recall them, they appear to make for a dull conversation and inappropriate interview material. And how can they describe the logics which organise these activities when the very definition of this tacit knowledge suggests it is not amenable to reflection and articulation? An active approach to interviewing provides a means of tackling these obstacles. For if the researcher recognises interviews as dialogues in which both interviewer and interviewee are jointly constructing meanings, then the researcher can use her role to 'activate, stimulate and cultivate' the interviewee's 'interpretive capability' (Holstein & Gubrium 1995, p.17).

I developed a number of specific techniques to engage interviewees in discussion about their practices. One was to ask them to bring to the interview a print out of their work calendar from the preceding 3-4 weeks; this provided a material point of reference for my questions about the patterns of their daily work. I also found that the specificity of the events described made such discussions more engaging for the participants, and seemed to be for them more legitimate topics for an interview conversation than equivalent conversations conducted in the abstract.

Another approach was to pose counterfactuals in response to descriptions of how projects had proceeded: for example, 'why do you think that needed to be a meeting not an email exchange? What would you not have got had you done it differently?' This opened up the possibility that these ways of doing things might have been otherwise, and encouraged reflection on why they were as they were. I also engaged interviewees in discussions about what constituted competence in their work through discussing the skills of particular colleagues. I would ask the interviewee to think of a colleague who they felt was excellent at their job, and then examine with the interviewee what it was about that person and his or her way of working which made them so. This seemed to yield more reflective and nuanced accounts than asking the abstract question 'what constitutes competence in your line of work?', which triggered semi-official responses based on the Department's espoused theory.

I also found it productive to focus on any periods of time that interviewees had spent away from the Department, through sabbaticals for example, drawing the reflexive benefits of this temporary estrangement to ask them about their experience of returning to their jobs: what had seemed strange, or difficult? What was just the same? Finally, in a number of interviews I used the end of the interview as a space for sharing my emerging findings, and seeking feedback on what 'sounded right', what did not, and why. I also provided a space for all participants to tell me about anything they thought was important to

understanding the role of knowledge in the Department's work, which we had not yet covered.

### **Recording data**

For the first eleven interviews, I took handwritten notes only because I felt that recording the interview would put off potential participants. However, it became clear that particular phrases were recurring which would be useful to collect for my analysis. Furthermore, in having to focus on taking notes, I lost eye contact with the interviewees for sustained periods of time, which in turn had the effect of reducing the energy and dynamism of the encounter. I decided to experiment with using a digital audio recorder, and found that it did not seem to adversely affect the interview (or my success rate in securing interviews), and that it left me free to focus on active listening and composing the next question. I used the audio recorder for all of the remaining twelve interviews, and supplemented this with hand-written notes made during the interview. In adopting an ethnographic approach to data collection, I was concerned to capture not only what was said, but also the ways in which things were said; the interviewee's facial expressions and the points at which they seemed to become more or less engaged, or more or less animated. After each interview I took notes on what had seemed significant or interesting about the encounter, and I supplemented these notes with new reflections when I transcribed the interviews.

### **Observation**

Drawing on my past professional interaction with civil servants, and writing on the nature of policy work (Noordegraaf 2000; Freeman 2006; Freeman 2008), I hypothesised that the work of civil servants would comprise desk-based work, and meetings. Since the former is very difficult to observe, and my early interviews together with findings from the evidence and policy literature had pointed to the importance of interactions for knowledge mobilisation, I focused my attention on observing meetings. I observed fifteen meetings in total. For five of these meetings I was accompanying different members of a single team to their various respective meetings during the course of a day; for three

meetings I was shadowing a particular individual to scheduled meetings on two different days; and for seven meetings I was accompanying the members of another policy team to their meetings on a particular programme over the course of six months.

Five of the meetings contained only Department of Health employees; all the others included senior NHS staff and/or civil servants from other government Departments. Three meetings also included individuals from the charity sector. The majority of the meetings were closed in the sense that invitation was strictly controlled; two were more open, insofar as initial invitees seemed to be free to forward the invitation to colleagues or others they felt should attend. Most of the meetings took place in Department of Health buildings; one was in another government Department; three were in external conference facilities; and one was a teleconference, which I joined remotely. The meetings lasted from 50 minutes to 5 hours, with most taking between 2 to 3 hours. Altogether, the observations comprised 32 hours of original data collection.

Although the content of the meetings ranged widely across different policy topics and types (incorporating both programme and project work), they tended to all involve the sharing of current activities or knowledge; the identification of links, tensions, or gaps between the various agendas or tasks being pursued by the respective participants; and commitments to develop new connections and share information further. In some cases, there was also a performance management component to the meeting; the teams or individuals I accompanied were responsible for co-ordinating or delivering a particular set of policies, and wanted reports of progress, and warnings of any risks that their colleagues might miss deadlines, go over budget or develop a policy in such a way that it could threaten the coherence of some overarching policy programme or commitment. Some of the meetings comprised groups which met on a regular basis by virtue of their responsibilities in relation to some medium or long term programme of work; others were *ad hoc* formations focused on a particular issue.

In addition to observing meetings, I sat in open plan offices between meetings; I shared lunch and coffee conversations with participants; I travelled to and from a number of meetings together with individual or small groups of civil servants; and, on one occasion, I accompanied civil servants to social drinks after a day of meetings. Waiting for interviews also offered an opportunity for observation, as I sat in the reception areas and staff cafes of various of the Department's London buildings, observing the physical surroundings, the kinds of people who came and went (their age, gender, dress, posture, demeanour), who they were (when they announced themselves and their meeting to receptionists) and how they spoke to one another when they met. During the course of my fieldwork I also attended three seminars, organised by the LSE, the Institute for Government, and the London Public Health deanery respectively, in which past and present Departmental civil servants gave talks and responded to questions on the nature of their work within the Department. This all provided supporting data.

Throughout the observations I took handwritten notes of what people said, how they said it, physical cues (a raise of the eyebrow, a frown, turning away from somebody and so on), as well as any initial interpretations of what I was observing. In line with anthropologist James Spradley's metaphor of the funnel (Spradley 1980), my early notes tried to incorporate as much as possible of what I was observing (necessarily summarising some exchanges, but being sure to include specific quotes which seemed important), while my later notes were more selective, and focused around fruitful avenues of data I was identifying through on-going analysis. I typed-up my fieldnotes within a few days of each observation, and kept a separate journal of reflections on the significance of my interpretations for the project as a whole.

In the following chapters, where a quote comes from an observation, it is labelled with 'Obs' followed by a number, to distinguish it from other observations.

### *Participation by proxy*

I was not *based* in the Department; mine was a form of what Wulff has termed 'yo-yo fieldwork' (2002). My position was perhaps closest to the observer-participant (Junker 1950 in Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, pp.104-7), or 'peripheral-member-research' (Adler & Adler 1994, p.380), who is present in activities (rather than watching from afar or through a one-way mirror), and interacts with participants, but is not a full member of the group. I was never one of the civil servants, but through my growing knowledge of how to behave and speak in that context, and through on-going exposure to confidential conversations, I achieved a form of partial-insider, or at least non-outsider, status.

The distinctive advantages of using observation lay in *seeing* the boring, routine, unnoticed nature of daily work practices with an outsider's eye. The undiscussable became visible; practices which go against official accounts of how things are done, which can be difficult to draw out in interviews, are to some extent laid bare. It is also significant that observing action and talk from a peripheral position is how the participants themselves learn to be civil servants (see Chapter 6); it is equivalent to the distinctive power of immersion when learning a language. Of course, the participants learn to be civil servants by *doing* as well as watching and, in that sense, my fieldwork was more limited.

But I do participate in another, related, professional context, through my work in a national health policy think-tank whose staff includes former Department employees. And that participative experience, which ran alongside my fieldwork, proved highly valuable in offering points of comparison which enabled me to refine my descriptions of the civil servants' practices, and to think through and develop hypotheses about their meaning and logic. This parallel experience offered a further point of comparison in the abductive process of developing understanding and explanation.

For example, during one meeting at work, my colleagues and I were discussing the potential impact of a new policy, when a senior colleague told a short story about the experience of staff in a hospital with which she was familiar. This contribution somehow closed down the conversation. Nobody commented further and the subject matter was changed. I had seen staff in the Department use stories in meetings which also seemed to enjoy a distinctive power in conversations. So I was able to reflect on why I did not feel I could contribute further to the conversation in my work meeting; this had been a story from the *real world* as opposed to the removed, more abstract worlds of policy and research and, as such, it trumped theories from these latter paradigms. Also, because it was relayed in terms of a personal experience, to interrogate the story was to challenge the authority of the teller. These provided me with working hypotheses about the role of such stories in Departmental meetings, which I was then able to explore and test out through subsequent interviews and observations.

#### **The benefits of combining interviews and observations**

The interviews and observations provided me with distinctive forms of data, but they were also directly complementary. The observations provided me with something to talk about in interviews (activities, events, processes, artefacts and so on); they gave me a toe-hold into a world about which I knew so little that, at the start of my fieldwork, it could be difficult to know how to formulate appropriate questions. The observations also enabled me to learn the Departmental language; its technical terms, its acronyms, and the colloquial phrases which civil servants used when interacting with one another. By using such terms in interviews, I was able to better articulate to the civil servants what it was I was asking about, and to establish a degree of credibility; I understood something about how things worked, and so was potentially worthy of their attention and deeper reflections.

In turn the interviews enabled me to ask about what was difficult to observe: writing practices and meetings with Ministers, for example. Also, although the

lone researcher can observe a meeting, once the meeting closes and the members disperse, she can only follow one individual or group. Interviews were an opportunity to ask what happens afterwards. As I described above, interviews also provided an opportunity to test how my hypotheses about the tacit knowledge that guides the practices I observed.

### Research ethics

The obstacles to accessing the Department meant that treating policy content in confidence, and anonymising the identity of participants when writing up the research, were prerequisites for being able to conduct fieldwork at all. But the very fact that the Department is so sensitive about revealing the nature of its inner workings also underlined the importance of offering adequate protection to participants, to ensure that they would not suffer negative professional repercussions as a result of their participation. The ethical case for protecting the confidentiality of policy content is less straightforward. Does the need for a 'safe space' for policy development, and the possible benefits of that space in terms of the relative effectiveness or fairness of policies, outweigh the interests of the academy and indeed the public in better understanding how policies are developed? This question is probably impossible to answer in the abstract.

In the case of my research, being able to demonstrate the impact of knowledge use in terms of the evolution of the content of particular policies would have added colour to my data, and would have been especially beneficial had I been able to observe in detail the development of one particular policy. It might also have allowed me to unpick how practices may vary depending on the characteristics of a policy issue. On reflection, I do not think including references to this material would have added greatly to, or indeed altered, the substance of my analysis. In any event, I could not have secured access without committing to treat any discussion of policy content in confidence, and the benefits of including such content in my analysis would certainly not have been sufficient to justify contravening the principles of informed consent.

The practical steps I took to fulfil my ethical duties to the participants included securing informed consent; securely handling data; and making appropriate redactions when representing the data in written work and presentations. For the purposes of informed consent, I provided interviewees and my lead contacts for observations with an information sheet in advance of the interviews and meetings, which detailed the purposes of the project as a whole and how it was being supervised and funded; the particular aim of interviews and meeting observations; and how I would record, store and use the data I collected, including how I would anonymise the data, and treat information about policy content in confidence (see Appendix B).

At the start of interviews, I checked whether participants had had a chance to read the information sheet, and if they had not, gave them time to do so. I then asked whether they were still happy to participate, checked whether they were happy to be recorded, and reminded them that they were free to withdraw their consent at any time during or after the interview. I then asked them to sign a consent form to record that these procedures had been followed, and that they agreed to participate on the terms set out in the information sheet (see Appendix B).

For meetings I used a process of administrative consent, by which the participant granting me access to a meeting or series of meetings was provided with the information sheet in advance of the meetings and asked whether they agreed to my observing on the terms set out in the sheet. This was confirmed over email. At the start of each meeting, I would introduce myself to the other attendees, setting out why I was at the meeting and making clear that I would not be reporting on identities or policy content. I made copies of the information sheet available (including my contact details) to all meeting participants and invited participants to approach me with any questions or concerns they might have about the research either during or after the meeting (though none did).

I also took a number of steps to ensure the security of my unredacted data. An index sheet containing interviewee names, job titles and contact details, as well as full meeting titles and locations was stored in a password-protected file on a non-networked computer in my home. All other electronic data relating to interviews and observations (audio files, transcripts, typed field notes) were labelled using assigned code names. Audio files were stored on my non-networked home computer, and transcripts and field-notes were stored as password-protected files on this same computer, as well as in a password-protected area of an on-line data analysis programme, Dedoose.<sup>10</sup> Hand-written interview and field-notes were stored securely in my home, and only analysed in that location.

For the purposes of presenting data in written drafts, presentations and in this thesis, all references to policy content which is identifying and/or not in the public domain; to individual and team identities; and any other information I considered to be potentially identifying has been redacted from quotes and descriptions. I have also protected the security of this information in informal conversations with participants (who often wanted to know who else I had spoken to), as well as in conversations with academic and work colleagues. In this thesis, I have sometimes replaced this redacted data with equivalent words or phrases to allow the original meaning of the quote to be clear. For example, the name of one city is replaced with the name of another. Replaced words or phrases are marked out with square brackets.

By taking these steps, my research complied with the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Studies Research Ethics Policy and Procedures (2008).

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<sup>10</sup> The creators of Dedoose claim that compared to other analysis software, theirs has a particularly rigorous security system. For further details see: <http://www.dedoose.com/Public/Terms.aspx#SECURITY> (accessed on 10 September 2012).

### Leaving the field

The shape of a doctoral project creates certain boundaries around the amount of time a researcher can spend in the field, but there is still considerable scope for discretion. After more than a year of interviews and observations, I experienced a form of saturation. Harry Collins aptly describes two indicators which tell a researcher that she has a reasonable grasp of the tacit knowledge of some community: 'Ceasing to commit *faux pas* during interactions with respondents ... [and] the nature of conversations ... if you can get them to listen to you seriously and interestedly when you discuss their subject that means you are getting somewhere...' (H. Collins 2001, pp.108–09). Answers to my interview questions became predictable. Interviewees were consistently responding positively to my emerging hypotheses. The meetings I observed had begun to feel normal; I was losing my *stranger-ness*.

### Analysis

The work of analysis is iterative and continual; there are moments at which it is made more explicit, and its processes and outcomes are codified, but such work draws on (and in turn informs) the on-going sense-making and interpretation activities of the researcher. There were two formal periods of analysis during my project; the production of a written account of emerging findings, approximately a third of the way through data collection, and the main phase of data analysis after I had completed my fieldwork.

### Early analysis

For my first analysis, I sought to group my data according to a series of detailed research questions I had developed following an initial review of the evidence and policy, and sociology of knowledge literatures; and my initial conceptualisation of my case as the production of a policy document (see Figure 2.1 Initial Detailed Research Questions).

**Figure 2.1 Initial Detailed Research Questions**

1. Who are policymakers talking to in seeking out knowledge on a topic? Through what processes do they come to talk to these people and not others? What are they seeking to achieve by the interaction?
2. What are policymakers reading to inform their work? Through what processes do they come to read these particular materials and not others? What are they reading them for?
3. How is knowledge that is gained elsewhere reported back to other team members? In what forms is it reproduced?
4. What are the sets of documents produced in the course of producing a public policy document – briefings, literature reviews, chapter drafts etc.?
5. What materials and which people are considered authoritative or persuasive, for which policymakers, in what circumstances and for which purposes?
6. How are different (and potentially conflicting) claims that have been identified as relevant reconciled by individual policymakers, and by the document-writing team as a whole?
7. How does the knowledge get re-represented in the policy document?
8. Who is involved in drafting the policy document? Who in editing, reviewing and ‘signing-off’?
9. Overall, how do the particular requirements of producing a policy document in this context shape these processes of knowledge identification, selection, interpretation, reconciliation and re-representation? Who do policymakers consider to be their audience?

Although some of these questions proved fruitful ways of organising my data (for example, understanding who policymakers are speaking to and what they are reading and why), the focus on policy documents no longer seemed

appropriate. Firstly, it was clear by this point that I was not going to be able to follow the development of a document in the way I had anticipated, which meant obtaining data for some of the questions became impracticable. Secondly, although the production of policy documents did organise some of the policy work of some of the participants, there was lots of work which fell outside these processes, and even for more document-focused tasks, there was a sense in which the document itself was not important for civil servants. A further tension between these initial research questions and my early findings was that the kind of know-that which I was interested in did not tend to feature in the interviewees' extended accounts of their work. It only emerged in response to my follow-up questions.

This initial analysis led me to set aside these detailed research questions, and refocus my attention to understanding first what policy-making seemed to be about for the civil servants, and secondly whether and how knowledge fitted into this account. This shift was critical in the development of my study. What was initially a source of tension and stress (they are not doing or talking about the things I am interested in), eventually prompted me to better see the world from their perspective (what is it that they are doing and saying?), and to analyse the role of knowledge in this context.

### **Main analysis**

For the main phase of formal analysis, I derived analytical themes abductively from the data. Guided by my broad research question about the role of knowledge in the civil servants' policy-making practices, I moved back-and-forth between different parts of the data; what I felt I had learnt in my experience of *being there*; the concerns and findings of the evidence and policy, and sociology of knowledge literatures; and my own professional experience.

At the end of each interview and meeting observation, I wrote a series of handwritten notes about what had been interesting or informative about that

particular encounter. I also kept a separate series of notes of my emerging interpretations and hypotheses about what I was learning and what it might mean. I used these two collections of notes to develop a long and chaotic list of ideas and themes. I then engaged in an iterative and lengthy process of grouping these ideas into fewer and fewer categories, and experimenting with how the categories worked individually and as a collection. This work involved grouping and regrouping, ordering and re-ordering, naming and re-naming themes on large pieces of paper and white-boards.

Strong contenders for themes were tested through conversations with my supervisor and presentations in research forums. Surviving categories were tested further through hand-coding sub-sets of data and attempting to write about the provisional themes using these excerpts. It was through having to articulate the themes in my conversations and writing that I came to see what I was trying to say, which echoes with ways in which the participants themselves often used interaction as a means to think through ideas, and test them out (see Chapter 4; I discuss this comparison further in Chapter 7). In each round, some themes worked, others did not and had to be abandoned or reformulated.

The chosen set of themes had to satisfy three different criteria. The first related to the sense of the Department, the civil servants, and their work, which I had developed experientially through the interviews and observations, which contained information and meaning beyond what could be captured in transcripts and observation notes. Did the themes capture or articulate what 'felt' important about the practices I had studied? What did they leave out, and did this matter? The second criteria related to my research question; did these themes individually and collectively offer an answer? Finally, I examined whether the themes enabled me to tell a coherent, analytical story, which met academic conventions for what doctoral-level, qualitative social research ought to look like. This involved asking a series of questions such as: Was there logic to the groupings and their combination? Were the categories sufficiently

distinct, or could overlaps be justified? Were they of a similar type, and did that matter? Did the parts add up to a meaningful whole; a 'thesis'?

Once I had a relatively settled set of themes that met these criteria, I coded all the data against them using Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis programme. My initial analysis had developed some rough sub-themes; I refined and elaborated these as I progressed through electronic coding, which required moving back-and-forth between transcripts and notes, revisiting the coded materials to add coding according to newly developed sub-themes. This full coding process also resulted in further refining the first-level themes. By using Dedoose to label interview transcripts and observation notes according to various characteristics of their source (interviewee grade, gender, role; meeting type) I was able to explore the distribution of themes against different participant and meeting types to identify any particular clusters or patterns.

I exported data excerpts by sub-theme, and used these to draft my results chapters. The framing and definition of these themes continued to be refined as I worked through writing accounts of the different themes; as I discussed them with other researchers and informal contacts in the civil service; and as I revisited the literature. The account to emerge is necessarily some combination of the understandings which guide participants' practices, and my interpretation of those practices and their meanings. In writing and rewriting the findings chapters, I revisited the literatures I had scoped, and explored new sources in an effort to elucidate the significance and meaning of these findings, and articulate how my data might refine and build-upon our existing understandings of the relationship between knowledge and policy.

This chapter has described the empirical and analytical work I carried out for this study. The remaining chapters set out the results of this work. In the next four chapters I describe my findings, organised around four themes. The ordering of these themes and their content reflects to some extent the chronology of my analytical journey. In the final chapter, I pull together these

findings to delineate three forms of knowledge and knowing characteristic of policy work in this context.

## Chapter 3 Knowledge Sources

*'We know who to talk to'. DHP6*

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When we talk about 'knowledge' in lay terms, we are usually referring to propositional knowledge: knowledge *that* something is the case. In this conceptualization knowledge is something like an object; it can be acquired, possessed and passed on. It must also have a topic: it is knowledge *about* something. This is the conceptualization of knowledge that has underpinned much of the literature on the relationship between evidence and policy, and which was implicit in some of my initial detailed research questions: 'Who are policymakers talking to in seeking out knowledge on a topic? Through what processes do they come to talk to these people and not others?' and 'What are policymakers reading to inform their work? Through what processes do they come to read these particular materials and not others?'

This chapter sets out my findings on these more traditional questions. It describes how civil servants often knew very little about policy issues when they first came to work on them, how they turned to people and texts to develop their knowledge. I describe the types of people and documents the civil servants drew upon, and explore how these selections were organised according to principles of trust and authority.

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## Overnight Experts

When the civil servants started work on a particular policy, they were typically entirely new to its subject area. They were often moving between policy areas at least every one to two years. This was especially true of those on the fast-stream training programme which institutionalises this type of regular and frequent movement between posts within the Department, but it was also the case for many of the mid-ranking civil servants I spoke to. For example, one mid-grade analyst who had started as a fast-streamer had been through six different postings within the Department in less than four years, working on a wide-variety of different subject areas:

JM: I'm interested in some work that you did where you started on the topic or project area and you really knew nothing about it before you started. I don't know which of your experiences might be the best example of that?

DHA4: Almost all of them.

More junior staff members have the support of their senior colleagues when starting out on new topic areas, but mid-grade and more senior civil servants described having to very quickly take on the full responsibilities of a 'policy lead' on a subject to which they were often completely new.

DHP12: [...] to be honest with you, when I moved to [this] post it was straight in, you know I was kind of drafting submissions [to Ministers] in the first week, so you really have to get your head around it.

Policy leads (typically on grade 7 or 6) are positioned within the Department as in-house experts on their particular area, and many were aware of the tension between this positioning, and their relative lack of knowledge at the start of their postings. Although they treated their fellow policy leads as knowledgeable, when the question of their own *expertise* on a policy issue came up in meetings or interviews, the civil servants always found a way of distancing themselves from the term:

DHP13: [...] I just have to convince them that I'm an expert {laughs}.

DHP12: [...] [us], the so-called policy experts in the area.

Civil servant: I'm no expert on [this area]... (Obs 7)

DHP9: [...] You know, we are not experts in many technical areas, actually, in fact, it doesn't even have to be technical.

One interviewee described how she felt particularly uncomfortable with this aspect of the role:

DHP11: People describing themselves as specialist when they've been in a job for thirty seconds. [...] That you can be moved post at the drop of a hat, and that you get dropped into something. And I think this is something to do with the confidence issue as well, of if you're dropped into a policy post, you're described as the senior policy lead for x, you need to engage with people who've been doing this for decades. They are the experts, but you're perceived as the expert, and you put yourself forward as the expert, and I, I can't get my head around that bit. [...] [Some] people almost adopt a persona on going into the post, they're there for a few briefs and all of a sudden, it's "yeah, I'm the expert world leader on this". No you're not!

The civil servants varied in the extent to which they found this positioning problematic, and in the strategies they adopted to manage the tension. Some used humour as we saw in the previous examples, combining references to their own alleged-expertise with a smirk or a raise of the eyebrows. Some told me that they were upfront with people about the limits of their own knowledge:

DHP12: I just think don't be afraid to say to people, "actually I don't know anything about this, can you help me out here, and can you do it quickly?" you know {laughs}.

Crucially, the civil servants had confidence in their abilities to get hold of the relevant issue-specific knowledge which they did not themselves possess, and having these skills seemed more important to them than possessing the substantive knowledge itself:

DHP12: [...] one of the nice things about the civil service is that actually the skills are more transferable than a lot of people recognise, quite frankly. They are transferable, and you get, you find yourself working on things that you think [...] “I don’t know anything about that”, but it’s not necessarily the knowledge base, because you can learn that, you can read up on that, the skills are fairly, as I said, transferable.

In fact a couple of the interviewees were positively disparaging about building up issue-specific expertise, seeing this as a symptom of staying in the same position for too long, which was represented as boring; as an indication that they had failed to progress in their career; or as stifling innovation in thinking. At least for some, ambition was synonymous with frequent movement to new subject areas:

DHP12: [...] I tend to get bored actually, a couple of years in post and you know, I like to move on, I like a fresh challenge.

DHP1: [individuals in the strategy unit] aren’t people with families who’ve been in their jobs for years – they are young and ambitious.

DHA8: I’m an economist by background but what I don’t want to do is what a lot of analysts in the Department have tended to do which is end up as a specialist in a particular area which kind of limits what they can end up doing in their careers. And that’s something I was quite clear I didn’t want to end up doing.

[...]

JM: You mentioned analysts developing specialisms. How does that happen?

DHA8: Umm {laughs}. It seems to be partly by accident, partly by apathy. There’s quite a few analysts in the Department, certainly some of the older ones who’ve been working in the same place for a number of years and they’ve developed a specialty there that the policy team then don’t want to do without, but, it’s not then stretching the analyst any more, they become very kind of “this is what we’re doing because this is what we’ve always done”, and they tend not to have the skills then to look at other areas. I think one of the things that the Department in general is looking at is trying to avoid that situation arising.

A senior civil servant echoed this last comment by DHA8 that the Department was moving to a model which would increasingly emphasise flexibility over established expertise in any particular area:

DHP6: [...] whereas we used to value craftsmanship, learned experience, we now value ability to change. And we’re in a strange position in the Department of Health where we have both of those at the moment, going on, shifting from the sort of craftsmanship towards the sort of change thing.

So if the civil servants often find themselves in the position of being a novice on a policy issue, how do they develop their subject knowledge? Where do they go to find this type of know-that?

### Formal Knowledge Resources

There is a series of formal structures and resources in the Department which seek to operationalize the commitment of past and present administrations to evidence-based policy-making. Two of these featured in the data: the Department of Health's Library and Information Service and the Department's Policy Research Programme, which funds and organises the commissioning of external research (see Appendix C).

Of the two dozen interviews I conducted in which I was asking participants to describe how they developed their understanding of a topic area, the library was only mentioned three times, and it was not referred to in any of the meetings I observed. None of the interviewees described using the library's 'DH Data' database of journal articles, official publications and grey literature themselves (though this is not to say they never did so). The three respondents who had used the library's literature-searching service described the labour involved in identifying the best search terms to give the library staff, and the challenges of generating meaning from the numerous results that the searches returned, which they found particularly problematic in the context of their tight deadlines. For example:

DHA4: [...] They find hundreds of pages of articles, then you just have to go through and kind of rationalise that into something do-able. And a lot of it's driven by the amount of time you have.

DHA5: Umm, DH has got a library, so if we need a wider search of something we can ask them and they'll pull out journal articles or things like that.

JM: And do you do that? Have you used that before?

DHA5: Yep, I've used that. Only once or twice in three years. [...]

JM: Why don't you use that more often? So why don't you use that every time?

DHA5: Umm, some... they're not knowledge experts so rather than knowing what each term means in your context, they will do a very good job and look up things [but] sometimes it's a bit too wide so they come back with lots of information and all you needed was one bit. That lots of information could be really useful but for the timescales we don't have time to trawl through it all.

DHP7: [...] we have a library within the Department so they can do a literature search for me as a starting point. And the, it's finding, it's an iterative, a sort of on-going process from there.

For the participants of my study, the library and information service was not a commonly-used source of knowledge and where civil servants did use it, they were still having to do much of their own work to identify what might be relevant to their task, both before and after the search had taken place.

Another resource the civil servants can draw on for formal research input into policy development is the Department's Policy Research Programme (PRP), which commissions (usually academic) research in response to requests from policy teams and, more recently, has initiated a series of contracts with 'rapid response facilities' based in universities, which policymakers can draw on for faster-turnaround research input (see Appendix C). The PRP received a mention by only two of the interviewees, though three others referred to commissioning research related to their policy area, which may or may not have been managed through the programme.<sup>11</sup> Evaluations were the most commonly described form of commissioned research and, in the interviewees' accounts, at least part of the purpose of these was to better understand whether a policy was having its intended effect. For example:

JM: What do you hope to get from what you've commissioned?

DHP8: Well ideally an understanding of the impact of its implementation in England or in parts of England to get an understanding of whether the impact it's had in [another country] was felt at all elsewhere.

An analyst described how, in the case of one particular pilot evaluation:

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<sup>11</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, in theory research could only be commissioned by civil servants through the PRP, but it was suggested to me that people could and did get around this by defining projects as something other than research, such as service audits.

DHA8: we'd be essentially buggered without [the research], because we are quite heavily reliant on it for a number of reasons. Firstly to work out whether this actually works or not. Secondly, to work out how to implement [the policy].

He went on to say that the PRP had enjoyed mixed success in the Department, and that, in his experience, the helpfulness or otherwise of such commissioned research depended on the nature of the relationship between the researchers and policymakers:

DHA8: I know the kinds of contracts the Department has had with research departments in the past have tended to work pretty well where the links are good, some of them tend to work substantially less well [...] where the links aren't so good, or whether there's a kind of disjoint between [them].

A number of interviewees attributed the apparently limited uptake and impact of the programme to the contrasting time-scales of policy and research work respectively: 'obviously the timeframes are really different. Two or three years and we want things next day. We haven't got that quite right' (DHP4). The more recent emphasis on the 'rapid response' function to be performed by the university-based 'policy units' commissioned by the PRP was seen as a positive development in terms of overcoming the time-scale issue, and because it held out the promise of enabling more direct interaction between the civil servants and the university-based researchers:

DHA8: But we've got, within all of those contracts, a 20% flexible resource type of thing, which I think is a very sensible thing to have. Because it means we can get external thinking and challenge or validation depending on what it might be.

DHP4: [...] what we want, and what we're moving towards, is having access to academics. What policymakers want is access to their judgement and human capital. If they've been thinking about this for years, we want to know what they think.

At the time of my fieldwork, this rapid response function was only just starting to be advertised and nobody I spoke to had had experience of using it. But this desire to have access to people, rather than research reports, when seeking out knowledge was a powerful theme running through the data. So if the formal research resources of the library service and the PRP received few mentions by

civil servants, and a mixed response from those who did describe using them, what knowledge sources were the civil servants drawing on in the course of their daily work?

### People as Knowledge Sources

The principal forms in which knowledge about policy issues was mobilised in this context was through interactions between people, and the reading of documents. As one civil servant put it:

DHA4: all of my knowledge is the product of speaking to doctors and professors and academics and you know, reading, essentially.

*People* transpired to be the dominant source for this type of knowledge among the civil servants I spoke to. There were some exceptions to this, some participants (more often analysts than policymakers) liked to read themselves into a subject first, then go to speak to people. But for most others, when they needed to understand a new topic area, they would start, and continue their knowledge development by speaking to people:

DHP13: Like everything we do it was sparked by government or others saying “we should do something for [this social group]” or whoever. And our task is to think, what are the things you can do in order to do it? So then you have discussions with [people from that group] and other [government] Departments and build up the knowledge as you go along.

JM: So when you were given this piece of work, how did you familiarise yourself with what the issues were, what needed to be done? What were the kinds of things you were reading, or people were you talking to?

DHP8: Well fairly early on we made a visit to [Liverpool] to see what was happening there and understand a bit about how things worked in [that part of] their hospital and how it worked in practice. Some discussions with other officials [in the Department] who had had some kind of involvement with the bits of work that had happened at an earlier stage. You know the fact that this guy [Joe Brown] in the South East had done some stuff on it meant that we, I think at a fairly early stage had some kind of initial meeting with him.

DHP1: The first thing I did was ring all the big academics, because I’m interested in academia [...] I spoke to a few people, finding out what’s going on. I actually went to visit an amazing professor in [the west].

DHP11: [...] this is a classic policy development role that I've not done before. So I am very terrified. Very much wanting to use all of my contacts, not only in the Department but also [from outside] to inform and build that thinking.

### Internal contacts

One of the most striking characteristics of the civil servants' work practices was the extent to which they drew on one another for their knowledge of policy issues. When I asked interviewees how they 'got up to speed' on new topic areas, they frequently referred to conversations with fellow team members and their immediate predecessor. As their work progressed they would draw on other policy leads or analysts in the Department who were either technically responsible for a particular policy area, or who had developed expertise through their time spent on a particular topic. I put this observation to a senior civil servant:

DHP6: [...] absolutely, that's how the Department works, we know who to talk to. When I need to talk about, I don't know, heart disease, I don't go and think "who do I go to outside?", I go straight to the heart disease team. Mostly, 95% of the time, they will tell me what I need to know, the other 5% they will go and access it for me. So that's the way it works, internal networks. But I think it's a really interesting observation, because we worry so much about where we get the expertise from and we probably worry too much about that. You know, we have it, or we have access to it.

Internal policy leads, and individuals who had worked for sometime on particular subjects, were treated as something like human filing cabinets on a topic; they were the first point of reference for knowledge on an issue. During meetings, when civil servants decided that they needed more knowledge on a particular area, rather than agreeing that one of them would read-up on the issue, they would invariably decide to invite someone from the Department with the relevant responsibility or experience to contribute to the next meeting.

Policy leads would also be spoken about as if they were synonymous with their topic area. For example, in one meeting I observed, a participant mentioned foundation trust hospitals and queried how they would relate to the issue in hand. A colleague replied, 'that's not around this table' (Obs2). That phrase seemed to denote both that the policy lead for foundation trusts was not part of

this particular working group, *and* that the policy area itself was not one that was an explicit part of the working group's remit or programme. In this way, the policy lead and the topic area for which they were responsible, were sometimes talked about as one and the same thing. These practices stood in tension with the fact that policy leads were often relatively new to issues and recognised the lack of their own issue-specific expertise (as described earlier).

Although using internal colleagues as sources for such knowledge was very common, identifying these internal contacts who were not immediately related to a particular policy team took work on the part of the civil servants, and involved drawing on informal peer networks. For example:

JM: How did you know who to talk to?

[...]

DHA4: It was about, umm, kind of networking, so I tended to network through my analytical colleagues, who I have quite a wide sort of network of, to find out who the right people in policy to speak to are. So I kind of go a bit backwards, because policy leads would often speak to policy teams to find out who the analysts are, rather than vice versa [...]. So then that's how we sort of generated names [of policy leads]. And then where you, where we couldn't identify people through people that we knew, it was just a process of searching through, we have a big directory that gives people and their responsibilities.

DHA6: I think in terms of some of the peer networks you have, it's kind of informal, so it will depend on whether you have links to other analysts and other policymakers in the Department whether you can actually get access to that [information] or not.

JM: In terms of internal people, how did you know who it was who had done stuff? How did you know who to go and ask?

DHP8: Erm... that's probably quite a good question. I think that, probably a fair bit of it relied on the recollection of particular individuals. So like [my director] will remember having had quite a lot of involvement in [that type of] work generally [...] So I think it was probably, probably just, I don't think it happened systematically that we were necessarily aware of what had taken place beforehand, just the links between different people. So I think because of the way the Department works, it's not likely that there would have been other bits of work going on that we would never have found out about because... but I suppose it's not impossible.

One civil servant described how she would learn of others in the Department working on related topics through mutual external contacts:

DHP2: We communicate with each other often through third parties. That's how you find out what's going on elsewhere in the Department, when someone you're speaking to outside says, "Have you spoken to so-and-so? They're working on this".

The downside of having internal colleagues act as holders of issue-specific knowledge, and one of the reasons they can be difficult to locate, is that they move jobs. This might be part of the reason that the internal directory was seen as a last resort for civil servants seeking to identify relevant colleagues. Furthermore, the potential for the Department to 'lose' the knowledge that such individuals held was a salient issue at the time of my fieldwork, as the Department was embarking on a radical reduction in size in line with the political commitments of the coalition Government (see Appendix A). For example:

DHP8: [...] there are people in my team for example who left in March. And I think we probably do get a bit, you know, there were hand-over notes and things like that, but definitely a lot of the knowledge and experience is kind of, sometimes, just is lost when it happens, certainly, or you don't think very much about the transfer.

JM: That's all my questions. I don't know if there's anything else you want to say to me, if you've felt, she should really understand x if what she's interested in is knowledge and how it works in the Department?

DHP7: I think maybe the knowledge management thing is the trickiest to get your head around because it is, we're constantly told it's really important, especially as people are leaving as they are at the moment. You know about the admin-funded and programme-funded workers and that sort of thing. And there's people also going on voluntary severance schemes as well. So when they leave, they obviously take some knowledge with them. And if you haven't got that, or they've filed it in a strange way, then you almost have to start again which is no good for anybody and is a waste of money.

DHP13: When stuff comes in from [this academic] say, on mental health, I don't know how to interrogate it so I take it to [James] in mental health. But [James's] job isn't going to be there anymore so I don't know what I'll do then {shrugs}.

A couple of the interviewees took the view that the changing size and role of the Department would mean that in future its staff would have to become more reliant on external sources of knowledge.

## External contacts

In addition to speaking to their colleagues, the civil servants were also regularly using contacts with external people to develop their knowledge of topics. These included individuals from the following groups:

- Official clinical advisers
- Department-appointed committees or working groups with a specific remit, or who provide a generic sounding board for policy development. These groups comprise individuals from a range of backgrounds, for example, in one case: ‘clinicians, a lawyer, ethicist, patient representatives, charity representatives’ (DHP9)
- Other government Departments, and non-Departmental public bodies, such as the quality regulator
- Professional representative or membership organisations, such as the British Medical Association, the Royal Colleges, the NHS Confederation and the Local Government Association
- Academia
- Health policy think-tanks, such as the Nuffield Trust and The King’s Fund
- Patient charities, such as Diabetes UK and Rethink
- NHS staff, including GPs, hospital staff, and commissioners
- Third-sector service provider organisations.

Outside of formal public consultation processes (described in Chapter 4), members of the public and individual patients did not often feature as contacts for these types of issue-specific knowledge-gathering conversations. One civil servant with a specific policy-making improvement remit in the Department told me that his colleagues ‘often [...] lack the confidence to contact stakeholders, particularly service users, patients and staff; the people affected by the policy’ (DHP5). However, Chapter 4 illustrates how one-off contacts with front-line services, through personal experiences or professional site visits often had a profound impact on civil servants’ understandings of an issue.

So how did the civil servants come to speak to those external individuals they did converse with? How were they identified? A couple of interviewees mentioned using formal mechanisms: a funded programme to bring together

academics from a London university with policymakers in the Department (DHP4), and the Department's established expert working groups (DHA4). But by far the most common way of identifying or selecting people to speak to was by past personal contact, or 'contacts of contacts'. More senior interviewees in particular would describe, for example, personally knowing 'some of the main authors' (DHP4) of research papers, as a result of their experience in that field, or being able to visit a particular type of hospital 'through a friend' (DHA1). Most of the interviewees identified people through the recommendations of colleagues within the Department, and sometimes of other external contacts. The following account was typical:

DHA6: I reckon actually usually it's a case of getting [contacts] from asking other people. Because it's the sort of whole six degrees of separation. It doesn't take many people – if there's someone worth talking to, someone will probably know. And that's the way I would do it. Always that. Which is basically just asking people, "who else might be good to talk to about this?" And there's obviously, cause there's a lot of people in DH who know, you know, people like [Dan Jones], just like knows pretty much everyone in [public health], you say "I really need to talk to someone like this, who do you think might be a good idea?" And even if they're not the best people they'll then be, you'll then speak to them and they'll say, "ah, who you should be really speaking to is..." So it's lots of, it's kind of personal contacts, I think.

In the meetings I observed, I saw first-hand this practice of sharing contacts:

Civil servant 1: We've been down a number of blind alleys, this has taken us too long.

Civil servant 2: Is there someone we should be bringing in too?

Royal College representative: Regulators, the HPC, their chief exec [...] and head of legal [...]; and [a local part of the NHS]. I wouldn't speak to [x] because they're just a Quango. (Obs 6)

Charity director: We're looking for guidance on who the key organisations are that we should be keeping in touch with. So we'd like input on that. We've got a list of third sector groups that we'll give you.

Civil servant: Be really good to get that so that we can feed it in. We can probably add to it. (Obs 8)

Being well connected, in the sense of having lots of contacts both within and outside the Department, was seen as a real asset in terms of career progression in the Department. Individuals described how they or colleagues had been moved on to particular projects because of the contacts they brought with them,

and an analyst described, how having the skills to develop such relationships, could impact on a civil servant's standing in the Department:

DHA8: [Establishing internal peer networks] comes down to the personalities involved, so some people are very good at doing that, others won't be. So a lot of people who are good at that will, well they'll tend to be the more sociable, but they'll also tend to be the people who then do better in their career because they can kind of bring in thinking from elsewhere.

One effect of civil servants using this networking approach to identifying external contacts is that they are drawing their knowledge from a common group of individuals and organisations. The civil servants were sometimes made acutely aware of this fact when they found that somebody they approached had already been contacted by other parts of the Department in recent months. The civil servants found such experiences embarrassing and worried about the negative impact on the Department's reputation; that people would see them as uncoordinated. For example:

DHP6: [the head of this patient charity had] had four different letters from people working on [this policy] [...] that said "why don't you come and talk to us about [it]?" And they were picking on people that they'd heard of [...] it just seemed uncoordinated.

DHP11: At the same time as we've just announced the Future Forum they're also going to announce a whole series of work streams around the future of social care and how we deliver the white paper, so they've done a similar thing to what we did with the [x] strategy, but there will be more work streams [...]. And I'm desperate that we bring all of that stuff together in terms of the engagement, because I do not want to go out and have a conversation and find out that they had someone from social care the day before and have someone from public health the day after, all asking the same questions!

The default method of identifying people to speak to also ran into particular problems when it came to efforts to formally engage the public and patients in policy-making (an approach which has received a renewed political emphasis under the coalition Government), as this exchange at a meeting of civil servants and senior regional NHS managers demonstrates:

Participant 1: I don't think we're reflecting enough on how to engage the public. I'm not sure who that is.

Participant 2: We've just done it in the way we always have, getting people in a room.

Participant 3: But lots of people will be going out there and there could be overlap and confusion. Some people could get over-exposed.

Participant 2: I could share the core groups and individuals we used for this with others?

Participant 4: There's a difference between engaging with the well-known groups and with the true running public. (Obs2)

Having to speak to people who are in part defined by their lack of connection with the world of policy-making posed a distinctive challenge to civil servants, whose contacts with external individuals when developing knowledge of a topic are so often organised through personal links and contacts of contacts. This may also explain the comment by DHP5 earlier in this chapter about the civil servants lacking 'confidence' in contacting front-line staff and members of the public; unlike most of the civil servants' interlocutors, these individuals are completely unknown quantities. They did not come with the prior approval implicit in a recommendation by an acquaintance. I return to this theme in the discussion at the end of this chapter.

### **Insider/outsider boundaries**

In this section I have distinguished between *internal* and *external* contacts, as a way of organising the data, and to emphasise the extent to which the civil servants drew on their colleagues within the Department for their knowledge. The cleanness of this distinction and the connotations that it carries (for example, that internal contacts are known and familiar while external individuals are strangers) belies the more complex nature of the civil servants' professional relationships in practice. For example, some analysts seemed to have semi-outsider status in terms of their relationships with policymakers, and other groups, such as part-time clinical advisers, seemed to straddle the insider/outsider boundary. It was also the case that the civil servants developed close working relationships with particular outside contacts, whom they spoke to far more often than many of their insider colleagues.

However, the distinction is helpful in this context insofar as having insider status denotes those who may be *in the know*: who understand what policy-making is *really* about, and who can be trusted with sensitive information about policy development. Being a Department of Health or government employee is often necessary (if not sufficient) to qualify for treatment as an insider. Here is an example of a senior civil servant acknowledging the importance of this boundary:

DHP6: There's a question about whether we treat other [government] departments as stakeholders. My view is you shouldn't because we're all part of government so we should act as government, but we don't {laughs}.

JM: Yes, in practice is it very different to going out to talk to someone like The King's Fund.

DHP6: Well actually it is different, because [...] we have a complete interlocking set of relationships and I, so I can pick up the phone to a dozen people across Whitehall and speak very freely with them about an issue, in a way which I'd have to be much more guarded with external partners, for obvious reasons, issues of confidentiality and things.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I explore in further detail this notion of the *real* nature of policy-making and its implications for knowledge use.

## Documents as Knowledge Sources

### Internal documents

After people, documents were the other principal source of issue-specific knowledge for the civil servants. An important part of the knowledge they needed about any given topic was an understanding of past and present Department policy relevant to the issue. This partly explains the extent to which the civil servants drew on their internal colleagues to gather knowledge. This was also reflected in the kinds of documents the civil servants described drawing on when they first learnt about a topic. When the participants did refer to reading documents, these were very often documents produced by the Department (either published or internal documents) about existing policy. Here are some examples:

JM: So when you knew you were going to have to do this role, what did you do to try and get yourself up to speed on where things were at – assuming you didn't know much about [the policy area] at that stage?

DHP9: Erm, we read the white paper, I looked at the impact assessment although I have to say to you I skimmed that {laughs}. I was particularly interested in the consultation.

DHP12: Umm, the [executive officer] had actually printed a load of stuff out at the request of the [senior officer] that was on the team, because she was trying to prepare me [...].

JM: What sorts of documents were they?

DHP12: A lot of it was stuff off the internet, off our website, basically, because bearing in mind it's, I was lead to the whole policy area, you know, it's kind of getting me up to speed on what had happened within the Department before. You know, what the current position was, any commitments we'd made.

JM: [...] And you said that when you first started work on the consultation document you were given information, so some of it was already there. [...] What kind of form did that take, what kind of information did you have?

DHP7: Erm, I suppose it was sort of the policy documents which go back to the last sort of five, ten years or so and there was a, call it a strategy, which ministers had signed off about these three different options basically. So that was my starting point. Obviously.

There had almost always been some kind of previous government policy on the issue<sup>12</sup> and understanding the preceding *policy* on that topic, as opposed to the topic itself, was a key starting point for the civil servants in learning about a new issue. This could have been otherwise: learning about the health impact of alcohol and available research on how that might be minimised would be a very different knowledge endeavour to learning about the government's previous policies on the issue. The fact that the civil servants often started with the latter then frames what they see as their task, and colours everything they might subsequently learn about the topic. This hints at a basic but crucial characteristic of policy work, which is critical to understanding the use of knowledge in this context: this work is not, or at least is never solely, a matter of technocratic-style problem solving. I attend to this issue in Chapter 6.

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<sup>12</sup> Two participants were able to think of one example each of a policy area in which they felt the team had really been 'starting from scratch', but both said these were cases were unusual in that sense (DHA1, DHP1).

One approach I adopted to try to identify the kinds of document-based knowledge sources that civil servants used in their daily work was to ask some of the participants about the documents that they had sitting on their desktops (both physical and electronic), or in their email inbox, in the week in which I was interviewing them. Again, Departmental documents dominated in the participants' responses, though in this context the documents were sometimes internal documents about policy in development, as well as recently published policy documents. The subject matter of the documents referred to was also sometimes broader in scope than the documents the civil servants had used to 'get up to speed' on their issues, relating to other aspects of the Government's reform programme, rather than narrowly to the civil servants' areas of responsibility. For example:

DHA8: I've got quite a few different roles in the team at the moment, so there are a few documents [I] quite regularly [refer to]. So the Bill I'll come back to and the Bill impact assessment I'll come back to quite a lot. The stuff that's kind of attached to that around what information we had to support all of that stuff I'll come back to quite a lot, and then some of the other Bill related documents, the explanatory notes, that kind of thing, the briefing especially.

DHP8: At the moment there's a lot of policy papers on things like public health and NHS reform. I don't necessarily get them directly but they'll come via maybe [my director] or [deputy director] and we'll get the latest update paper on the Public Health Outcomes Framework or the consultation or the Command Paper [...], or bits of how the NHS Commissioning Board mandate will work so lots of general things like that.

DHP6: I think I get around two hundred emails a day, which is quite a lot. [...] I always think, should I be seeing less of this sort of stuff? And actually quite a lot of it is about knowing what's going on. You feel out of it if you don't know what's going on. And I think that's really important.

So as well as understanding past policy in their particular area, the civil servants were also engaged in seeking to know about the development of other policies in the Department, particularly around the Government's reform programme. As I will describe in Chapter 6, understanding the latest developments in an evolving policy programme is critical to the civil servants' efforts to secure approval and influence for their particular area of policy.

## External documents

Although internal documents dominated in civil servants' descriptions of their work, and indeed in the papers circulated at the meetings I observed, some of the interviewees also described drawing on external research documents. These included peer-reviewed journal articles; research papers and reports from academics, Parliament and Quangos; and 'think-piece type papers' (DHA8) from think-tanks. I asked interviewees about how they identified relevant resources. A number mentioned searching the internet for literature, including using Google and Google Scholar for an initial search, and then using a snowball referencing strategy (following references in each document identified) to identify further sources. One policymaker with an academic background said that he kept on top of 'what research is telling us' in part by checking recent editions of particular journals (DHP4). The civil servants described selecting specific documents from these searches on basis of their authorship:

DHP12: [I will look at it] if it's another government website or [...] [an] organisation, you know, that I just know is a player in the field.

However, a number of respondents emphasised that the range of information available varied significantly depending on the topic area you were working on and relevant knowledge was often scarce. Selecting from a range of resources was a luxury they did not always enjoy:

DHA5: Often what you're looking for is really quite specific so what evidence there is you have to kind of say, well it's better than nothing [...] We rarely have the choice of going "oh we'll we're [going to] pick and choose what evidence to take".

By far the most common way in which the civil servants identified relevant documents was through hearing documents mentioned, or having them recommended, by colleagues or other contacts:

DHP12: [...] so the question was how do I identify [reading] wasn't it? Yeah. Line manager, colleagues, a lot of colleagues would say you know "have you come across this yet, have you seen this whatever?" Umm, email trains a lot of the time. They'll refer to things or they might not, they'll kind of say "oh and the so-and-so-report says this". And you'll think, "what's the so-and-so report?", you know. You have to kind of follow the lead if you like. [...] Going to meetings where people mention things you know, often you know you just write it down, go back and look it up. [...] And actually I think just talking to people and asking them what it is you should know.

DHP2: I didn't have time to do lots of desk research or start from scratch. I pulled out things [...] that the working group suggested were important.

DHA5: And hopefully start thinking about, okay, so we need to analyse these [...] is there going to be any information the policy team will be able to provide? Have they got any contacts, or sources of data or references? Quite a lot of them will know, you need to go to this, this and this document.

Civil servant: [Tom] in a former life worked in the [Food Standards Agency] and remembered a review in [1995] that's well worth a look. I'll circulate. (Obs11)

## Summary

In line with the conclusions of empirical studies of evidence use by health policymakers, and with theoretical accounts of knowledge as realised in practice, interactions with other individuals seemed to be key for knowledge mobilisation. People were the 'go to' source when civil servants wanted to develop their knowledge of a topic and, even when civil servants were drawing on documents for their knowledge, the selection of these documents was usually organised through people: mentions and recommendations of texts in conversations and meetings; and choosing internet search results on the basis of trusted authors. In this context, the civil servants developed their knowledge of a policy issue through networks of individuals and documents.

Furthermore, in the context of commissioned research, it was the character of interactions between researchers and policymakers that could determine the success or otherwise of research contracts, and the civil servants were eager to

secure the 'human capital' of researchers through real-time interactions rather than long-term and paper-based research commissions.

These findings have also drawn attention to the dominance of internal contacts and Departmental documents as knowledge sources. In the following discussion, I draw on insights from sociology and organisation studies to consider how and why the civil servants prioritised some knowledge sources over others. In the next chapter, I take up the theme of interaction, setting out the different kinds of meetings in which knowledge was mobilised, and how, and why.

## Discussion

Documents are selected because they are past policy documents; because they are recommended or mentioned by colleagues or contacts of contacts, or referenced in other familiar documents; and because they have been written by other government agencies or recognised 'players in the field'. In terms of speaking to people, the civil servants similarly start with immediate colleagues, and branch out to the contacts of those colleagues and to other personal external contacts; extending to contacts of contacts, and sometimes 'big' names or the 'main authors' in academia. These practices seem to be organised according to two characteristics belonging to the presenter or author of the knowledge in question: their proximity, or connectedness, to the Department; and their perceived authority within the field in question.

### Cognitive proximity

Why did the civil servants go to colleagues, or to contacts of colleagues, for their knowledge? Why was this type of proximity a criterion for selecting between potential knowledge sources? One possible explanation can be drawn from studies of organisational learning, which, building on Simon's concept of 'bounded rationality', emphasise the extent to which comprehensive

information searches are time-consuming and costly. Authors in this field have described the tendency of organisation members to draw on what is familiar, and cognitively (if not spatially) proximate; something Cyert and March referred to as 'local' rather than 'general' scanning (Cyert & March 1992, p.61).

More generally, theories of communication suggest that we find it easier to communicate with people who share similar frames of reference to us; in Basil Bernstein's terms (Bernstein 1971), when the civil servants are conversing with one another, they can use 'restricted' language codes, which are relatively short, and take for granted (and indeed re-make) shared understandings and meanings about the world they reference. By contrast, when communicating with outsiders, the civil servants must be more explicit and detailed in their communication, using 'elaborated' codes which make it possible for the outsider to understand what it is they are saying. There may be a sort of ease and efficiency in talking to colleagues who share a similar frame of reference, which is absent in conversations with outsiders.

But I would suggest there are two important additional reasons for the civil servants to implicitly favour individuals and documents located within their own environment, which are specific to the policy-making context. The first concerns trust. At a time when negotiations are delicate, the civil servants cannot be open about policy in development with people who are minded to share the information they receive more widely, or use the information themselves to damage the Department's reputation, or sabotage the policy's progress. This trust is not assumed, but rather has to be earned. Being a close colleague who also has an interest in the policy's success and the maintenance of the Department's reputation, or being a contact of such a colleague, provides the civil servant with grounds for being able to speak openly with that person; hence the reliance on contacts-of-contacts for identifying outsiders to speak to.

Another reason the civil servants spent a considerable part of their time speaking to colleagues and reading internal documents is because of a

perceived need to understand past policy relating to their topic, and other current policies in development. Hugh Heclo identified a similar phenomenon in his research on social policy-making in Britain and Sweden (Heclo 1974). He found that the civil servants he studied used past policy to draw analogies with current situations, which helped them to establish 'a path through the immense complexity facing social policy makers' (1974, p.316). This is reminiscent of Lindblom's account of incrementalism (see Chapter 1) in which, through a process of classification, administrators subsume 'one experience under a more general category of experiences' (1959, p.87).

But in addition to this practical function, past policy also had a more substantive relevance; those policies had shaped (and continued to shape) the environment within and upon which the policymakers were seeking to act. Heclo puts this in vivid terms:

In both its self-instruction and self-delusions, the cobweb of socioeconomic conditions, policy middlemen, and political institutions reverberates to the consequences of previous policy... in a vast, unpremeditated design of social learning.  
(1974, p.316)

In fact we might understand past policy as reverberating through the environment in two significant senses. First, it affects the world upon which the civil servants are seeking to act; the NHS may still be implementing the last government policy on commissioning, and part of understanding the current state of affairs requires understanding that which is being implemented. Second, it shapes the more immediate political and policy environment within which the civil servants are acting. As I describe in Chapter 6, the civil servants needed to show how their policy linked to existing and emerging policies to secure its passage, influence and success.

### **Contacts of contacts as *weak ties***

Although the use of 'contacts of contacts' by the civil servants seemed, in one sense, to serve as a substitute for cognitive proximity and trust in the process of

identifying sources of knowledge outside the Department, another way of looking at such relationships is as an example of 'weak ties' which, in fact, link civil servants to different and potentially innovative sources of information and knowledge (Granovetter 1973; 1983). Writing in the 1970s on the diffusion of information through social networks, sociologist Mark Granovetter identified the 'strength' of particular kinds of so-called 'weak ties' for explaining the bridge between micro and macro social patterns of information sharing.

In Granovetter's theory, the relative strength of a social tie is defined by the amount of time two individuals spend in contact; the emotional intensity and mutual confiding involved in that contact; and the reciprocity of the services they offer to one another (1973, p.1361). Strong ties tend to be concentrated within a group; if you have a strong link with an individual, they are likely to have strong links with others in your group; weak ties on the other hand 'are more likely to link members of *different* small groups' (1973, p.1376), with the advantage that those individuals 'are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we receive' (1973, p.1371). Particular weak ties provide 'bridges' across network segments (1983, p.229); and conversely 'individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of close friends' (1983, p.202).

Granovetter's account is a reminder of the way in which using a contact of a contact, or at least, a contact of that contact-of-a-contact, can in fact lead to conversations with people who are significantly removed from the world of the Department. This potentially opens up the kinds of knowledge, experience and mindsets the civil servants are drawing upon to those beyond the immediate community of the Department. Significantly, weak ties, are still *ties*, of some form (they are not *non-ties*), and they thus still offer the civil servants some grounds for trusting that their interlocutor will not use the information they share to sabotage policy formulation efforts. But by definition, this trust is not as strong as it is with those with whom the civil servants have strong ties,

principally their close colleagues. This trust also offers a basis for being able to use (rather than doubt or question) the information that contact may offer. In their study of civil servants in the UK Treasury in the 1970s, Heclo and Wildavsky found that trust was the 'single most dominant theme' in all of their interviews (1974, p.61). They concluded that:

Treasury officials are able to do their jobs because there are relationships of trust. By their own account, the most important skill Treasury people learn is "personal trust and where it should be put". "This is necessary," as an undersecretary says, "because you are dealing with such an enormous amount of material that you can't possibly know the whole field. You get a feeling as to who is telling you the whole truth".  
(1974, pp.61-62)

Interestingly, empirical work on the different qualities and functions of strong and weak ties has found that, while weak ties are effective for the mobilization of information or innovations, it is individuals connected by strong ties who are able to influence decisions (Granovetter 1983, pp.218-19). In the next chapter we will see just such a division between the ways in which the civil servants used interactions with insiders and outsiders in developing policy.

### **Authority**

Another way in which the participants identified individuals to speak to, and selected documents to read, was through selecting 'big names' or 'players' on the issue in question; that is, individuals and representatives of groups who were considered to have some kind of authority and/or power in that field. The knowledge claims put forward by such individuals or groups were considered worthy of attention by virtue of the authority of their holders or authors. As one civil servant working on health policy in the Cabinet Office told me, 'if someone is risk averse, they will just use the ideas of those who are authoritative, the LeGrands' (COP1), a reference to the LSE Professor Julian LeGrand, who served as health adviser to the Blair administration.

The notion that the authority of knowledge might be tied up with its creator or

promoter is well established in the sociology of knowledge. Here are two examples of Pierre Bourdieu making this point:

What creates the power of words and slogans... is the belief in the legitimacy of words and of those who utter them. And words alone cannot create this belief. (Bourdieu 1991, p.170)

In the struggle for the imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world, in which science itself is inevitably involved, agents wield a power which is proportional to their symbolic capital, that is, to the recognition they receive from a group. (Bourdieu 1991, p.238)

This recognition of authority is also mutually reinforcing; when a civil servant draws on the ideas of a reputable academic to shape a policy, they are in turn strengthening that individual's claim to authority. G. Nigel Gilbert put forward a similar argument in a theorization of referencing practices in papers for academic journals (Gilbert 1977). In a paper entitled 'Referencing as Persuasion', Gilbert suggests that scientists include references in their articles to authoritative papers in their field because, 'inasmuch as this work has already been accepted a "valid science", it also provides a measure of persuasive support for the newly announced findings' (1977, p.116); the author is 'trading on its acknowledged adequacy' (1977, p.116). In turn, by including a reference to such a work, the present author 'can be seen to be making an assertion about his own opinion concerning the validity of the findings of the cited papers, and is thus contributing, albeit only in small measure, to the overall consensus of his research area' (1977, p.117).

A similar phenomenon is identified by Katherine Smith in her study of the use of evidence by policymakers working on health inequality policies in England and Scotland (K. Smith 2008). We saw in Chapter 1 that Smith draws on Latour and Woolgar's (1986) model of 'cycles of credit', in which the credibility of a scientist's ideas, and his or her ability to promote those ideas (for example in reputable journals), becomes bound up with their credibility as a scientist. The more the scientist is able to produce credible ideas and publicize them, the greater is his or her individual credibility, and hence the likelihood that he or

she will secure resources such as research funding, which enable the scientist to develop and publicize further ideas, and enhance his or her credibility. Smith finds that, in the case of the academics and policymakers she studied, an academic gaining credibility in the policy world may find that their credibility within the academic world (the very thing which may have triggered policymakers' attention in the first place) begins to diminish as the researcher's autonomy is called into doubt (K. Smith 2008, pp.205, 209). We might then expect that at least some of the 'big names' only last for a certain period of time before they decline and others rise.

### **The importance of people**

The most striking feature of the data set out in this chapter is the extent to which people (as opposed to texts) are such an important source of knowledge. Our traditional image of bureaucracies is of written cultures; the 'keeping of files' features in Weber's definition of the modern bureaucracy (Lassman & Speirs 1994, p.146), and such objects are afforded agential powers in the work of Bruno Latour: 'The "rationalization" granted to bureaucracy since Hegel and Weber has been attributed by mistake to the "mind" of (Prussian) bureaucrats. It is all in the files themselves...' (Latour 1986, p.25; see Cambrosio et al. 1990 for an empirical example). In anthropology, writing and documents are understood by some to be critical to understanding the power and influence of literate bureaucracies over their non-literate equivalents (Goody 1986, p.112); and past studies of the Department of Health itself have described the organisation's upper echelons as dominated by a written culture (Day & Klein 1997). As Richard Freeman and I have written elsewhere, in our society 'Government is unthinkable, impracticable, not feasible, without documents' (Freeman & Maybin 2011, p.155).

And yet, although documents did indeed seem to be critical to the work of *governing* in this context (they were the dominant form through which proposals moved vertically up the hierarchy in the Department, and by which

such proposals were ratified and rendered 'official'), when it came to the mobilisation of *knowledge*, people and their interactions seemed to be where the action was. This echoes findings in the evidence and policy literature reviewed in Chapter 1, and is in keeping with the claim made by theorists of knowing as practice, that knowledge emerges in interaction.

Although mapping a policy's knowledge sources would tell us something about its formulation, we need to better understand what it is that the civil servants take from those individuals and those interactions and how this contributes to their work. What is it about the kinds of knowledge that *people* bring that makes them such appealing sources? And what do face-to-face interactions with individuals achieve? I turn to these questions in the next chapter.

### A reflection on practice

Before moving on I want to reflect briefly on how the civil servants' knowledge-seeking activities resembled *practice* accounts of action. The civil servants were not using standard operating procedures or guidelines that told them how to search for knowledge resources, or how to select between what existed; indeed, the formal knowledge resources which were available played a relatively insignificant role in much of their work. Instead, they had developed their own methods for identifying knowledge resources by watching colleagues and through the experience of having to develop policy on unfamiliar topics. Even seeking out relevant colleagues to ask for help was often conducted through personal networks, rather than by reference to the internal staff directory and so, in itself, required prior experience. This form of learning can be unnerving for the novice. Here is one civil servant describing one of her earliest experiences of working in the Department:

DHP10: I think probably at the time I was floundering a bit when I was writing that guidance. I'm not sure I knew quite where I could go and seek help, or – I think now I would have a much clearer idea, if I was floundering, who could I go and talk to. There would be people who would probably point me in the right direction.

Practices were, in this sense, under-determined, and they varied. They seemed to be contingent on the particular learning style of the civil servant and their past professional experiences; the content of the policy and the circumstances of its formulation; and on the working style of their particular superior on that policy (more on this later). Notwithstanding this contingency, there were more or less 'normal' ways of doing things: going to speak to people in order to understand issues; giving particular attention to internal documents; and identifying authoritative and trustworthy contacts through drawing on big names and contacts of contacts were common to many of the practices I observed and heard described.

## Chapter 4 Learning Through Interaction

*'I learn much better by talking something through.'* DHP10

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In the last chapter, I identified that people are particularly important knowledge sources for the civil servants, and described how they come to speak to particular individuals and groups. In this chapter, I explore *why* civil servants seem to value the kinds of knowledge that people bring, and discuss the different kinds of interactions civil servants engage in which impact on their understanding of, and thinking about, a particular policy issue. I begin with an account of the Department's formal public consultation processes and how they featured in my data. As we shall see, it is in informal interactions with colleagues and outside contacts, rather than in formal consultation processes, that the real action of knowledge mobilisation in policy work takes place. In the final section of the chapter, I draw on psychology and theories of communication to explore in greater depth why this is the case.

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### Formal Public Consultations

When developing significant new policy on a topic, civil servants can use formal written public consultations. These usually involve publishing a series of policy proposals in a document, accompanied by a series of questions on which

interested parties can submit written responses within a specified timeframe. According to government guidelines, they are intended to subject early proposals to outside scrutiny, and identify 'additional evidence' relevant to the proposal (see Appendix C for further details of the formal requirements around consultations).

Formal consultation exercises were referred to by less than a third of the interviewees (n.7) in their descriptions of policy development, and received only one mention in all of the meetings I observed. This does not mean they were not being used in the work of the other participants, but suggests that a significant (or even *the* significant) part of policy development happened outside this process. Two interviewees mentioned having to produce documents for consultation, but even in these cases the overall direction of the policies was determined by Ministers: 'you can shape things quite a lot by how you formulate options [... and] really, it's the Minister who decides' (DHA1). Another interviewee, whose predecessor had developed three possible options for a policy, described how identifying exactly what should be consulted on was not straightforward in a context in which Ministers already knew which option they favoured:

DHP7: [...] my job then was to say, so the Ministers involved had decided which of the options they wanted to go with. But, they said, subject to consultation. So it took me a while to work out what they were consulting on. Was it the [original] three options or something else? It turned out to be something else. That was a bit of a learning curve for me. {Pause} It's basically about how they implemented that option.

This interviewee was also responsible for summarising the responses to his consultation document. He described adopting a thorough and methodical approach to identifying 'what was common in the responses, whether they agreed with the sort of direction that we were taking, if not what the key arguments were against it, and looking for some sound-bites or quotes from people as to whether they were for or against' (DHP7). Others reported being more selective in their reading: 'you have to read the responses – but you don't read every word' (COP2), and this was especially true for those who were not

technically responsible for summarising the responses, but were working in the same policy area. These civil servants described looking out for the names of 'big' and 'credible' organisations (in keeping with the findings of the last chapter), and in particular those who would be critical to the implementation of the policy.

Although I saw no evidence of formal consultation exercises having a significant impact on the content of policy, the civil servants did value the opportunity these exercises presented for identifying contacts they could go to speak to about an issue, and for gaining a sense of the views and position of the those contacts in advance of such conversations. For example:

DHP2: I took the judgement that I didn't have enough time to go through the responses, and just used the Department's response [to the consultation responses received]. But I did search the originals from local authorities and PCTs or trusts to look for people we could contact.

DHP9: So if we want to win their hearts bringing them into [this policy] we need to understand where they're coming from [...] You can't enter into dialogue with any of these organisations or indeed any key stakeholders without understanding {laughs} you know, what are your issues? [...] for me the main bit was really to understand those who I was going to have to work with.

The formal consultations served as a prelude to informal consultation. This underlines the extent to which the civil servants felt that face-to-face interactions gave them more of what they needed than did written texts: they had a bespoke document from these respondents which (at least in theory) related to the particular issues and questions the civil servants were contending with, and yet the civil servants still wanted to go to speak to the respondents personally.

Some formal consultations took a different form, which incorporated this interest in interpersonal interaction. Four of the interviewees who talked about formal processes described using alternatives to the traditional written format for consultations, such as interactive workshops with front-line staff, patients and/or third sector organisations; and appointing stakeholder groups to advise

the Department on a particular issue. These exercises tended to be spoken about with more enthusiasm than the traditional formal written consultations, insofar as they were seen to be more effective at extracting the genuine views of participants, and at giving the participants a sense that the Department was listening to their concerns. They were also presented as relatively unusual or unique. Here are some examples:

DHP11: [...] so in the workshops that we did, they were around a set of key questions, and we did the feedback, it was typed up – you know the big thing with [this group] is “we [the group] tell you this stuff but you don’t actually listen, you don’t hear what we’re saying”, so we were typing them up in the feedback sessions on a big screen. You know, “this is what you’re saying to us now”. They were then published in their raw form. So [as] in, “the Department of Health is shit”, type of... you know, real live feedback, every single one was published after each workshop. So people coming to the next workshop in a different region could review or reflect what had gone on before, the day before, the week before. And when people [in the Department] went “ooooh, we don’t like doing it like this, {adopts low voice} this is not the way government works”. Umm, but it was really important that people see we were listening and happy to publish the criticism, and happy to say, “actually yeah, we get some of this stuff wrong”. So it was a much more open process.

DHP8: Well I thought that the way that we engaged with stakeholders as part of the [x strategy] was a lot more positive. But then that’s partly down to the fact that it was semi-independent from government. So it was kind of set-up by us [...] we provided the secretariat and we kind of organised the papers and things like that and we appointed independent chairs. But then the purpose of that was to give advice to the government. So when people were asked for their opinions or views or whatever then that would feed into a document that would go to government and then the government would respond to that, so it was quite a measured sort of process. There’s a kind of logic to it, and there was a sense that the people could say what they wanted and that information would feed through to government and then there would be a responsibility for government to respond to that. So there was actually a point to them coming in and saying what they said. That doesn’t necessarily mean that they say something and government policy changes, but at least it’s something that means that they’re heard and there’s a record of it and a process by which those things are listened [to] and something happens at the end of it that’s a result of what you did.

In both these cases, the interviewees judged that the participants had valued the deliberation these exercises involved, as well as the production of a written record of that deliberation. But as the last speaker acknowledged, none of this actually guaranteed influence. And in some cases, this could be starkly clear to

participants during the meeting itself. In the following quote, DHP8 provides an example of where the interactive format had been less successful:

DHP8: So basically [this other government department] brought in these stakeholders. So these meetings tend to be, they're not really good for discussion, because you just get a presentation and some sort of summing up by the [Minister], but not real debate. There wasn't enough time for a debate because there was a really heavily packed agenda. But also basically the decisions [...] have already been taken so it was a pointless exercise in getting them to come in, voice their concerns about things that aren't going to change. And then just at the moment when there was going to be a discussion [...], [the Minister] walked out of the room and didn't come back. It was kind of like the [other government department] thought that just by having the discussion in the first place that that would be a positive thing, rather thinking about whether that discussion would then lead to something else that would be productive in any way. So I think, I mean it wasn't obvious in the room, but I can't imagine that many of those people weren't incredibly pissed off at having been brought in, having been given a platform to say what was wrong, no actions and nothing else happens.

In this way, even more interactive forms of consultation could still be principally a matter of performance.

Less formal consultations with individuals or small groups through meetings and conversations seemed to play a much more significant role in contributing to the civil servants' knowledge of a topic, and in shaping their thinking. The following quote from this interviewee, who was one of the participants apparently most committed to ensuring that formal consultations did influence policy development, is revealing. Here she is describing how she will tackle a thorny policy issue which has been passed to her:

DHP11: [...] I will pull together a group of eight or nine people who we trust implicitly as an informal group, we don't want to create a whole bureaucracy, we've done the consultation, you know all of that process stuff's been done. What we now need is a group of people who will give us their honest view and their collective expertise.

The formal consultation is 'process stuff', and has clearly not provided them with the 'honest view[s]' and 'collective expertise' they are looking for. So why are people, rather than the documents they might produce (be it a research report or a consultation response) such important sources for knowledge in this

context? What is distinctive about the kinds of knowledge people bring to an issue? And what is achieved in less formal interactions, which institutionalised exercises fail to deliver?

### The Qualities of the Knowledge that People Bring

The importance of people as knowledge bearers in this context was clear from very early on in my fieldwork, so I spent a considerable part of my remaining time in the field trying to understand *why* this was the case. I focused on the ways that interviewees talked about their interactions with others when responding to open questions about how they went about developing a policy. I asked direct questions about why they preferred speaking to people over reading, or whether a particular meeting could have been replaced by an exchange of emails or papers; and, in the meetings I observed, I attended to what it was about individuals' contributions, and the back-and-forth of conversation, that seemed to help the civil servants and enable them to move forward with their work.

I identified five key characteristics of the kinds of knowledge people bring which were particularly valuable to the civil servants:

- It included accounts of how policies, systems and organisations work in practice;
- It appeared to be less censored than written accounts;
- It was often very current, where documents are dated almost as soon as they are published;
- It was synthesised, and editorialised, and drew upon years or decades of experience and accumulated knowledge; and
- It comprised different perspectives and mind-sets that offered new ways of seeing issues.

In the next section of the chapter I discuss each of these qualities in turn, before moving on to describe the role that interaction played in mobilising knowledge.

### How systems work in practice

In health services research, written descriptions of how policies, systems or organisations work in practice are hard to find, and where they do exist, they are almost always already out-of-date. And yet understanding the practical mechanics of arrangements in the health and social care system seems vital to understanding, analysing and developing policy intended to improve its working. Descriptions of how someone with a particular kind of condition moves through different services; or how in practical terms the Department of Health actually gets local NHS organisations to do things; or what hygiene rules mean for the routines of staff in hospitals, are difficult to come by, unless you can speak to people who have some kind of involvement in such processes.

The Department meetings I observed often involved presentations or descriptions by civil servants and outsiders that provided basic accounts of how particular services or organisational relationships work in practice. These would often simply be informal oral accounts, as the following excerpts from interviews indicate:

DHA6: [...] Sometimes it's not the most senior people who can give you the best [information], you know, it's the people who know how it's done on the ground. So you know if you're trying to understand that... So we did a visit to [Milton Keynes] as part of the [x policy], and it was talking to all the people who are managing [these] services. Actually you wouldn't have got the same richness of understanding how the system works if you'd spoken to more senior staff.

DHP8: [this other government Department] tend to not understand the distinction between the Department of Health and the NHS – they think that if they put a certain amount of pressure on a certain part of the Department of Health, or the Department of Health in general, that that would result in something happening in the NHS. That's not the case.

JM: So was part of what you were having to do at that meeting explaining how that relationship works?

DHP8: Yeah – there was quite a lot that, yeah.

Where meeting participants were using PowerPoint presentations, these would invariably involve some kind of organigram, flow-chart or other kind of diagram to describe the working of a service or a system. Of course, sharing such images does not require face-to-face interaction. But meetings seemed to be *the* place where they were displayed, perhaps because this enabled their creators to frame and caveat them as they saw necessary. I explore the function of such representations in further detail in Chapter 5.

### Less censored accounts

One of the strong appeals for civil servants of orally reported knowledge was that it seemed to them to be less censored than written accounts; to somehow be more *candid* and *real*. The civil servants themselves believed that they could elicit more open and honest responses from colleagues and outsiders through informal meetings, site visits and chats than they could through formal consultation exercises. Here are some examples:

DHP10: And I think [...], a lot of the time in health [...] it's the things that people don't write down that are quite important. So erm, because it's such a sort of thing about people, and the interaction between people [...] And when people aren't, aren't [following some policy guidelines], they aren't necessarily going to sort of come back to consultation and tell you in writing why they wouldn't [follow them], because of course they're supposed to [be doing so]. [...] I would almost characterise it as there's a verbal exchange of, you know it's sort of, it's like having a verbal history that a lot of these things are passed on and people know about them but they don't necessarily write all of them down.

DHP11: [...] And so doing something over a cup of coffee, can be so much – because it's not something that's formal, you know, we have all of our formal routes and our governance processes and that stuff, but we don't have to formalise everything. So having a conversation with somebody to understand where they're coming from doesn't need to be a minuted meeting with a room booked. Actually let's sit in the [café area], let's do that. And I think I get, I receive so much more from people that way, that's real, as opposed to it being something that's very guarded.

DHA8: [...] I always find it quite helpful to meet people on a face-to-face basis at the outset as well, because I think it kind of gives you the opportunity to build up a more friendly working relationship which certainly works better for me [...] I think it gives you the opportunity to get more information as well out of them. I think if you reduce the formality they tend to be more relaxed, they tend to be more open about what's good, what's bad, what's working, what's not and so on.

In terms of my own search for knowledge about the practices of civil servants, I too felt that some of the conversations I witnessed in meeting observations (about the existence of bad practice, or about internal tensions surrounding a policy's development, for example) would never be committed to paper. Knowledge shared orally seems to be considered less *risky* than knowledge which is written down. Documents might get into the wrong hands, and oral reports can be more easily denied or reformulated.

#### Up-to-the-minute

Another advantage of the knowledge that people bring is that it can be the most up-to-date account possible of some state of affairs. This is important to the civil servants who are devising programmes intended to act upon the world now and in the future, not on the world as it existed in the latest year for which data or research are available. It is also particularly important in the context of a continually evolving policy and political environment, to which the civil servants must try to connect their particular area of policy responsibility in order to secure its currency and influence (see Chapter 6). When I asked interviewees about the purpose of a particular meeting or a series of meetings, 'updating' one another on 'what's been happening' often featured in their response, and in the meetings I observed the civil servants would always give colleagues or external individuals accounts of the latest developments in policy formulation and implementation on their particular patch:

Senior civil servant: [in the Department of Health] we're in a period of political turbulence and are currently having a pause in the legislation. There are four work-streams, one of which is being led by [x] who we all know [...] The areas which look likely to change are around GP consortia's constitutions and Monitor's role. We're waiting with bated breath. The Bill has to pass this session if it is to get passed. (Obs7)<sup>13</sup>

Civil servant: There are some fairly existential discussions going on at the moment about whether the [new body will take on that particular function]. It seems inevitable that it will [...]. I'll actually be joining in some of that work so I'll be able to bring along more insights on what's happening next time. (Obs11)

Civil servant from another government Department: So that's a very quick run through of what's happening [in our area] – in some cases as we speak. (Obs10)

DHP7: when we put the consultation together, one of the almost stumbling blocks we had was how we fitted in with the commissioning board in the future. That was being developed as we were developing our consultation. So I spoke to one person and they said, yeah, it would be good to speak to x, y and z.

Documents have the quality of being frozen in time; they cannot give an indication to their reader of what may have changed since they were written (or they can do so only in very vague terms); people are better placed to know of what is happening *now*.

### Synthesised and editorialised

A further advantage of seeking knowledge from people is that they have already digested, synthesised and effectively editorialised what may be years of accumulated experience and knowledge on an issue. This was especially true of outside 'experts', but was also the case for some internal colleagues who had worked on a topic for a number of years. This digested knowledge represents an invaluable resource for civil servants who are seeking to quickly understand an issue, to identify its most significant themes, questions or tensions, and to do so under considerable time pressure. The meetings I observed often involved

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<sup>13</sup> I have included references to policy content in this quote because these details have since been put into the public domain, and because so many of the Department's teams were effected by these developments that to do so does not identify the particular meeting or individuals involved.

someone giving a one-line précis of entire bodies of research or experience, for example:

Civil servant: Research tells us that it's not [this groups'] conditions that are different but they have a different set of cultural needs. And some want people [from their background to speak to] and some don't. (Obs8)

These one- or two-liners had, in turn, been picked-up from interactions with 'experts' in the field. This seemed to be a form of embodied knowledge that became encapsulated into these phrases which would then be carried over to and repeated in other interactions. As one more junior civil servant said to me at the end of a meeting involving experienced practitioners: 'I just really hear things in meetings like that and then say them in other meetings where they seem relevant' (Obs9).

Meeting participants and chairs were sometimes explicit about the need to extract or mobilise the embodied knowledge present in a meeting room, as well as in the wider contacts of those present, and to apply it to the task at hand. For example:

NHS manager: [Feeding back from a breakout-session] My sense was that around the table we had the knowledge and the intelligence which if we just put it down then we could start to paint the picture. (Obs9)

Civil servant 1: How do we help you? How do we get the wisdom around the table to do that?

Civil servant 2: We're going to establish the detailed areas after the strategy group and work out who we need to talk to in relation to each. (Obs2)

In his account of international policy meetings, Richard Freeman likens this work to a group interview: 'the group itself is trying to determine what it thinks and knows' (Freeman 2008, p.12). In the meetings I observed, it seemed that *capturing* such knowledge meant writing it down, whereas *applying* the knowledge to the task in hand usually involved further, more focused interactions.

## Perspectives and mind-sets

Individuals were valued not only for the bodies of knowledge they carried, but also for their distinctive ways of seeing and thinking about issues. These mind-sets or perspectives seemed to be the product of a combination of a particular educational background, a particular professional experience, and/or belonging to a social group (with an associated identity and life experience). They ranged from critical thinking skills grounded in logic, to seeing questions from the viewpoint of protecting or furthering the interests of a particular group. Here are some examples:

Chair: The benefit of [you] being in the room is that you've got a unique perspective that's different to the mental health perspective, and that's the value of what's in this room. (Obs9)

DHP11: So the brief I was given was [...] we want you to bring [this particular] lens to all of the policy thinking [...] So very much trying to tease out from [this outside group] what they might be able to help with and contribute to this process. Because they look at this stuff very much through – “we want [x] in our communities, so therefore what's [this] strategy going to give us towards that?” So that's very much about getting external insight into my thinking as well.

DHA8: I think we've got a lot of pretty motivated people [in our team] who are intelligent and are capable of thinking things through quite critically, quite honestly, quite openly and then passing that on. Which I quite like because I struggle with [...] people who don't challenge stuff, or don't have the capability or don't display the capability for critical thought on things and I think that's something that's good in our team at the moment. It's very rare that you will say something and it will just be let go because people are either too apathetic to disagree with it or whatever it might be.

DHP5: What we are bringing [to the policy team] is a set of perspectives, questions and possible answers, as well as a body of research knowledge.

Although these various quotes refer to very different forms of knowledge, what links them is that they refer to distinctive ways of appraising proposals. Later in the chapter I discuss how civil servants drew on these different ways of seeing in brainstorming and idea-testing meetings.

The civil servants valued interacting directly with individuals in possession of these bodies of knowledge, critical thinking skills and distinctive perspectives,

so that the insights they gave could be applied specifically to the particular questions and issues they were engaged with. In this context there is something important about the act of *interaction*, in combination with the qualities of the knowledge and the particular perspective or ‘thinking skills’ that individuals may bring to such conversations. In the next section of the chapter I explore the different functions such interactions served, and why these were so highly valued by the civil servants.

## The Benefits of Interaction

### Translation

One very clear benefit of interaction for knowledge mobilisation in the meetings I observed was that it enabled simultaneous, basic translations to take place, permitting the development of shared understandings and meanings. Meetings nearly always involved exchanges in which people would say, ‘ah, so by x, you mean y’, or ‘a for you, is like b for us, right?’ The civil servants would translate a type of service, or profession, or policy instrument into terms with which they were familiar; identifying its equivalent in the world that they knew. Individuals who themselves held dual professional identities, or who had in the past worked across more than one field (for example, a civil servant who had previously worked as a paramedic), were particularly valued as members of teams since they could do some of this translation work themselves.<sup>14</sup> For example, one civil servant commented to me in a break between two meetings:

[Dan] who was present at the last meeting, he’s a PCT chief exec and [used to be in this particular profession], and a cluster chief exec, so he’s the whole deal. So now he’s being used for the [national policy development on this], in the way the NHS brings these people up into strategy roles. (Obs7)

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<sup>14</sup> I got the sense that such individuals were also valued because they were thought to serve as *de facto* representatives of particular constituencies (a professional group, for example). Even if that individual did not formally speak for the group, they were at least treated as a barometer of how the relevant group might react to a proposal. This theme is explored further in the description of idea-testing in this chapter, and in the section on consensus building in Chapter 6.

Interpersonal interactions also permit a whole host of visual and other cues which enable participants to gauge what or how much their interlocutor understands from what they are saying, which further facilitates the linking of meanings between the individuals in the conversation. Here is an analyst describing the benefits of sitting near to a policy team she was supporting:

DHA5: So how is your work different when you've got closer relationships with policy people compared to when you're...[separate from them]?

DHA5: Umm, I think the practicalities of getting things done are a bit easier, rather than relying on phone calls and emails it's much better, personally I think, to organise things face to face.

JM: Can you say – this is a bit of a difficult question – can you say what makes it easier talking to someone face to face rather than for example emailing them, or talking on the phone?

DHA5: I can get a better idea of whether they understand, whether I've expressed myself clearly and whether they understand what I've said and whether I need to say it again, say it in a different way, expand a bit more. Whether they're interested in it is quite important. You write a long email and they might only be interested in one part of it and they have to trawl through, so it's much easier to get a gauge on that.

The last two lines of this quote hint at how interactions also permit a form of translation at a more profound level. By posing a series of questions, the civil servant prompts their interlocutor to filter and tailor their knowledge, by directing it to the question in hand and the particular interests of the civil servant. So long as the civil servant is reasonably authoritative in the interaction, and the consultee is responsive, face-to-face talks meant that the civil servant did not need to do the equivalent of leafing through irrelevant pages of information. But the quick back-and-forth of an oral exchange also enabled conversations to progress beyond these initial questions posed by the civil servant, and to elicit responses that were not simply a previously-formulated 'piece of knowledge', but a selecting or reworking of what that interlocutor knows in order for it to make sense in the terms of the question.

In this sense, such interactions perform not just a linking of the civil servant's interests and the interlocutor's 'knowledge', but also appear to be creative, constructing knowledge in the process. Through face-to-face interaction, it seemed that the parties in the dialogue figured out *what* to say, as well as how

to say it. This function was described by interviewees in terms of using conversations to 'tease out' what the issues are on topics (DHA1), or to 'drill down on particular questions' (DHP2), and they explicitly recognised how such conversations allowed them to discover 'unknown unknowns':

DHP12: [it's] about working with others to get to the kind of information that you need. Cause it might not be immediately obvious what you need, you know you've got to kind of talk to people to actually flush it out and its err, it's a mutual thing, you know. In talking about it you get to the point where you actually think "aha!", you know, "that's what I was after!" You might not have known it yourself when you first sat down but that, that tends to come out.

DHP6: the kind of trouble with the [pre-established] series of questions is that it doesn't allow the conversation to go in different directions. You know, you've kind of already in effect, you've already imposed your thought process by drawing up a set of questions [...] [By taking a more open approach] you've got your kind of, "this is what's going on", and then you talk to them, and sometimes it's confirmed, and other times it's, you know, you've got another richness, and you think "oh no this wasn't quite right the way I was thinking about that, the way it really works is like this".

Dialogue and interaction have the potential to enable the civil servants' knowledge interests and the interlocutor's knowledge to be linked effectively. Interactions are valued for their efficiency in bringing to the fore the relevant know-that which a consultee may hold on a topic which will help the civil servant with the task in hand, but they also enabled the construction of *new* knowledge; something more than the aggregation of that which the parties brought to the meeting. In fact, some kinds of interactions are more explicitly focused on what can be elicited through dialogue, drawing particularly on the thinking skills and distinctive perspectives of the consultee over and above their knowledge on a particular issue. I have termed these *thinking meetings*.

### Thinking meetings

These meetings often featured as significant moments in the civil servants' narratives of how particular policies were developed. They were also a common occurrence, featuring in descriptions of the regular team meetings the interviewees had scheduled in their diaries. They included what I have classified

as *brainstorming* meetings, in which a group is coming up with initial questions and ideas on a project; *working things through* meetings, in which the participants work collectively to resolve questions or tensions; and *idea-testing* meetings, in which a civil servant brings already-formulated ideas to a group (or individual) to test the idea's robustness against challenges. Brainstorming meetings and meetings to work things through often involved only internal colleagues, whereas idea-testing was performed with both insiders and outside contacts. Some meetings fell under two or even all three of these types. Nonetheless the types do distinguish between the distinctive functions that such meetings seemed to serve.

The following descriptions of meetings that took place early on in projects are examples of brainstorming:

DHA6: [...] so we'd spend a lot of time with [the policy lead] in his first days, you know, literally, he was [on this project] two days a week, we'd sit down for one and a half [of those days], around the table, talking about stuff. That was a way of kind of, you know, asking questions, "what are the questions we really need answers to?" "what's the kind of ways of thinking about this?", "what's the problems of that?"

DHP11: {Of a meeting early on in a policy's development} So that [team meeting] was very much group thinking about [this policy] and some of the [particular issues] that have come out of that.

These next two descriptions represent meetings where civil servants are working problems through:

DHA1: We had produced our estimates [...] I thought what they came up with [in terms of a policy recommendation] was about right actually. The process by which they got there was senior [Department] people sitting in a room. Our figures weren't significant or influential.

JM: What do you enjoy about what you're doing?

DHP3: [...] Seeing people who are really good at their job and the effectiveness of the impromptu meetings where they thrash things out.

The interviewees often talked about both brainstorming and working-things-through meetings with enthusiasm, and even a sense of excitement.

Participants also described the usefulness of talking through policy proposals with external contacts, but these types of interactions tended to involve testing developed ideas, rather than developing new ideas or reaching a point of (even temporary) resolution on a point of tension or dispute. For example:

DHA8: [...] it was just kind of getting some critical challenge to what we were thinking about really [...] I'm trying to link it all together in my head and then trying to talk to people about whether it sounds sensible.

JM: When you go out to see someone or speak to someone, what are you trying to get from them, or what do you take from it?

DHA6: I reckon there's a sort of testing hypotheses, that's a big one for me. It's kind of mental models you've got in your head, and to me, it's sort of testing those [...] not pushing it at this stage, but you know, seeing, do my initial thoughts on this make sort of sense [...] is this reasonable?

Meeting chair: {Having described a policy proposal} Today is an opportunity to critique all this – what should work, what may not. (Obs10)

Ideas would also be tested in internal meetings; colleagues would interrogate a proposal using logic-based critical thinking skills, or adopting particular roles or perspectives in an effort to help an individual or team to refine their proposals. For example, I saw civil servants in meetings challenge their colleagues on how a Minister could defend their policy against some particular criticism in Parliament. In internal meetings, such idea-testing also had the potential to shift into 'working things through', as is hinted at in these examples:

Chair: [...] once we have the strategy we need to make sure it's a fit for purpose vehicle. So for example, does it allow [Sarah, a policy lead from a different area] to do what she wants? We'll have to do lots of work on what will happen on Monday morning. (Obs2)

DHP11: [...] going from my concepts of what it is, and sharing all of my thinking with [this other team in the Department], and then their ability to look at it through different lenses and ask questions, that, just, "how did you think to ask that question?" And actually, it's so the right question to ask, because it's just generated this whole train of things to a place now where [...] we've got a kind of focus to what this could mean in health and care and made it very relevant to some of those people.

Of course, what was often being tested, both with internal and external interlocutors, was not just the sense, or logic of a proposal, but also its acceptability in political terms. Internal consultees had knowledge of Ministers'

interests and political views, and a sense for issues that were likely to antagonise Parliament or the press; external consultees were sometimes the very people who would need to be 'kept on board' in order for the policy to gain acceptance and be implemented, so gauging their reaction to ideas was critical.

Thus, interactions were not only about receiving information or insights from colleagues, professional representatives or academics; such meetings were also (and sometimes primarily) about trying to enrol an individual or organisation's support for a policy, and informing people of the Department's intentions (I explore these themes further in Chapter 6). As such, these meetings were not just about gathering knowledge and views, but also about influencing them at their source in an effort to secure a smooth passage for the policy:

DHP2: With the working group I shared with them a few sections at a time for comments. They were particularly useful because we were managing a whole range of interests and we got to see what pushes whose buttons. And they all come in complaining about everything, but this allowed us to drill down, getting them to think, "what can we do about it?" and getting to the nub of what really mattered to them.

DHP12: [...] a lot of the time, policies, especially, they're not things that are imposed by government, they're things that happen, they're delivered by a kind of social structure, a system [...] you can't just do it on your own, you know? So you've got to involve people. You've got to get their buy in ASAP. And the more you involve them earlier the more likely they are to actually understand what you're doing later, and actually help you to implement it.

Such interactions could result in the civil servants adjusting policy plans in light of the views of a senior colleague or a stakeholder, but civil servants would also challenge their interlocutors' views, seeking to persuade them of the benefits or necessity of a particular course of action. More broadly such interactions were also about ensuring that selected individuals and groups *felt* that they had been consulted and involved in the process, to make them more likely to be sympathetic in their response to the policy's publication, and more likely to facilitate its implementation. In Chapter 6, I return to this theme of the civil servants needing to construct coalitions of agreement around their policies, and examine the distinctive role that knowledge plays in these processes.

## Personal encounters

Personal encounters with the health service, staff, patients and members of the public had a distinctive and powerful influence on civil servants (and their political colleagues), and stories of such encounters featured in meetings, apparently playing an important role in the development of shared understandings of issues. As part of their scoping activities on a topic, civil servants would sometimes visit local services, and staff and patients *in situ*. For at least some of the civil servants, this way of learning about an issue felt much more effective than desk-bound research about an issue; it brought alive the meaning of the policy topic, and made it *real*:

DHP10: I know that I learn well through verbal interaction. I learn much better by talking something through than by reading in it. So even if I'm reading quite a lot of documents, they won't become real until I go and talk to people. Erm, I'd quite often go and shadow a few people in, in a sort of real life situation.

Civil servant: I think it would be useful for [another civil servant] to meet [Tim] and his crew up in [Newcastle]. They've got some very strident views and I think that would bring this to life. (Obs6)

Relatedly, when faced with a new topic, some individuals, in particular those who were on more senior grades, would explicitly recall some past personal experience of the issue, or service, or place. For example:

Senior civil servant: I had a girlfriend once a long time ago who had a summer job selling Embassy cigarettes to people in [Skegness]. It wasn't difficult. That's what I know about [Skegness]. (Obs3)

The meaningfulness of such experiences or encounters, whether acquired in one's personal or professional life, seemed to stem at least in part from their *affect*; their emotional impact on the individual. Interviewees and meeting participants would often become more animated when describing their experiences of visiting front-line services:

Civil servant: We went round the country to find examples of good practice. [This particular type of professional group] is a real issue. It's *really hard* for them. (Obs4)

Civil servant from another government department: I'm smiling because I was [at an institution] and asked them "what's the biggest thing about your health that we can do for you?" and they said "give us more cigarettes!" {laughs}. (Obs4)

Charity director: My in-service story of the week is [this] [...] I'm welling-up just thinking about it. (Obs8)

In one of the meetings I observed, a patient presented an account of their experience of suffering from a particular condition, and of the lack of understanding they had received from the health service. The story had an emotional impact on me (I felt saddened and sorry for the terribly difficult experience this person had had), and has formed a more vivid memory than the hundreds of other exchanges I witnessed in meetings. It was clear from the reaction of the civil servants I was accompanying that the account had also had an emotional impact on them and my guess is that it will stay with them too.

The knowledge drawn from such encounters (that a particular type of service is poor at providing for a particular type of patient, for example) also seemed to enjoy a distinctive authenticity and credibility. For civil servants visiting services, whether personally or professionally, seeing often did mean believing. For example:

JM: And what did you get from that day [visit]? Did you find it useful?

DHP7: Oh yes, incredibly useful, yeah. I mean you... I suppose there's the practical issues about the way, what it's like to work in [that service]. But it's also, it was quite apparent the difference between people who'd been through the programme and people before they went on it, just in their sort of, I wouldn't say we had a conversation or an interview or whatever but just [...] you could see [the difference].

DHP11: [...] To get some of the people in London to understand [what it's like there]? Really difficult. And the only way they can do it is to get them to come and be. So we did and I took some people up there [...] we just spent a day. And they could not believe it. So as much I could tell them about it – I can show them pictures about it, I can show them website pages about it, but until they've walked in those places, the penny didn't drop. And the same's true of going to a hospital. You know we had people went out to go and visit a [particular] unit, and the impact of meeting the [people there]. They came back going "my god this is amazing [...] it's fantastic, how do we do more of it?" Yeah, you published a strategy that told you all of that! So yeah, there is an authenticity, and a "walking in their shoes" [...] They're people, we're humans, and it's about how we experience and receive things in a way that we can believe them.

The power of such visits for those experiencing them first hand, did to an extent carry over into the translation of such experiences into stories as they were relayed in conversations and meetings. This was sometimes because the tellers were powerful players: Ministers and senior civil servants. Policy work on a particular area was often initiated in part because somebody senior had had a direct experience or encounter with the issue, or had heard stories first-hand from those who had:

JM: What does a mandate look like, what sorts of things give you a mandate [to work on a particular policy issue]?

DHA6: So I think that's actually the stuff like the stuff I worked on for the [x] review, that was [one of the permanent secretaries] basically saying [they had] lost confidence in the policy team and just, you know Ministers were, everything they heard when they went out, you know constituency MPs were hearing lots of [...] stories [about this service], they still do actually. There's something wrong here, and yet the policy team is kind of "everything's fine, everything's fine".

Civil servant: This started because [a DH director-general] went to see [staff in this service] [...] who lobbied her on [x] [...] One of the things [the DG] was impressed with was [y]. The problem we've had is getting our heads around the legislation.

DHA2: The story goes that Andy Burnham [the then Secretary of State] was visiting his father in hospital and commented that there were not many other visitors, and his father or someone else on the ward said that was because the car park was too expensive. There was a rapid development of a proposal because he wanted to announce it at party conference.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This interviewee was happy for his comments to be quoted directly, without redactions. Andy Burnham's subsequent conference speech was described in *The Guardian* as 'emotional and crowd-pleasing' (Bowcott 2009).

Stories from personal encounters with front-line services also travelled among mid-ranking civil servants and were used in meetings to summarise issues. An interesting quality of such stories is that they are very difficult to dispute: to question what somebody says they 'saw' and 'heard' seems somehow aggressive; it calls into question their sense of their own experience. I never heard anybody challenge the representativeness of such stories. It would have felt socially inappropriate for someone to do so; the civil servants were not, after all, explicitly claiming their story had the same knowledge status as a randomised-control trial. And yet such experiences were relayed and treated as if they had a privileged relationship with *reality*. The civil servants were aware of this power and knowingly exploited it in negotiating with their colleagues:

DHA6: Also I reckon the other thing, it really, the kind of persuasiveness of being able to say, "and when I talked to so and so, they said that this", and that just suddenly, you know you've got some kind of [numeric] data which might tell you something, but then being able to give sort of a personal, sort of story on top of that, I think the combination of those is incredibly powerful in convincing people.

JM: And who are you thinking of convincing [...] when you're saying that?

DHA6: Well it could be a Minister, DG [director general], it could be the Treasury, all those kind of... [...] It's all part of building a kind of strong case I think. And I think actually, with the Treasury with [this policy], that's been quite helpful to say "yeah, but when we talked to so-and-so in this [organisation], they said this". The Treasury doesn't get out there that much {laughs hard}. It's always quite strong.

Although stories enjoyed a kind of influence in this context, there seemed to be some implicit rules about where and by whom they could be used. While staff at mid-ranking as well as senior grades relayed stories from professional visits in meetings, it seemed more common for stories from personal (non-work related) experiences of the health service to come from senior staff and politicians. This may well be a question of power: the senior staff had the personal authority which made it acceptable for them to use this informal type of knowledge in a professional context, whereas more junior staff had to bolster their credibility through evoking more authoritative knowledge forms, such as research evidence and formal government reports. This recalls the mutually reinforcing

relationship between the authority of a knowledge claim and the authority of its creator or promoter discussed in Chapter 3.

This type of knowledge also seemed to circulate in talk more than in writing. It may be that the effect of such encounters, and the sense that they are necessarily authentic, means that they get talked about and shape the civil servants' understandings of issues, but that the civil servants are aware that they fall outside of the corpus of accepted knowledge sources when it comes to the drafting of texts, and offering other more formal accounts of how and why proposals have been reached. Experiences and stories of experiences are used for understanding, and for internal persuasion, but not for justifying or defending policy choices.

### Summary

While formal consultation exercises featured in the work of the civil servants, they did not seem to be the most significant site for knowledge mobilisation. Rather, more informal interactions with individuals and groups played an important role in civil servants developing their knowledge of particular issues. The knowledge that colleagues and outsiders bring to such encounters was particularly valued because it included accounts of how things happen in practice; it appeared to be more candid than formal or written accounts; and it was (at least potentially) up-to-the-minute. The most valued interlocutors held synthesised, editorialised bodies of knowledge that were the product of many years of experience; or they had a particular perspective on, or skills to think through, questions or issues.

Acts of interaction enabled this knowledge, and these ways of thinking, to be applied to the particular problems with which the civil servants were engaged and for new knowledge and understanding to emerge through dialogue. Engaging with front-line services on professional visits or through personal

experiences had a distinctive effect on the civil servants, and stories from such encounters travelled well through meetings.

## Discussion

### Thinking as an interpersonal activity

The importance of interpersonal interaction for mobilising knowledge has been identified by writers in the evidence and policy literature, and by those who conceive of knowledge as practised. In this chapter I have set out some of the distinctive benefits for civil servants of turning to people for developing an understanding of, and thinking through, issues in the context of their work. But perhaps there is something more foundational, something more quintessentially human, about the way in which people seek knowledge through interaction, and think things through together with others. Authors in policy studies and public administration have not yet presented a way of understanding *why* knowing so often takes place in interaction. One way of addressing this gap is to draw on work on this issue in social psychology. This research, albeit rooted in a quite different discipline, offers a set of tools for scholars in policy studies seeking to understand the distinctive appeal and function of interaction for knowledge mobilisation.

A starting point might be work in social and development psychology on the ways in which the development of our capacity to think is bound up with our ability to relate to others. For example, the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky claimed that the development of a child's ability to conceptualise together with other related 'higher functions' emerges as a result of their social interactions:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later on the individual level; first *between* people (*interpsychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals.

(Vygotsky 1978, p.57, original emphasis)

More recently, experimental psychologist Peter Hobson has argued for the evolutionary importance of social engagement in understanding how people developed the capacity to think and to symbolise (Hobson 2002). He illustrates this with reference to child development, identifying three principal stages in which an infant learns to relate to others and in so doing establishes their capacity for thought. In the first month of an infant's life, she learns to engage emotionally with her care-giver; she perceives or 'feels' her care-giver's emotions via bodily interactions and cues, and she is affected by these emotions. In the second step, the infant begins to perceive how her care-giver interacts with objects and happenings in the outside world, as well as with the infant herself. This sews the seeds for an ability to take on the mental perspective of others which, for Hobson, is critical to the ability to think and to symbolise. He summarises these steps as follows:

[this] fact that the human infant is drawn into the feelings and actions of the other ... [is what] leads to what we have called "identifying with" other people. Identifying with people is what leads to mental perspective-taking. Mental perspective-taking leads to insight into what it means to have a subjective perspective. And once the infant understands that, symbolizing becomes possible.  
(2002, p.271)

Perhaps those individuals who learn and think best through talking do so because it is through interactions with others that humans learn to think at all. This idea needs further development and consideration; here I mean to suggest that theories and empirical work within social psychology offer a promising set of resources for investigating this phenomenon further, given the significance of interaction to understanding knowledge and its movement.

Such a turn to social psychology might also help us think through the significance of the *embodied* nature of such interactions, and the role emotion might play in knowledge mobilisation. I highlighted earlier in this chapter how interactions which occurred in the context of personal experiences, or professional visits to front-line settings, seemed to have a distinctive emotional

impact on the civil servants and I reflect below on how this influenced the knowledge the civil servants took from these interactions. But there also seemed to be a physiological component to the internal brainstorming and idea testing meetings. The civil servants would become more engaged and excited in interviews when they described these encounters, apparently animated by the stimulation they took from the meetings themselves. These meetings were also sometimes described with particularly vivid language: for example, one interviewee described the excitement of meetings, in which problems or disagreements were 'thrashed out'.

Such meetings seemed to have an element of physical excitement to them. Richard Freeman evokes Roland Barthes' phrase 'the thrill of meaning' (Barthes 1977, p.97; quoted in Freeman 2008, p.12) to make a similar point about the experiences of participants at international conferences. For at least some of the participants of my study, the cognitively demanding nature of these meetings was physically, as well as intellectually, stimulating (if such a distinction is meaningful). In his book *Thinking Fast and Slow* (2011), psychologist Daniel Kahneman draws on experimental evidence to suggest that when people engage in particularly demanding forms of mental effort (what he terms Type 2 thinking), their heart-rate increases, which puts them into a state of heightened physical stimulation, and their pupils dilate, making them more attractive to others (Kahneman 2011, p.32). In this context, the word 'thrill' seems to take on something of a literal meaning; there may be a physiological pleasure in intense brainstorming meetings which makes them particularly appealing to the civil servants.

On the flip side, there might also be a case for understanding the presence of others when thinking through difficult issues as not just a source of (and audience for) stimulation, but also or alternatively as a source of calm. In this case, the very emotional presence of another person, particularly one who is known, offers a kind of reassurance, which permits the civil servant to think through an issue carefully, whereas alone they may have found their thinking

was inhibited because of the complexity or intransigence of the issue. Peter Hobson makes this point in exploring the different ways in which we might need to consider thinking in social, and not just individual, terms. He writes:

We are accustomed to thinking of thinking as happening in the individual. What we tend to overlook is that the individual's capacity to think may be strongly affected by the influence of other people. Here I mean not only the contributions that other people may make to a person's ability to see reason or think more correctly or more deeply. I also mean the ways in which someone else's emotional presence may strengthen or weaken an individual's capacity to think at all. Perhaps especially if you are in a state of anxiety or conflict, the presence of a steady, attentive person can enormously increase the chances that you will be able to think things through.  
(Hobson 2002, p.22)

It is significant that there is something uncomfortable about turning to psychological and even biological accounts of the physical and emotional aspects of thinking in this context. This is not just a matter of the anxiety generated by reaching for intellectual resources outside of the disciplines most commonly invoked in policy studies, but I think also reflects deeply held lay understandings of knowledge and knowing as rational, and disembodied activities, which rule over the body and the passions. Descartes' concept of 'dualism', in which the substance of the mind is distinct from the body (Garber 2003), looms large in our every-day thinking.

In addition to attending to the embodied, emotional aspects of interaction which might tell us something about the appeal of thinking with other people, we should also ask how these interactions shape and change the ways in which the civil servants think about issues, and in the process, what happens to the *knowledge* or *meanings* the various parties bring to such interactions. In the next sections I suggest two (overlapping) sets of theoretical resources which might help us with this: theories of dialogue, and theories which understand meaning as constructed through interaction.

### Interaction as dialogue

There were some forms of interaction in internal, idea-testing meetings which closely resembled Socratic forms of interrogation and argumentation. The civil servants would challenge one another's proposals in way that seemed intended to test (and in doing so, develop) their robustness and strength in the face of possible future criticism from politicians, Parliament, the press or stakeholders. As we saw one civil servant say of his team, 'It's very rare that you will say something and it will just be let go' (DHA8). Critical thinking skills were an important part of the civil servants' skill set. In such meetings, a civil servant's colleagues would take-up the position of possible objectors to the policy and point out logical flaws in a proposal or an argument. Descriptions of the Socratic method (or what we might call Socratic practices) offer a means of theorising the civil servants' practices, and of thinking about why and how they engaged with one another in these ways (see Table 4.1 The Socratic Elenchus and Idea Testing).

**Table 4.1 The Socratic Elenchus and Idea Testing**

	<p><b>The Socratic Elenchus</b></p> <p><i>(as represented by Vlastos 1983; and reproduced in Matthews 2008, p.124)</i></p>	<p><b>Example of the civil servants' idea-testing interactions</b></p> <p><i>The policy example is invented for the purposes of illustration</i></p>
1	<p>The interlocutor asserts a thesis [p] which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation.</p>	<p>Civil servant 1 sets out plans to give the Secretary of State a particular new power through the new Health Bill.</p> <p>Civil servant 2 wants to establish whether this proposal is defensible.</p>
2	<p>Socrates secures agreement to further premises, say <i>q</i> and <i>r</i>... The argument is ad hoc: Socrates argues from <i>q</i> and <i>r</i>, not to them.</p>	<p>Civil servant 2 points out that an overall principle of the Government's health service reform programme is that the role of central Government in managing health should be significantly reduced.</p>
3	<p>Socrates then argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that <i>q</i> and <i>r</i> entail <i>not-p</i>.</p>	<p>Civil servant 2 argues, and civil servant 1 agrees, that giving the Secretary of State this new power appears to contradict this high-level principle.</p>
4	<p>Thereupon Socrates claims that <i>not-p</i> has been proved true, <i>p</i> false.</p>	<p>Civil servant 2 claims that either the proposal will have to be changed, or civil servant 1 will have to come up with a convincing argument as to why this instance ought to be an exception to the prevailing principle.</p>

Scholars disagree on whether Socrates meant only to reveal his interlocutors' inconsistencies, or whether the method was intended to actually uncover truths, as is implied by step 4 (Matthews 2008). In the case of my participants, consistency seemed to be a more relevant criterion of acceptability than claims to truth (Chapter 6 shows how *coherence* with existing policy is an important criterion for assessing policy proposals). In the example above, when civil servant 2 requires civil servant 1 to come up with a convincing argument as to why it is acceptable that her proposal contradicts some broader policy principle, it is not because he himself needs to be convinced that this proposal is legitimate given his belief in this overriding principle, but rather that he wants to be assured that she can defend the proposal against criticisms of inconsistency from others. The civil servants use Socratic-style dialogue to identify aspects of a policy which might render it susceptible to strong criticism, and to adjust the proposal accordingly, or at least to pre-arm themselves against possible objections.

### **Meaning as constructed through dialogue**

More recent theorists of dialogue have focused less on the adversarial quality of these Socratic-like exchanges, and have attended instead to the educative power of question-and-response forms of interaction (Freire 1996), and on the ways in which such exchanges enable the construction of new meaning (for a helpful introduction to contemporary theories of dialogue from a policy studies perspective, see Escobar 2012). The point I take from these authors is that the outcome of a dialogue is not simply the sum of its constituent inputs – some aggregate of the knowledge that the respective participants brought to the occasion – but rather that the distinctive qualities of the back-and-forth of interaction enables the joint construction of new meaning. Theorist David Bohm illustrates this phenomena as follows:

[in] a dialogue, when one person says something, the other person does not in general respond with exactly the same meaning as that seen by the first person. Rather, the meanings are only *similar* and not identical. Thus, when the second person replies, the first person sees a *difference* between what he meant to say and what the other person understood. On considering this difference, he may then be able to see something new, which is relevant both to his own views and to those of the other person. And so it can go back and forth, with the continual emergence of a new content that is common to both participants. Thus, in a dialogue, each person does not attempt to *make common* certain ideas or items of information that are already known to him. Rather, it may be said that the two people are making something *in common*, i.e. creating something new together.

(Bohm 1996, p.3 original emphasis)

This recalls for me how the civil servants said they sometimes went to meet people not knowing exactly what information it was that they wanted to get from the meeting; and neither presumably did their interlocutors. They worked this out through conversation.

Building on the earlier theme of how our capacity to think as infants develops through social interaction, Russian socio-linguist Valentin Voloshinov takes this a step further to argue that there is a sense in which *all* thought and meaning (not just that of infants) emerges through interaction. For Voloshinov, we work out what we think, and we make sense of (and even construct) our experiences, through articulating them to others:

Realized expression [...] exerts a powerful, reverse influence on experience: it begins to tie inner life together, giving it more definite and lasting expression...The claim can be made that it is a matter *not so much of expression accommodating itself to our inner world but rather of our inner world accommodating itself to the potentialities of our expression, its possible routes and directions... The organizing center of any utterance, of any experience, is not within but outside – in the social milieu surrounding the individual being.*

(1973, pp.90, 91, 93, original emphasis)

The *meaning* of these articulations, or ‘utterances’, in turn emerges through interaction. For Voloshinov, listening involves translation; ‘understanding strives to match the speaker’s word with a *counter word*. Only in understanding

a word in a foreign tongue is an attempt made to match it with the “same” word in one’s own language’ (Voloshinov 1973, p.102). On this basis, he claims that:

Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the *effect of interaction between speaker and listener* ... It is like an electric spark that occurs only when two different terminals are hooked together [...] Only the current of verbal intercourse endows a word with the light of meaning.  
(1973, pp.102–03)

So we might think of dialogue as enabling the mutual discovery or construction of new meaning, and even as a pre-requisite for the emergence of meaning *per se*. This idea has also been explored with reference to understanding policy transfer (the movement of policy ideas between times and locations) and research use by policymakers as instances of translation. Richard Freeman draws on theories of translation in language and literary studies as well as in sociology to emphasise the necessarily generative (rather than reductive or linear) character of translation: ‘every utterance [must] be accompanied by some hermeneutic move on the part of the reader or listener’, and this ought to be seen as ‘a source of innovation and creativity as well as error and failure’ (Freeman 2009, p.440). The idea that meaning emerges through interaction also recalls the writing of Susan Leigh Star (drawing on Lev Vygotsky) and Jean Lave on knowing as socially distributed (see Chapter 1).

But for all this discussion of the constructive power of dialogue, it is important to recognise that interactions among policymakers, and between policymakers and outsiders are not necessarily co-operative, egalitarian ventures in which the parties collectively seek to identify some new and mutually satisfactory way of thinking about issues. As we saw earlier in the chapter, such interactions are often about trying to persuade some other party of the legitimacy or expediency of some new proposal. Perhaps most importantly, the mid-ranking civil servants are often in a position where they cannot allow themselves or their thinking to be transformed through the interaction. They are agents of the Minister, and of their senior civil servant colleagues. As representatives of the Department they

have to watch what they say; they cannot put all issues on the table and see where the conversation takes them, since existing settlements may often be the result of hard-won compromises by colleagues, and it is not in their gift to re-open such negotiations. This necessarily places limits on the generative power of their dialogues.

### **The credibility of the real**

Personal and professional encounters with front-line staff and patients, *in situ*, produced a form of knowledge which seemed to enjoy a particular credibility for the civil servants when it came to their own understanding about an issue. We saw earlier in the chapter that there was something about visiting a service, and speaking to the people working for or using that service, which seemed to give the participants a set of understandings which were especially convincing and enduring; a form of 'seeing is believing'. This recalls a quote from work by Mark Petticrew and others, mentioned in Chapter 1, in which a civil servant interviewee reports that 'what Ministers call "evidence" is what they get from constituents at their Saturday surgery' (Petticrew et al. 2004, p.812).

But in my study this effect extended to civil servants too. This phenomenon must surely be related to the strength and appeal of *observation* as a research method in the social sciences. There is something about *being there* (as opposed to reading about an issue, or even asking people about it in some dislocated interview room) which gives an inquirer a sense of understanding what things are *really* like.

Of course, in everyday life we continually rely on our ability to understand and interpret situations in which we find ourselves, and the ethnographic method, and the civil servants' interest in going to see services, both draw on these skills which we possess as social actors. And yet the accomplished ethnographer seeks to reflect critically on, and account for, how it is that they come to see and understand the subjects of their study as they do (see Chapter 2). I did not see

evidence of this type of reflection by the civil servants. Though they might discuss in general terms what was particular about the case they had visited, what really seemed to stick was a strong sense of how things are, which had a distinctively powerful impact on their understanding and beliefs about an issue.

I suggested in the chapter that one aspect of this phenomenon might derive from the emotional impact of such encounters: they involved visiting severely deprived areas of the country; cancer wards; A&E departments; and other locations in which front-line staff and patients are having to deal with difficult social situations which are often highly emotionally charged. As the psychologist Peter Hobson puts it, 'we cannot watch someone else's feelings and fail to react with feelings ourselves. We have a basic response to expressions of feelings in others – a response that is more basic than thought' (2002, p.60). It may be that, once the civil servant has experienced this emotional response, its perceived cause takes on a distinctive authenticity. It *feels* real.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman argues that we learn more from individual cases than from statistical facts (2011, pp.173–74). Kahneman says that this is attributable, at least in part, to what he terms the *availability heuristic*. His argument proceeds as follows: experiments tell us that personal experiences (as well as pictures and vivid examples) are easier to recall than words, statistics and incidents that have happened to others. Our confidence in the validity of what we 'know' is a *feeling* determined by the ease with which something is recalled (as well as its coherence). Thus, personal experiences are more easily recalled than other forms of knowledge, and that ease of recollection gives us an enhanced sense of their 'truth'. This creates a phenomenon that he dubs WYSIATI: 'what you see is all there is' (2011, pp.130–32). We believe, and do not readily scrutinise, that which we have experienced ourselves. Interestingly Kahneman says that individuals who are most strongly affected by this ease of retrieval, allowing themselves to 'go with the flow' of this tendency, are those who are 'knowledgeable novices on the topic of the task' (2011, p.135); an apt description of many of the mid-ranking civil servants.

## Chapter 5 Analysis and Representation Practices

*'You can't plainly present something true'. DHA1*

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As well as drawing on the knowledge of others, and constructing new knowledge through dialogue, the civil servants were also engaged in creating their own representations of the world, through defining, categorising, quantifying, and mapping the objects of policy. Civil servants employed as analysts have a formal responsibility for providing economic and statistical analyses to inform and support policy formulation. Furthermore, the requirement to develop *impact assessments* for significant policy developments institutionalises the role of cost-benefit analysis in evaluating and selecting between different policy options. Or at least that is the theory. In this chapter I describe how, in practice, analysts were often side-lined in decision-making and impact assessments were considered a bureaucratic hurdle or at best, a means of justifying decisions already taken.

Other forms of analytical work did play a critical role in enabling the civil servants to conceptualise, hold steady and act upon the objects of their policies. As Herbert Simon puts it, given the bounded nature of rationality, public administrators must necessarily work with representations in which: 'the world [the administrator] perceives is a drastically simplified model of the buzzing, blooming confusion that constitutes the real world' (Simon 1957, p.xxv). This chapter explores how such perceptions were constructed, and what might be their consequences. I begin with a description of the role that analysts play in the Department.

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## The Role of Analysts

Most civil servants are formally categorised as ‘policymakers’, defined as covering ‘all [those] civil servants engaged in the elaboration and development of government policy, from directly advising ministers on the formation of policy to designing its implementation’ (O’Toole 2010). But the Department also employs a number of analysts with professional skills in economics and statistics, and ‘operations research’. In Appendix A I set out the number and organisation of these staff.

I found in my fieldwork that analysts were often marginalised from the main business of policy-making, occupying a semi-outsider status. As one analyst put it, ‘partly because of a historical split between analysts and policy within the Department [...] it’s been kind of viewed as a “them and us”’ (DHA8). Interviewees described senior analysts as not having had ‘a seat at the top table’ (DHA1) or not being ‘in the loop’ (DHA6), and at more junior level, in relation to working with policy teams, analysts were frequently excluded from discussions about policy development. Here is a junior analyst describing her experience:

JM: Can you think of [a policy] where you’ve felt more involved in those sorts of – working out how to move forward with it – kind of things?

DHA5: Well, quite often I join when there’s been some thought to the policy solution, I think that’s where analysis might be in DH at the moment, that the people who know the topic area have thought about the problem and the potential solution to it and then we get asked to come in and look at it [...].

However, there were exceptions to this rule. Interestingly, those analysts who seemed to be playing a more influential role in policy development were also those who were most reluctant to identify themselves as analysts in interview conversations, calling into question the helpfulness of the analyst/policymaker distinction:<sup>16</sup>

DHA6: the DH policy civil servants who were in the team can't ever resist the separation of analysts and policymakers. But you know, I would always complain when they talked about "analysts". And the jobs we did were actually not just analysts, you know we were doing policy – I was leading policy as well as the analysis. Because actually I don't think those two are separable.

JM: Are you there [in the team] as an analyst?

DHA8: Kind of.

JM: Or is that not a helpful distinction?

DHA8: Erm {laughs}. It's difficult to know how to answer that [...] I think in some cases analysts and policymakers work very well together. Though I would argue that's a lot more down to the people involved rather than the artificial split that we've got [between policymakers and analysts]. Looking to the future what we would ideally have is a Department where you've got a lot more people who've got the joint policy and analytical skills, but at this stage I would say that we haven't got a huge number people in that position.

There seemed to be a spectrum on which analysts could be placed: at the one end were those who were focused on completing analytical tasks to a standard acceptable to other analysts, and who saw policy work as outside their realm; at the other were those who performed some policy-type work themselves (such as 'getting stakeholders to do things' (DHA1)), who questioned the helpfulness of the policymaker/analyst distinction, and who were more similar to policy-making civil servants in terms of how they judged their own achievements. Some interviewees themselves alluded to this variation within the analyst community:

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<sup>16</sup> A footnote to the Department's data on the number of analysts in post states that the numbers do not include analysts currently in non-analyst posts, suggesting that the key demarcation between analyst/non-analyst resides in particular role or post, rather than the skills of its inhabitant. As the quotes that follow will show, in practice, even this distinction was not clear-cut.

DHA8: this is a constant challenge for all analysts in the Department. If you just kind of do back-of-a-fag-packet kind of stuff but people listen to it, is that more or less important than to spend six months on a project that meets the [more rigorous standards]... but it's not really [used]...

DHA4: And there's a big split between the sort of pragmatists at one end and the purists at the other.

One interviewee described this distinction in slightly different terms; analysts are of two types, he said, they either produce numbers, or they think about problems in analytic terms (DHP4). The number-producers seemed to be examples of purists, while the analytical thinkers were more likely to be pragmatists.

These two categories bare some resemblance to the 'technical' and 'political' skills of policy analysts, described by Arnold Meltsner in 1970s America. In Meltsner's account, the analyst with technical skills 'is convinced that he is objective, a scientist of sorts' (Meltsner 1976, p.23), focuses on producing high quality analysis as an end in itself and is concerned with satisfying themselves and their analyst peers. In contrast the analyst with political skills wants to be 'where the action is' (1976, p.32), is concerned with the timeliness of their analysis and their ability to communicate ideas (as summarized in Radin 2000, pp.24–26).

When I probed interviewees further on this distinction, they were not able to offer a characterisation of the kinds of people who fell into one group or another: it did not seem to be determined by age, gender, or professional background, for example. The positioning of an individual on this scale seemed instead to be associated with how an individual analyst understood their role and its purpose, together with their willingness to compromise logic or other rules associated with analytic practice for pragmatic, policy-related purposes. Here are some examples:

**The purist:**

JM: So with [that] document, who is your audience? Who do you have in your head when you write it?

DHA1: I'm trained to think about what is a correct interpretation of evidence, not who is my audience and how I can make a compelling case for it. We don't think about persuading.

**The pragmatist:**

DHA6: [...] there are some times when people do make suggestions and you think, well that's not quite, and I'm particularly, because I quite like frameworks which are logical, where people might make changes where you think, that's not quite right, but I think you just have to kind of...

JM: Swallow it?

DHA6: Swallow it, yeah. Where okay it doesn't quite fit, but you know, it's something, [for example another civil servant says] 'I want an indicator of that' and it doesn't really, it's sort of covered by these other ones, but yeah, okay, I'll just stick it in there, that's fine.

JM: Because it keeps you on board, or gets you on board?

DHA6: Exactly, yeah.

**The policymaker frustrated by purist analysts:**

DHP10: [the analysts] didn't see what my ultimate aims were [...] they saw their job as, you know, well we're just going to go off and crunch these interesting numbers and oh look, there's a funny tangent here and I'm going to follow it for a while, even though what I [as policy lead] was really wanting was something else.

These groupings among analysts also seemed to be linked with the members' career aspirations: whether they wanted to move into a policy job in the future, or remain in an analytical role, either inside the Department or in academia or a think-tank. As one analyst put it:

DHA2: Line management [of analysts] is to the policy lead, though there may be groups of analysts on a team in which case the junior analyst will be accountable to the senior analyst. They all have a professional accountability to the chief economist. Quite which is the stronger pull depends on their ambition. If they want to be promoted as an analyst then it's about getting a good rep among analysts.

Of course, in practice, individual analysts combined different elements of the two types sketched here, but my impression was that it was more common for analysts to be situated towards the 'purist' end of the spectrum. A number of interviewees (policymakers and more pragmatic analysts) emphasised the value and relative scarcity of people who combined analytical with policy skills:

JM: Can you tell me about someone [...] who you think is really good at what they do? [...]

DHP4: There's an analyst who is exceptionally creative. He's a pukka economist and understands all the cost-benefit analyses [...] Others are great relationship people, getting things to happen with people in other Departments. They might know very little about the technical aspects of the policy. So those are the two polar extremes really. There's not many who are excellent at both.

DHA1: Analysts aren't very good at people and understanding where people are coming from. It is rare to have excellence at both [those skills and analytical skills].

DHP6: So, I think the key trick to pull off for us is when you get both analytic capability and then it gets combined with policy responsibility. So [Steve Brown] actually has a policy job, he's an economist, but he's fantastic because he combines those two things. [Nick Jones] is like that. He came in as an analyst and once he'd mastered the policy, you know, suddenly, you had this kind of capability that you wouldn't have had otherwise. So my ideal is an economist or a, usually an economist actually, less statisticians, they're a bit odd statisticians [...] But yeah, an economist who turns into a policymaker is a fantastic resource.

It seemed that the extent to which purist analysts had a weak hand in decisions in the Department was at least partly attributable their treating the work of analysis as *the* task, rather than a tool to serve the requirements of policy-making. In Chapter 6 I set out the forms that this second, more pragmatic use of knowledge took.

The relatively marginalised role of some analysts seemed to be exacerbated by them having to spend so much of their time working on impact assessments. I describe in the next section how such assessments rarely had a significant influence on the content of policies in development, though they did play a symbolic role in policy-making. However, as I show later in the chapter, the analytical skills involved in simplifying and systematizing the objects of policy that analysts (and some policymakers) contributed to policy teams, did play a significant and valued role in policy work.

## Impact Assessments

Impact assessments (IAs) are a compulsory requirement for any policy development that proposes to change the costs or regulatory burdens the government places on outside organisations. Civil servants are required to complete a form which sets out the expected costs and benefits for various population groups of the policy options under consideration (see Appendix C for an overview of the formal requirements surrounding IAs). Completing these assessments formed a major part of the workload of the analysts I spoke to. A senior analyst who had recently returned to the Department after an absence of some years remarked that this was one of the things which had most struck him on his return: ‘an awful lot of analysts’ time is [now] spent doing impact assessments’ (DHA6).

However, rather than constituting the means by which different options were appraised by policy teams, the assessments were often completed by analysts towards the end of a period of work on a policy, after a preferred option had been established. In fact sometimes they were not completed until the last minute. For example:

DHP7: When I was given the strategy that had been produced, I said to them, possibly rather foolishly, this is when I started back in October, “where’s the impact assessment that goes with the strategy?” They hadn’t done one. So then we, if you like, second stage, we were doing a little consultation about it, and the impact assessment I tried to write didn’t fit because it was the three old questions rather than the new questions if you like. So we ended up getting to a stage quite close actually to publication where we decided, okay, we’re not doing impact assessment now. We’ll do one later in the piece because we can’t make it fit [...] It’s going to be a nightmare at some point this year trying to do that, to be honest.

Even where work had begun on an assessment early on in a policy’s formulation, the pace of policy and political developments would often outstrip the analysis work undertaken for the IA, as was the case in this example:

DHA5: [...] the policy announcement was made on the [10<sup>th</sup> of November] by the Secretary of State in Government and we were still working on the IA at that point in time. So although [the announcement] should have come at the end, it came part way through.

It is also telling that, while the civil servants frequently drew on past policy documents when getting to grips with a new area, they very rarely described using impact assessments for that purpose. When they did so, it was often in disparaging terms, for example: 'I looked at the impact assessment, although I have to say to you I skimmed that {laughs}' (DHP9).

Although some policymakers described finding some of the questions posed by impact assessments as helpful prompts for their thinking (and, as I describe later in the chapter, being able to quantify the potential impact of a policy carried a certain amount of internal prestige), for the most part, IAs were completed because they were compulsory: they were 'a hoop that needs to be gone through' (DHA5). They were also recognised as a means for defending or justifying policy choices already made. As one senior analyst, who had had responsibility for the oversight of IAs in the Department, acknowledged, 'sometimes [the IA] is a handmaiden to the Minister, and about finding good bits of evidence to support an already selected position' (DHA2). He seemed to be explicitly recognising their symbolic function when he concluded that they were a 'useful part of the package, a key strand in carrying the case for a particular policy' (DHA2).

Equality impact assessments, for which the policy team has to complete a form in which they reflect on the effect their proposal could have on inequality, discrimination and vulnerable groups (see Appendix C), seemed to play a similar role to IAs. One policymaker with experience of the process told me that there were three common ways in which policy teams approached these assessments: essentially ignoring them, and not undertaking the required assessment; treating them as a bureaucratic exercise and getting someone temporary, or junior, who has not been involved in the policy's development to

fill them out; or at best, developing a well thought-through equality impact assessment, but then still not applying the learning from that assessment to the content of the policy (DHP5). In all of these scenarios, the assessment was seen as separate from the policy development process.

So why are IAs and equality impact assessments not afforded more value by the civil servants? The interviewees complained about the 'straitjacketing' of the pro forma (DHA6) and the bureaucracy surrounding the sign-off processes, whereby assessments had to be signed off by a senior analysts or the equalities team, and relations could become tense. One interviewee described to me the considerable lengths policymakers would go to in order to avoid the process, including getting their document prepared by outside organisations, or persuading a senior colleague to 'stand on' the sign-off team, telling them that the proposal would be announced by the Minister the following day (DHA5).

While these processes are compulsory, they simultaneously lack authority. This is attributable to the fact that the assessments bracketed-off analysis from broader policy and political concerns. In practice, the policy-making civil servants needed to consider all these factors in the round, and political and policy concerns were always more influential than the outcome of such analyses. This analyst summed up the problem like this:

DHA8: All the stuff around the IA doesn't tend to take into account things like how easy it is to implement, how many years to implement, what stakeholder opinions are, what the political pressure is, which also needs to feed in. And so policy people don't value the IA [...] And analysts tend to put too much value on the IA. And that then becomes quite a significant problem [...] I don't know whether it's [that] the IA's an excuse for them not being able to work together for whatever reason, or it is genuinely the IA type stuff driving a wedge between them. I would imagine it's probably a bit of both.

As that interviewee explained, the status of impact assessments and the status of purist analysts seemed to have become mutually reinforcing.

So what other contributions did analysts make to policy formulation, which might explain why policymakers were so interested in people who combined analytical and policy skills? Their value seemed to be in providing distinctive ways of thinking about, and representing issues, which made the objects of policy amenable to conceptualisation, further analysis, and intervention. Here is a senior analyst describing these thinking skills:

JM: So I'm interested in what you think an analyst brings to things, especially considering that you're resisting the kind of strong distinction [between analysts and policymakers].

DHA6: [...] none of these things do I claim just for analysts, but I think probably some analysts have a strong kind of conceptual, you know, way of conceptualising the world. They like to seek out frameworks, models, theories to explain the world, and that's quite helpful because it helps simplify things and build models of the world [...] the sort of systematising skills.

As Meltsner identified in his writing on American administrators four decades ago, a skilled analyst 'makes the complex simple' (1976, p.35). This work of 'simplifying' and 'systematising' was a significant part of the knowledge work undertaken by both the analysts and policymakers I interviewed and observed. It comprised defining, categorising, quantifying and mapping: constructing representations of the objects of policy, in order to render them actionable. In the next section I describe each of these practices in turn. In the Discussion I consider the implications of these practices for the ways in which the civil servants come to see and act upon the objects of policy.

## Constructing Representations

### Defining and categorising

Defining and categorising the objects of policies was a continual concern for the civil servants. Meetings frequently involved exchanges about who counts as this or that category of professional or patient, or which issues sit under what policy area. These negotiations were played out in two main ways. Firstly, through decisions about whether an issue should or should not be discussed in a particular meeting, or handled by a particular project team. For example:

Civil servant: You mentioned authorisation. Can we discuss offline whether that belongs here or with GP commissioning? (Obs2)

Civil servant 1: Should public health come onto [this] working group agenda?

Civil servant 2: Umm {sounds unsure}. Yes probably, because we want to keep [the workload] balanced [between the groups]. (Obs6)

As this last exchange suggests, decisions about issue groupings may sometimes be taken for practical, administrative reasons, and yet they would have consequences for the ways in which different policies develop.

Secondly, civil servants created and tested categories by relating them to real or hypothetical individual cases. For example:

Civil servant 1: It's about distinguishing between support and treatment.

Civil servant 2: If it's care it's treatment. [...]

Civil servant 3: Just to be clear about where [that type of] care is – do we want to formalise this one case? (Obs7)

Civil servant: One of the interesting things coming out of [that meeting] is, when does [this category of patient] become [that category of patient]? What do you reckon [Steve]? You have a good head for policy. [...][Simon], you had that case of someone who [needed this type of service who came from that group]. So if we agreed the policy tweak now, he would have been entitled to [it]? (Obs11)

Difficulties arose where people defied categorisation:

NHS manager: There are some [people] who then are [this type of patient, and not that type], so they are out there, in your community, floating around.

Member of that group: We don't fit neatly into the boxes – we don't ask for preferential treatment, but just understanding that we're different.

Civil servant: What is the typical profile of [someone from your group]?

Member of that group: [...] there is no typical profile. (Obs9)

Civil servant: There is a problem with this [group, who don't fall into either of the categories we've been talking about]. They are in limbo. (Obs6)

The references to 'floating' and 'limbo' stand in contrast to the civil servants working to put people and issues into 'boxes':

Civil servant: We've got a whole host of non-medical, quasi-clinical roles, which are increasingly important as care shifts to the non-hospital providers. We box them up differently ... (Obs6)

DHA6: [Before I speak to people] I like to have kind of made sense of the kind of, well, at least [have] some kind of structure for putting things in. When they tell you something new, it goes in this box.

Civil servant: So we'll have a small group meet on logistics and funding because we can't not have that sorted out. We'll get it back in its box. (Obs7)

As this last quote illustrates, putting phenomena into boxes was a means of controlling an issue, of turning something complex, fluid and problematic into something manageable. One analyst described in interview the first phase of work on a project in terms of 'attempting to *define down* what the issues were' (DHA5, my emphasis). This interest in 'boxing' and 'defining down' was often realised in material terms through tabulation: tables in documents provided a means of breaking issues down into separate, but equivalent, parts. Progress logs were a common feature of papers tabled at meetings. In these tables, a policy would be broken-down into component parts, which each occupied a row. The content of the columns would include the name of the civil servant responsible for the topic; a one line narrative statement on the focus of that component of the policy; and details of its state of progress, sometimes including a 'red', 'amber' or 'green' risk rating, highlighting whether it was behind schedule or subject to some other problem (see Table 5.1 Example of a Policy Progress Grid.)

**Table 5.1 Example of a Policy Progress Grid**

*Content invented for illustrative purposes.*

<b>Redesign of NHS commissioning</b>			
<b>Task</b>	<b>Lead</b>	<b>Key Milestones</b>	<b>Risk rating</b>
<i>Setting up NHS Commissioning Board in Shadow Form</i>	Tom White, Policy Support Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Appoint interim chief exec</li> <li>- Agree Terms of Reference with Minister</li> <li>- Establish funding</li> <li>- Identify skill needs</li> <li>- Map structure</li> </ul>	<p>Amber</p> <p>Chief exec appointed.</p> <p>Terms of reference not yet resolved.</p>
<i>Establishing CCG Pathfinder Programme</i>	<p>Sandra Lukes, NHS Commissioning and System Management</p> <p>(A.N.Other, G6, Policy Support Unit)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Agree terms of reference for participation with NAPC and NHS Alliance</li> <li>- Issue tender for academic evaluation</li> <li>- Secure 50% participation within first 18 months.</li> </ul>	<p>Green</p> <p>ToR agreed.</p> <p>Evaluation tender in development.</p>

At some points in meeting discussions, it was as if the thing to be acted upon was the content of the table, rather than that which it represented; as if the question of how to extend a service to some particular group of the population within the agreed deadline became a matter of how to change a number in a cell, or change a row from amber to green. The effect of all this categorising and defining down was to make highly complex social phenomena seem amenable to influence and action. These acts of definition and categorisation were creative as well as reductive. To develop a new category of person, or a new topic area was to render particular individuals or areas of life, appropriate objects of

policy. As one senior civil servant put it: 'I don't think we had [this kind of] health till we made it up' (Obs4).

### Quantifying and mapping

References to basic forms of quantification cropped up regularly in the meetings I observed, and in the stories that analysts told of policy development in interviews. The civil servants frequently asked themselves and others: how many belong to this social group, or this professional group, or suffer from this particular disease, or are likely to use this particular service or this combination of services? Meetings often included points at which a civil servant would ask: 'Have you got a feel for [the] numbers?' (Obs8); 'do you have a sense of numbers?' (Obs10); 'we're near the point [...] of needing to get a feel for the substance, the kind of numbers' (Obs6).

For some analysts, drawing together such data was a means of starting work on a topic:

JM: How did you get yourself up to speed on what you felt like you needed to understand, to be able to move forward with it in a productive way?

DHA6: [...] One is the kind of, what can you find from basic data, what are the basic questions here, what's been happening – have [cases] been increasing, what's happening to staffing, what's happened to money? You know basic kinds of questions. So, cause I think you need to have a basic level of understanding of the facts.

DHA5: Obviously we need to know what sort of, what population... Because they didn't have any fixed idea of "this is what we're going to do". The work that we were doing was trying to create some background, something to build on, some evidence that we knew we would have to use in the future without being too specific to what was going to change.

For these analysts, quantifying provided a starting point, and a foundation for subsequent policy development work; it translated the issue into something that seemed tangible and concrete, and in so doing, provided something to build on. Being in possession of such data also seemed to be a way of demonstrating to others that you had a handle on a topic. For example, one policymaker described having been impressed by a pitch made by a colleague to include a

particular issue in a policy document: 'they could tell me, you know, what the incidence [rate] was and everything' (DHP10).

Further on in the policy development process, being able to specify in numeric terms how a policy can have an impact, what that impact is likely to be, and framing the policy in a way that makes it possible to quantify its effects, were held in high esteem by some, and seen by many as a means of satisfying political leaders:

Civil servant 1: To talk plainly, we have to report to the [Minister] once a year on what we're doing. And we need something to put in that report. And if it's too light, they will withdraw the funding. [...]

Civil servant 2: And it's a good thing, to know you're doing good.

Charity chief executive: We want to measure everything. So that we know we're helping people. (Obs8)

DHP10: [success] is partly about knowing what it would do, if you then implemented these solutions, what impact it would have if you ... I don't think I've done anything that is that special. I'm much more in awe of somebody like [Sarah Brook] who on the stroke team worked out what they needed to do, and they have to implement a stroke target and everything, and saying *this* is the time at which it will save people's lives, and we therefore need to have our ambulance standard of eight minutes, because that's the point at which the intervention is meaningful, and is the difference.

Although impact assessments themselves were side-lined in policy development, the economic paradigm of cost-benefit analyses and the power of numbers were reflected in the way in which the civil servants used this kind of data to demonstrate and account for decisions and actions taken. This kind of information seemed to be used both for persuading other civil servants of the value of a particular proposal, as well as in more formal terms as a justification for a policy.

Another way in which the civil servants represented the world to themselves was through mapping: plotting out in documents and PowerPoint slides the geographic distribution of particular populations or services, or current and future organisational structures of parts of the health service. These mapping exercises seemed particularly useful to teams early on in a policy's development

as the civil servants sought to know and represent the objects of their policies. Once settled, these presentations were used as points of reference in explaining the policy to colleagues and stakeholders. Diagrams of system structures were particularly prevalent at the time of my fieldwork because of the major restructuring of the NHS in process. Here are some examples of maps being referred to in meetings:

Civil servant: There's quite a lot going on in mapping the new policy world. At some point we need to make that into a picture. (Obs2)

NHS manager: Can we have a map of the clusters so when we're talking to [the front-line] we know what to refer to? (Obs7)

In fact the civil servants were using maps and organigrams not just to locate and represent others, but also to locate themselves as the Department also underwent restructuring (see Appendix A):

DHP13: There's only going to be the NHSCB [NHS Commissioning Board], a public health bit and then the Department of State functions. I think that's where I'm going to sit. They're publishing organigrams of the NHSCB and the PHE [public health England] at the end of May. And then we should be able to look at it and go, "oh yes, maybe I fit in there" {points to a position on an imaginary piece of paper}.

Civil servant: So one of our questions is where we are. Without knowing the [service] structure it can be difficult... (Obs9)

These acts of quantification and mapping seemed to be manifestations of not just an interest in understanding issues, but also of a will to get a grip on, to control, the objects in question. There was a sense that if a civil servant could just get enough numbers, and plot out the thing on a piece of paper, if they could *visualise* the phenomena, then they could really *know* it, in a way which enabled them to act upon it, and to detect and report on the impact of that intervention. Some interviewees reported that colleagues both within the Department of Health and in other government Departments had almost insatiable appetites for numbers. For example:

DHA6: So I reckon people who don't really understand numbers often think they need lots of numbers, without really thinking about the quality [of them...] The Treasury, you know we gave them these results early on about the [figures] and they wanted the [figures] broken down, so there's future [estimates], we gave the 2010/11 [figures] if the [policy was introduced] as of today, and we gave them the numbers in 2025. So you know, it's only fifteen years ahead. But they were, you know, "we want them for every year from now to 2025, and we want them broken down into all these things".

### *The trouble with counting and mapping*

This aspiration to be all-knowing on the basis of numbers presumes that the numbers bear some direct and privileged relationship with reality. But the analysts were very aware that such numbers always involved choices and assumptions. This was most obvious in relation to future projections, as the last interviewee pointed out:

DHA6: And you're like, look, actually, 2025, we're all guessing, you know? Actually, what's the point of just unpacking all this stuff when it was a huge guess anyway?

Other analysts also alluded to the necessarily constructed nature of many of the numbers they produce which are intended to represent current states of affairs as well possible futures. For example:

JM: But when you're producing things like a set of population estimates for a policy lead, [...] what sort of form does your feeding back to them take?

DHA5: Umm, my personal preference is to put it in a two-page briefing document [...] You kind of give the answer immediately and then all the caveats you can fit on the front page, so they know *it isn't going to be the answer. It is an estimate of the answer.* (My emphasis)

DHA1: Somewhere in there the numbers are wrong, but *they're so ball park anyway.* It kind of goes out in the rounding. (My emphasis)

DHA2: The HSJ [a health service trade journal] ran a big piece on it – the DH was very angry and started to pull back on IAs. They only wanted them to contain numbers which aren't speculative. Some IAs started going out with no numbers in them at all.

As this last quote implies, at least in the case of assessing potential impacts, all numbers are 'speculative'. In fact, even the most apparently simple counting tasks were never quite as straightforward as they first appeared:

DHA8: The other thing that one of the guys in the team started doing is estimating how many people we might be talking about [...] [but] because we haven't got a huge amount of information on this, it's based on about four or five different ways of getting at it to see if we can get something consistent across to say, this is how many people we *might* be talking about. (My emphasis)

DHA5: [we were asked] simple things like how many patients are there with [this] disease. So [the director] with his clinical colleagues would go through ICD10 [diagnostic] codes and identify the ones that were related to [the] disease, and I would go to the database and pull out the data, process the data into population estimates, patient population estimates, rather than just activity. Because the data originally comes out on activity then you have to process it into population.

These acts of quantification were not simply about tallying up people, objects and events. They involved choices: *decisions* about which of a range of indirect measures to use, or which diagnostic codes are most likely to be associated with a particular disease (codes which themselves are translations by clinicians and, in turn, hospital administrators of the particular symptoms of some individual); and *assumptions* which make it possible to infer patient population estimates from hospital activity data.

If quantifying was never straight forward, mapping tasks also turned out to be more complex and political than they might have seemed at first. Attempts to 'simply describe' existing systems and organisational structures often met with dispute and resistance; representing them involved choices, and often implicit in such choices were decisions about future policy directions. One senior policymaker told me about a project in which she had had to provide an account of a particular set of functions currently being carried out by a number of different organisations that were due to be merged into one. This initial task of plotting the status quo had proved a highly sensitive exercise 'because you could tell that there was a [future] structure in there, simply from capturing [the existing ones]' (DHP9).

In another example, an analyst told me about having to develop a map that showed the geographic distribution of a particular population. She realised in

the process of its production that, by changing the scale of the map's labels, it was possible to imply a particular policy problem that should be addressed. She concluded: 'You are always struggling for the truth, but you can't really plainly present something true. There are always different sides and arguments' (DHA1).

## Summary

Analytical mind-sets were valued for their ability to simplify and systematise the world, in part through the production of numeric and graphic representations. These methods enabled policymakers to elucidate the objects of their policies, and render them actionable. But this work of representation always involved choices and assumptions, and failed to remain impervious to the political tensions surrounding policy issues.

Relatedly, the apparently limited role that impact assessments played in policy development seems in part attributable to their attempt to delineate a 'pure' economic analysis of the case for particular policy options, separate from concerns about politics and the positioning of stakeholders. Nonetheless, impact assessments, and quantitative analysis more generally, seemed to be a particularly important form of legitimation in this context.

In the discussion that follows, I explore why this might be the case. I also draw on work in science and technology studies, organisation studies and cognitive psychology to reflect further on why the civil servants engaged in so much categorization and visualisation work, and on what might be the consequences of using these types of representations for the civil servants' understandings of the objects of policy.

## Discussion

### Information use and legitimisation

In 1981, organisational sociologists Martha Feldman and James March used a review of empirical studies to argue against the prevailing rational conception of information use in organisations as ‘driven by the desire to improve decisions’ (1981, p.172). They proposed instead that information gathering is principally a ‘symbolic’ activity, intended to secure legitimacy for the organisation and its decisions. The dozens of empirical studies they identified suggested that much of the information gathered by organisations:

has little decision relevance... [that] much of the information that is used to justify a decision is collected and interpreted after the decision has been made, or substantially made... [and that] much of the information gathered in response to requests for information is not considered in the making of decisions.  
(1981, p.174).

These findings fit with the ways in which impact assessments (and indeed some forms of quantitative analysis more broadly) were used by the policy-making civil servants. But if this is the case, why then does the Department continue to invest so much resource in analytical activity and especially in the production of impact assessments?

In answering a similar question about the propensity of all organisations to continue to seek out and generate information in spite of its apparently negligible impact on decisions, Feldman and March identify the *legitimation* function played by information and information seeking activities in Western societies. In contexts in which a strong value is attached to rationality<sup>17</sup> and ‘intelligent choice’ as *the* appropriate way of making decisions, they find that:

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<sup>17</sup> There are three principles that UK citizens can invoke when requesting a judicial review of a decision by a public body, including government Departments; one of them is that the way in

The gathering of information provides a ritualistic assurance that appropriate attitudes about decision making exist. Within such a scenario of performance, information is not simply a basis for action. It is representation of competence and reaffirmation of social virtue. Command of information and information sources enhances perceived competence and inspires confidence. (1981, pp.177–78)

In my data we saw how having command of numbers relevant to a policy issue was taken to be a proxy for competence by colleagues; for being in command of the brief. Recall how DHP10 said of a colleague pitching their policy proposal: ‘they could tell me, you know, what the incidence [rate] was and everything’. Thus quantitative analysis was used as a form of legitimation internally, as well as externally through the publication of impact assessments.

Feldman and March go on to point out that the ‘visibility’ of information gathering exercises become all the more important in the absence of other means for assessing a decision-maker’s knowledge of a topic (1981, p.178). In the context of the Department of Health, in which so much decision-making work takes place out of public view, we might thus interpret impact assessments as a means of the Department *performing* appropriate decision-making; an ‘orchestration’ to help ‘ensure that decision makers and observers come to believe that the decisions [reached] are reasonable – or even intelligent’ (1981, p.178). This is perhaps what DHA2 was alluding to when he described them ‘showing the thinking behind the policy’ to Parliament and the public.

Impact assessments might then be understood as an example of Lindblom’s partisan analysis (1979, p.524, see Chapter 1). Their use also recalls Christina Boswell’s work, which offers an empirical case of a policy organisation using expert knowledge to secure organisational legitimation (Boswell 2008). Giandomenico Majone’s account of ‘evidence’ as information or data which is

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which a decision was reached was ‘irrational’ (Council of Civil Service Unions v Minister for the Civil Service, 1985).

marshaled by analysts to explain or defend courses of action as reasonable is also apposite here (Majone 1989). For Majone this is not necessarily a cynical move; he emphasises the role of argument and persuasion in decision-making, and defines rationality 'not in instrumental terms, but as the ability to provide acceptable reasons for one's choices and actions' (1989, p.23). Good analysis, in this account, is that which is seen to offer a reasonable defence for the decision made. That the grounds for justifying a decision, might be different to the way in which the decisions was 'really' reached (a distinction between knowledge for 'discovery' and knowledge for 'justification') is, according to Majone, entirely reasonable and indeed in keeping with knowledge practices in that bastion of rational inquiry, the natural sciences:

The way a solution to a mathematical or scientific problem is discovered is not necessarily always or even usually the way in which the solution is presented, justified or defended to the community of specialists. Even in scientific problem solving the private moment of intuition must be followed by a public process of justification and persuasion.  
(1989, p.29)

Together these ideas can help us to understand why impact assessments have been a compulsory requirement for years in spite of so much internal ambivalence about their role in decision-making. If it is indeed the case that they have principally played a symbolic, legitimising, justificatory role, this also tells us something of the value attributed to economic and quantitative analyses as appropriate or legitimate bases for decision-making in this context. Although we have seen that these forms of knowledge rarely determine how decisions get made, they nonetheless are afforded recognition as the types of knowledge that policymakers would like to be *seen* to be drawing upon.

It could be otherwise. Feldman and March illuminate the specificity and contingency of such norms by imagining a shift in values, 'enough to leave information and information-based analysis as the true basis of organizational action that is legitimised by symbols of ambiguity and intuition' (1981, p.184). The apparent playfulness of this suggestion, its very implausibility, speaks of the

power of these normative constructions of what constitutes legitimate decision-making.

### **The particular authority of numbers**

Feldman and March's theory refers to information broadly conceived. Why in the case of my data does it seem to hold for quantitative and economic analyses in particular? After all we have seen how other forms of knowledge, developed through personal experiences or face-to-face interactions, for example, have informed civil servants' understanding of issues. But these forms tend not to feature in formal narratives or justifications of how policy is developed. What is it about numbers that makes them such a powerful symbol of appropriate, rational decision-making?

In their call for establishing a unified sociology of quantification, Wendy Espeland and Mitchell Stevens identify a number of accounts in the existing literature as to why numbers are imbued with such authority (Espeland & Stevens 2008). For example, in the writings of Max Weber and in the sociology of science they find an account of the 'long and evolving association [numbers have] with rationality and objectivity' (Espeland & Stevens 2008, p.417). This association rests in part on another identified source of their authority, rooted in 'our sense of their accuracy or validity as representations of some part of the world' (Espeland & Stevens 2008, p.417).

There is something about the nature of numbers as figures on a page or a screen that gives an impression of simplicity and wholeness. They appear self-contained, complete, and absolute, and to stand somehow in a direct and straightforward relationship with that which they describe or depict. Deborah Stone puts it this way in her writing on the role of numbers in policy work:

In our profoundly numerical contemporary culture, numbers are symbols of precision, accuracy and objectivity. They suggest mechanical selection, dictated by the nature of objects, even though all counting involves judgment and discretion... And certain kinds of numbers – big ones, ones with decimal points, ones that are not multiples of 10... seemingly advertise the prowess of the measurer, as if to say that he or she could discriminate down to the gnat's knees.

(2002, p.177)

And yet we saw in earlier sections of this chapter how even the most simple counting tasks involved choices and caveats: drawing from across multiple data sets to estimate 'how many people we *might* be talking about' (DHA8) or inferring population estimates from activity data (DHA5). As Stone concludes, 'ambiguity – the range of choices in what to measure or how to classify – always lies just beneath the surface of any counting scheme. Before a decision is made, things could go either way' (2002, p.165).

In spite of efforts by analysts to communicate to their policy-making colleagues the choices and caveats involved in the data they produced, and the guesswork that had to go into developing future projections, these colleagues often seemed not to appreciate these concerns regarding what one analyst termed the 'quality' of the numbers. Numbers seem to possess their own confidence and are easily transported between textual contexts (from a briefing note, to a PowerPoint presentation, to an informal conversation); it is easy to see how their associated caveats are more cumbersome and are dropped in transit. In their work on organisations, March and Simon identify a phenomenon they term 'uncertainty absorption', in which choices involved in the construction of numbers, and the caveats which surround them, tend to be edited-out as they move up organisational hierarchies: 'inferences are drawn from a body of evidence, and the inferences instead of the evidence itself, are then communicated' (1958, p.165). It is also the case that in this context, analysts and other policymakers are at times put under pressure by their superiors to offer definite answers. As Beryl Radin puts it in her work on policy analysis in America:

analysts who were trained as academics were likely to approach their task with a high degree of skepticism and hesitancy about their own advice. Yet when they were on the line, asked to make recommendations, they had to assume a posture of certainty.

(Radin 2000, p.28)

Quantitative analysis then holds a particular symbolic power for civil servants and was a means for the Department to perform legitimate decision-making practices. But for some civil servants quantification was also a helpful way of *understanding* the objects of their policy; a means of conceptualising that which they sought to act upon, of gaining ‘a basic level of understanding of the facts’ (DHA6). Numbers enabled the civil servants to develop a synoptic view of the complex, distant and dispersed phenomena which were the objects of their policy. As Espeland and Stevens put it: ‘Quantification makes visible people, objects or characteristics that may formerly have been invisible. It permits scrutiny of complex or disparate phenomena in ways that enable judgment’ (2008, p.415). Those authors provide the example of gross domestic product, which, they write, enables analysts to “‘see” economies’ (2008, p.415).

Quantification thus performs an important ‘visualisation’ function, similar to that of drawing maps and diagrams. In the next section I draw on work in the sociology of science to suggest how we might think further about the purposes and consequences of these representation practices for knowing.

### **Representation (i) Visualisation**

We saw in the chapter how, as well as wanting to get a ‘feel for the numbers’, the civil servants were also frequently engaged in representing the world (and their world) to themselves and to one another using organigrams and maps. We also saw that such representations could prove political, becoming sources (or at least sites) of tension and conflict. Why were these forms of knowing so pervasive, and why did they sometimes prove contentious? To reflect on these questions in more detail, in this section I draw on work from science and technology studies, where sociologists have sought to understand how and why

natural (and also social) scientists develop visual representations of the objects of their inquiry.

Sociologist Bruno Latour identifies a predilection among scientists (broadly conceived) to employ visual representations in their work; a phenomena he terms an 'obsession with graphism' (Latour 1986). Latour explains this interest as a means of making visible such intangible, complex and/or distant phenomena as economies, internal organs or galaxies (1986). Indeed, in the case of the civil servants, it seemed clear that one of the functions of creating and sharing diagrams and maps of the objects of policy was that it enabled them to develop clear mental constructs of complex phenomena, such as systems of funding and accountability linking complex national, regional and local organisational structures.

In their introduction to a volume on representation practices in the natural sciences, Michael Lynch and Steve Woolgar describe the effects of constructing visual representations of phenomena as follows:

Boundaries, discriminations, spatial orientations and temporal series are exposed and framed on graphic surfaces. The phenomena under study become more visible, stable and measurable – they more evidently “fit”... what is claimed about their structure.  
(1990, p.6)

This description seems to articulate well the way in which organigrams and other maps and diagrams enable the civil servants to depict and view phenomena in terms which make them clear and comprehensible in the context of their task. Wendy Espeland and Mitchell Stevens make a similar point about the benefits of quantification: 'By simplifying, excluding and integrating information, quantification expands the comprehensibility and comparability of social phenomena' (2008, p.415). They conclude that 'good graphical representations make complex phenomena... thinkable' (2008, pp.428–29). In Latour's terms, through the use of these various 'inscriptions', 'domains which are far apart become literally inches apart; domains which are convoluted and

hidden, become flat; thousands of occurrences can be looked at synoptically' (1986, p.25). This helps to explain why some analysts start their mission to understand a topic through these types of tools, and how they prove to be a valued means for all the policymakers to 'get a grip' on an issue.

Bruno Latour also describes how, through this work, such representations make objects appear more amenable to intervention:

They are made flat. There is nothing you can dominate as easily as a flat surface; there is nothing hidden or convoluted, no shadows, no "double entendre". In politics as in science, when someone is said to "master" a question or to "dominate" a subject, you should normally look for the flat surface that enables mastery (a map, a list, a file, a census [...]); and you will find it. (1986, p.19)

Representing an organisational structure in clear and simple terms in some electronic document makes the task of changing that form seem somehow more achievable. That the change can be represented by just the drag and click of a mouse, moving a box from one part of a diagram to another, or as we saw with in my exchange with DHP13, that you can point out your new organisational position as a point on a piece of paper, perhaps makes the change itself more conceivable.

This is in part because there is a propensity for the representation to become synonymous with that which it represents; for actors to 'mistake the map for the territory'.<sup>18</sup> There were certainly moments in meetings where the contents of tables or diagrams seem to have become the object of the discussion, as opposed to a representation of the object of the discussion. Espeland and Stevens make this point in relation to numbers. They describe how figures in tables and on graphs, especially when framed by text describing what they represent, seem to do more than illustrate a point; they somehow *demonstrate* it. Drawing on an example of data on global warming used in a newspaper

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<sup>18</sup> The authors I draw on in this section would reject the notion that there is some unmediated reality against which to compare a representation; they argue that there are only other representations (see for example Lynch & Woolgar 1990, p.13).

article, they conclude that: 'The most successful numerical pictures influence the ontology of what they represent. The picture becomes its own subject, replacing, in the comprehension of observers, what it originally was intended merely to depict' (Espeland & Stevens 2008, p.426).

The reason all of this matters is because representations are *not* a direct and neutral picture of that which they represent. In order to serve the functions of simplifying, clarifying and summarizing phenomena, the construction of representations involves choices about what to include, and how, and what to leave out. These decisions influence how something is perceived, which in turn shapes ideas about the possibilities of its transformation. How such selections and decisions are made will necessarily be influenced by the particular task the representation is intended to serve. For sociologists Michael Lynch and Steve Woolgar, representations in science are always 'selected, arranged in series, identified with captions, etc. in order to make the case for various claims about "objects"' (1990, p.13).

Seeing representations in this way helps to make sense of why they could be sources of conflict in the civil servants' work. As one analyst put it, when realising that changing the scale of a key on her map would effectively make the case for the need for resources to be distributed differently, 'you can't really plainly present something true' (DHA1). The policymaker responsible for the merger of a number of organisations also found that 'simply' plotting existing organisational forms and their various functions involved resistance and tension. As Lynch and Woolgar put it, representations always have '*directionality*' (1990, p.6).

### **Representation (ii) Categorisation**

In addition to quantifying the world, and drawing diagrams and maps, we saw how the civil servants were also continually engaged trying to define and categorise the objects of policy. 'To classify is human', write Geoffrey Bowker

and Susan Leigh Starr in the opening of their book *Sorting Things Out* (1999). Indeed the work of classification or categorisation,<sup>19</sup> of 'ordering...objects into groups or sets based on their relationships [and...] the allocation or assignment of additional unidentified objects to the correct class' (Sokal 1974, p.1116), has been described as 'probably as old as the earliest forms of sense perception in living organisms' (Sokal 1974, p.1115). Cognitive psychologists have identified categorization as 'a fundamental universal process precisely because it satisfies a basic human need for cognitive parsimony' (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p.72 in R. Jenkins 2000, p.8). According to work in that field, categorising enables humans to carve out 'islands of meaning' from the 'flux of human existence' (Zerubavel 1991), serving as a sort of cognitive economising device which enables us to cope with a world 'full of single cases' (Sokal 1974, p.1116; see also Rosch 1978).

Sociologist Paul Starr points out that just like individuals, state institutions 'face the same imperative to reduce complexity to manageable proportions' (Starr 1992, p.280) through creating categories. In their writing on organisational learning Karl Weick and Francis Westley identify 'partitioning and labelling' as characteristic of rational or logical thinking work in organisations (1996, p.442). In policy studies Aaron Wildavsky identifies the Greek root of the word *analysis* as meaning to sub-divide, describing this work as involving 'steps through which, darting back and forth, difficulties are divided and decomposed until they are made manageable or abandoned' (1979, pp.8–9). Thus individuals in organisations, just like individuals in their everyday lives, seek to categorise the world in order to make its complexity somehow manageable: to 'define down' (DHA5) phenomena and to 'box them up' (Obs6).

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<sup>19</sup> Since the terms 'classify' and 'categorize' have such similar definitions, I use them interchangeably here. The Oxford English Dictionary defines them respectively as: classify v. 1. *trans.* To arrange in or analyse into classes according to shared qualities or characteristics; to make a formal or systematic classification of. categorize v. 1. *trans.* To place in a category or categories; to classify.

Starr argues that those whose professional roles involve decision-making are especially prone to this categorisation work. Where other professionals are able to practice with grey areas and continuums, Starr claims that decision-makers perceive a particular need for hard-and-fast boundaries. He makes the point this way:

Decision-making imposes peculiar demands. For example, in the development of a human fetus, biologists can identify no single point as the beginning of autonomous life. Similarly, dying involves a series of events that may or may not occur close together in time; from the biologist's standpoint, no single point constitutes the moment of death. Nonetheless, from a legal and medical standpoint, it is absolutely vital that definite criteria yielding single points in time be unambiguously identified to discriminate living persons from fetuses and corpses. Decision-making demands "realizable" rules of classification to facilitate social coordination... The biologist is free to observe the complex phases of birth and death; the legal system must draw boundaries, even if somewhat arbitrary. Inevitably, the boundaries are policy choices.  
(1992, pp.272-73)

As institutions characterised by their decision-making functions, Starr claims that 'bureaucrac[ies]... press toward formal definitions' (1992, p.280). The civil servants' pre-occupation with definition and classification can be understood in cognitive terms, as a means of creating meaning from sense data and as a coping mechanism for managing the complexity of the world; and as a feature of working in a bureaucratic decision-making environment in which there is a perceived need to develop clear rules to enable social coordination. But what is it exactly that people are doing when they define and classify objects, and what might be the consequences?

The cognitive sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel emphasises the Latin route of the word 'define' as '*finis*', meaning boundary (1991, p.2). He writes that 'to define something is to mark its boundaries, to surround it with a mental fence that separates it from everything else' (1991, p.2). We can see the civil servants' use of tables as a material manifestation of this setting up of boundaries and partitioning phenomena into distinct categories. Zerubavel describes how, as we categorise in this way, we are engaging in two key activities: 'lumping',

which involves ‘grouping “similar” things together as a single mental cluster’ and ‘splitting’, which involves ‘perceiving “different” clusters as separate from one another’ (1996, p.421). But in order to make such classificatory systems work, we need to ignore, or to set aside, those issues or factors which challenge these groupings: ‘lumping involves overlooking differences *within* mental clusters, splitting entails widening the perceived gaps *between* them, thereby reinforcing their mental differences’ (1996, p.424). Writing on this ‘partitioning and labelling’ work in organisations, Weick and Westley make a similar point:

to think rationally it is necessary to isolate a figure and then ignore the background ... So rational, logical thinking involves a closing, a protecting of the figure from disruption by irrelevant material ... through the forging and selection of words which increase ... precision at the expense of experience.  
(1996, p.447)

Like the visual representations described earlier, classification thus involves choices; selecting salient characteristics of phenomena and suppressing or ignoring others. And again, like visual representations, these selections are necessarily made with a particular task in mind; they are also characterised by directionality. These choices have cognitive and political consequences.

Zerubavel’s research suggests how through establishing such categories actors effectively alter their mental representations of that which they seek to classify in order to make the definition systems hold. Furthermore, these definitions and classifications that begin in internal meetings in the Department as a way of thinking through policy design and its consequences, may later become *official*, featuring in policy programmes which are in turn translated into guidelines and pro-formas. As Paul Starr points out, ‘official categories carry particularly serious consequences’, as they determine which individuals or groups may be entitled to particular state goods or benefits, and ‘may create strong symbolic associations with groups of high or low status or represent the achievement or imposition of a new identity’ (1992, p.274). Here we are entering the territory of Foucault’s concept of governmentality, in which knowledge becomes

implicated in the ways in which individuals govern themselves (Foucault 1980; Foucault 1991).

While classification systems may seem necessary for social coordination, and provide a means of making highly complex social phenomena thinkable and actionable, they risk 'defining down' or 'classifying out' potentially relevant information about the objects in question, and in the process, reshaping the ways in which decision-makers view the world. As the psychologist Eleanor Rosch (1978) identified, there is necessarily a tension in classification work between *abstraction* and *discrimination*: too much of the former and relevant information may be overlooked; too much of the latter and world becomes cognitively unmanageable. Work in sociology illuminates how what begins as a means of making the world thinkable may in fact become a means of ordering the world. The criteria we might value for the first (an emphasis on abstraction) might be different to the criteria we would value for the second (a greater attention to particularity).

The work in sociology and psychology invoked in this discussion suggests why civil servants produced simplified representations of the world, and how these representational practices involve choices and decisions, which, in turn, come to shape how the civil servants view the objects of these representations and the ways in which they might be changed. While representations are a critical tool in the civil servants' work, they are not neutral reflections of the world, and the ways in which they are constructed have consequences for the objects they seek to depict. As the policy scholar Deborah Stone puts it: '*Reasoned analysis is necessarily political*. It always involves choices to include some things and exclude others, and to view the world in a particular way when other visions are possible' (2002, p.378, original emphasis).

## Chapter 6 Policy-making as Articulation Work

*'Alignment is key.'* DHP4

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We have seen how the civil servants developed their understanding of policy topics through interactions with others and through constructing representations of the objects of policies; and how through those analytical practices they made the objects of policy *thinkable* and amenable to action. All of that knowledge work, which involved getting a grip of issues and developing the content and substance of policy proposals, was an important and substantial part of the civil servants' daily work. But it took place within a context in which the dominant ethos was one of making policy *happen*. The knowledge work described in the earlier chapters could not be allowed to get in the way of, and usually needed to somehow serve, this higher end.

In this chapter I set out how making policy happen was achieved through building *articulations*, or connections, between a policy, selected individuals and selected ideas. This required the civil servants to secure patrons for their proposals; to link their policy to powerful political agendas; and to try to construct coalitions of agreement among external individuals and organisations. Various forms of knowledge were invoked as tools in this work; to demonstrate competence; to persuade people of the merit of a proposal; and to justify and defend decisions taken. In the discussion I reflect on how this way of using knowledge has parallels with pragmatist descriptions of productive inquiry. I also return to some of the theoretical accounts of the nature of knowledge described in Chapter 1 to consider the ways in which articulation work can itself be understood as knowledgeable. In this chapter, by starting with action rather than with knowledge, new forms of knowing come into view.

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## **Making Policy Happen through Articulation Work**

We saw in Chapter 3 that civil servants are often new to a policy issue when they come to work on it. While this was a common and accepted form of temporary not-knowing, the civil servants were expected to bring with them the knowledge and skills required to make policy happen. Here are two interviewees offering accounts of this type of knowledge:

DHP6: [...] what you have to do is you apply those generic ... err... competencies and experience[s] to different situations. I could be moved tomorrow and have to sit down and have a discussion with, I don't know, the National Heart Forum about cardiac policy {laughs}. Well I won't know anything about cardiac stuff, but I will know how the system works, and how you make things happen, and how you crank the machine.

DHP10: [...] I would say part of a policy role, is the difference between a specialist, who might know about the research and what the problems were and what was causing it, and the policy person, who might know about what the opportunities were across the Department, what the processes were to change that.

Policy ideas had usually originated from somewhere outside of a policy team, and the civil servants' task was to make those ideas into workable policies. Many of the interviewees were resistant to being referred to as 'policymakers', since they felt this term implied that they were the originators of policy ideas, when in fact the focus of their work was on transforming ideas into policies. The civil servants would often make jokes if I used the term policy-making in relation to their work: when I would tell meeting participants that I was

studying policy-making in the Department, they would often laugh, and reply with ironic remarks such as ‘have you found any yet?!’ (Obs2). In cinematic terms, the civil servants presented their role as closer to that of producer rather than writer or director. As one senior civil servant put it:

DHP6: We don’t find a problem and think “well what are we going to do to solve this?” That’s what scientists do {laughs}. And we have these awkward things called politicians that come in. You know, we didn’t design this system, the Secretary of State did. What we do is take his thoughts and he, our Secretary of State came in with more ideas than anyone else has ever had, in more detail, certainly in certain aspects. And our job is to kind of make that work, or to point up the risks.

DHP10: I think often you’re not necessarily starting from scratch, you’re trying to bring [...] people together, so you’re much more a coordinator. I would see myself as much more a coordinator than necessarily an originator, if you see what I mean.

One experienced analyst told me that this shift towards *delivery* as a dominant ethos had been one of the most notable changes in the Department over the past decade. He attributed this to the appointment of NHS managers in key senior positions:

DHA6: they [are] very much more about the delivery of things rather than is this the right thing to be doing ... it wasn’t really questioning whether it was the right thing, it was just getting on and doing it.

This focus on delivery, on making policy happen, prescribed a need to keep things moving. It seemed that the ultimate failure for a civil servant would be inaction. In this context, the dominant paradigm was a pragmatic one; the civil servants asked of an idea or a knowledge claim whether it was ‘useful’, and of proposals whether they are ‘workable’. As one pragmatic analyst put it in relation to his approach to a particular problem: ‘[This] probably isn’t the only way to do it. It might not even be the best way to do it, but it was still useful. I think that’s kind of, my test, not is this the best way [but is it useful]’ (DHA6).

Another policymaker described how much she had learned from collaborating with more experienced colleagues: ‘It’s just a fascinating process and you kind of think, “why would we do it like that?” and you go through it and you go “oh

that's why we do it like that, because it works!" (DHP11). And here a policymaker describes supporting a politically-appointed individual to produce a strategy document: 'Up to that point he'd wanted to do things off his own bat, talking to stakeholders himself. The first draft contained some recommendations which just weren't really possible and we helped him work through that' (DHP13).

What does *making policy happen* mean? And in what sense are ways of understanding issues considered 'useful', and policy proposals as likely to 'work'? When civil servants talked about the ultimate purpose of their work, they described wanting the policies to have their intended impact, be that establishing a fairer formula for allocating funding to services, reducing injuries or preparing the country for infectious disease outbreaks. But their daily work practices were directed towards producing and publishing policy documents and other forms of documentation associated with policy programmes; and with pre-arming these policies against potential subsequent criticism by Parliament, the press and selected outside individuals and organisations. It was their effectiveness at these tasks which seemed to determine the professional success of the civil servants in terms of enhancing their reputations and chances of promotion, and which acted as a proxy for making a difference to society. The civil servants took pride from performing this work well.

Realising these objectives required the creation of a series of connections, or articulations<sup>20</sup> between the proposed policy and powerful actors inside and outside the Department; dominant political agendas and policy ideas; and current or emerging policy instruments and systems. Policy proposals had to be made to *fit* with these various phenomena; as one senior civil servant put it to

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<sup>20</sup> Defined as: n. a. *Anat. and Zool.* Connection (of bones or skeletal segments) by a joint; the state of being jointed; a manner of jointing. [...] d. *Fig.* A conceptual relationship, interaction, or point of juncture, esp. between two things. (Oxford English Dictionary 2008)

me, 'alignment is key' (DHP4). In the next three sections I describe what this work entailed, and how knowledge claims were used in its service.

### Securing Patrons

I had assumed that once work was underway on a policy issue, either as the latest initiative in a long chain of work on that area or as a result of some new commitment in another policy document, the proposal had the full backing of the Department. But this did not seem to be the case. To commence work on a new policy area for which they had been given some provisional form of mandate, or to gain influence for policy work already underway, the civil servants needed to secure support for the policy among senior officials or Ministers. Civil servants described generating momentum for their policy area by 'influencing Ministers and, you know, getting them stirred up about something' (DHP10) and trying to 'generate interest' 'at the top' of the Department (DHA2).

Having senior support gave the civil servants a 'mandate' (DHA6) for working on a policy area and enabled the work 'to move forward' (DHP12). Work on projects for which civil servants failed to get strong senior sponsorship or patronage, such as those that had been initiated by a previous administration or some political initiative which had since lost currency, might be allowed to continue, but there was a sense in which this work lacked meaning for the civil servants. There was a fear that, without this senior support, the policy would ultimately be discontinued. For example:

DHP8: [...] there was never any feedback from [the Ministerial office], so they obviously for some reason didn't... I sent numerous emails to the person who was asking for the update to say, "can we talk to somebody [in this office] about how they feel about this?" or anything like that, but there was never [any response] [...]

JM: Does it effect how you feel about working on it?

DHP8: Yeah definitely. There was a period a few months ago where I thought, there's not actually that much point in this piece of work. I probably think there's less point to it than there was about a year ago [when there had been senior interest in the topic].

DHA6: I sort of said I think we should try to put something to the NHS management board in [June], so we worked for three months trying to get indicators together and the framework and a sort of paper for them explaining what we'd done and why [...] It had to be someone at the highest levels [who signed up to it], otherwise it would just be another report which someone sees and nothing's done.

What exactly did senior support give to a policy that enabled it to progress rather than languish; to become real policy rather than 'just another report'? The mechanics of this were somewhat oblique, but at least part of the answer seemed to lie in the resources that can be mobilised in the name of director-level civil servants and Ministers, not least the attention and cooperation of fellow civil servants. For example, the following civil servant describes her failure to secure senior level support for an initiative as the reason for its limited impact:

JM: So what concretely would you do differently if you did it again to change [the fact that people in the Department haven't acted on the strategy]?

DHP11: I would engage at a more senior level and demand of that senior level engagement that they helped bring their bits of the world along. But then, you know, I came in, I didn't even understand the grade structure, so I had no idea how grade-ist it was. In many cases I was speaking to some fantastic people internally but they, but it wasn't within their gift to change the way their directorate worked and they didn't have the confidence to challenge their director or even their deputy director. So actually getting, you know we've done it this year when we've got director-level direct engagement with me around some of [these] arrangements, about their role or purpose, and it makes such a difference in the way then that their teams receive and contribute. Cause in many cases they're being told to do it by their director and encouraged to do it, you know "this is something of value to us in our bit of this world and therefore we want to engage with it". And that's what we didn't do.

### *Identifying a patron: grades and power*

When I asked my first interviewee to brief me about what I needed to understand in order to get to know the Department, she began with an in-depth description of the civil service grading structure. The hierarchical nature of the Department is one reason why patronage is so important to a policy's success. Feeling empowered to act on new issues without permission from somebody higher up the grade system seemed to be the preserve of those in the upper echelons of the civil service, and did not extend to policy leads (grades 7 and 6), and nor even necessarily to deputy directors (grade 5), in spite of the sometimes considerable responsibilities of these individuals for managing the development of policies. A senior civil servant told me: 'It's really difficult to have a good idea and just do it, unless you have good patronage' (DHP4). As I described in Chapter 2, this was also evident in the fact that mid-ranking civil servants did not feel sufficiently empowered to grant me access for meeting observations; in the terms of the quote from DHP11 on the previous page, it was not 'in their gift' to do so. As a consequence, like the civil servants themselves, I found I had to climb the hierarchy and get 'director-level direct engagement'.

To initiate a policy, or to serve as a patron for the policies of others, the individual must be either a Minister, or a civil servant on a senior grade. But this seniority is not in itself sufficient to make someone an effective patron. The individual also needs to be powerful, which is in part determined by having the will and skills required to be an effective player in the Department. This meant getting invites to the right meetings and being party to the important conversations: essentially, being *in the loop* of information sharing about the latest and most politically-sensitive policy developments, as well as being seen to have good policy judgement skills. As the following example suggests, seniority is necessary, but not sufficient in order to be a powerful player in the Department:

JM: Why do you think [that in the case of the work you did on that policy issue], that nothing happened with it? What's that about?

DHA8: Erm {laughs}. I'm wondering how candid to be with this. [...] [The senior person] was someone who was not viewed as someone who was particularly relevant or, he wasn't someone who people kind of listened to who put stuff forward. This was maybe [three] years into his time in the Department, and he'd kind of been sidelined already by that point. [...] Because [he] came in from [another industry] rather than a civil service background, I don't think he had a great understanding when he first joined about how the civil service operated, so he didn't know...

By contrast, the following director was described as effective and influential:

DHA6: [that director] seemed to be the sort of person who was just plugged in very well. You know, apparently [...] if there was a change of Minister and SpAd [special adviser] he would be literally kind of camping outside their door, waiting for the SpAd then kind of collar them and say, "I'm [John Smith]".

JM: So being plugged in is about forming relationships with the right people?

DHA6: Yeah, I think so [...] Just, you know, being part of the conversation.

As this last quote suggests, senior officials themselves worked to secure the support and interest of Ministers and their political advisers, and of permanent secretaries, the 'big beasts' (DHP4): patrons come in chains. Here is another example of this, from a senior civil servant who tries to use his clout to secure Ministerial support for a junior colleague's policy proposal:

DHP6: And this morning I spent, just before I went to my last meeting, I drafted a submission to our Minister, erm, which, I wouldn't normally draft submissions myself. [...] I need to do a bit of kind of impose my authority on it, to make sure I've got the right people in the Department signed up to it.

These examples also hint at how the relative power or reputation of a champion for a policy becomes a key determinant of whether the policy is likely to be supported by others higher up the patronage chain. In the penultimate quote above, the John Smith character does not go to the adviser's office to say, 'here, look at these policies that we should pursue', but rather, 'I am John Smith'. It is as if he is seeking support for *himself*, and that this support will then bolster whichever policies he seeks to promote. Another policymaker told me explicitly that one way to go about making policy happen is to 'say right, I'm going to find a champion, I'm going to find somebody who is extremely persuasive and

people respect already, and I'm going to get them to say that this is really good' (DHP10). Another interviewee argued that there was a good rationale for this link between the power of ideas and individuals:

JM: How do you go about trying to get support [for your policy]?

DHA8: Err, at the moment I try to get [these three senior civil servants] to support it first, and I think if they push stuff it tends to happen, but that's more the kind of force of them rather than the kind of force of the work itself. But then I think the force of them is partly because if they think something is worth doing, that tends to mean the work is worth doing.

The implication is that these senior civil servants have secured the power they have in part by backing what are deemed to have been successful policies in the past; having good policy 'judgement' is a critical attribute.

The mid-ranking civil servants needed to pick-up on this informal requirement to secure senior support, and to identify a colleague who enjoyed power as well as seniority in the Department. How did the civil servants then go about securing that individual's support for a policy? Partly in the same way their patrons had secured *their* own positions as patrons; by developing a strong personal reputation as someone who has delivered effective policies in the past. For example:

JM: And how do you persuade [these senior staff of the value of the proposal]?

DHA8: I've got quite a good reputation with the three of them at the moment, cause a lot of the stuff I've done around [another policy] had managed risks quite spectacularly shall we say [...] But that also means I've got to try to get [this policy proposal] quite good if I'm going to speak to them, because otherwise that all disappears at once!

This quote alludes to the mutually reinforcing relationship between a civil servant's reputation for effective policy work, and the success of a policy: a good reputation helps to gain support for a policy, but promoting a 'bad' policy can damage your reputation. This recalls the cyclical relationship between a researcher's authority and the authority of their research, identified in Chapter 3, and between the authority of civil servant storytellers and their stories, described in Chapter 4.

But relying on personal reputation, especially for relatively inexperienced staff, was not always possible or sufficient to secure the support of senior colleagues; the mid-ranking civil servants also needed to be ready to *sell* the policy to senior colleagues whenever an opportunity presented itself.

### *Selling a policy to a patron*

The Department was described by the civil servants as something like a market place, in which 'it can sometimes feel like a jostling for position [...] where lots of different policy people are wanting to try and put forward their particular policy area' (DHP10). Success in this context required understanding the mind-set of potential patrons; using chance encounters or opportunities to good effect; and moving quickly to capitalise on any indication of interest in or enthusiasm for a proposal. Here are some examples:

DHP12: [...] very often what happens, or sometimes what happens is [that these meetings are] a way actually of getting a really good feel for the way the Minister's mind is working. So you think, you know, okay, if he's saying this, then he's really keen, we need to push this, to really push it.

JM: So capitalise on their interest in something?

DHP12: Yeah, absolutely.

DHP10: And one of the things I would say, [...], is that actually if you're a policy lead, so on [that last policy], I knew what were the things I wanted to do. So if Minister came to me and he said, "I want to make an announcement next week, and you've got to write me a submission with a list of things I could announce, what are they going to be?" I knew what the top five things were that I wanted to happen. So I guess that's one lever of getting into things, is being prepared for whatever it is that comes along {laughs}.

Civil servant: What was great was [the senior officials'] enthusiasm for the new world – we should move soon because of that. (Obs2)

Senior civil servant: I bumped into him [and set-up this meeting], so we just need to catch him up on the programme, because he's now [in this senior position], so we can use him. (Obs4)

Civil servant to senior official: [...] actually before I start, I did meet you a few years ago when I was working on [another policy relevant to your area] and our work recommended looking at this issue in [this] way, so this is just a plug really. I'll send it to you. (Obs4)<sup>21</sup>

The civil servants would invoke knowledge about an issue in meetings and in their written submissions to Ministers in an effort to persuade them of the merit of some particular proposal, and also to display their own command of the subject area. Interviewees described senior colleagues and Ministers as having different tastes for different types of knowledge, ranging from a propensity to be moved by personal stories, to demands for rigorous research. The civil servants used their knowledge of these tastes to adjust their sales pitches accordingly. Here is one civil servant describing his experience of serving a variety of Ministers:

DHP1: That [work] was quite entertaining.

JM: What do you mean by entertaining?

DHP1: In relation to evidence-based policy making – [Minister 1] had strong ideological views but no interest in analysis and evidence. [Minister 2] was the polar opposite – he was interested in analysis, a pointy-head policy wonk. Not very ideological. He impressed me. And he practised classic EBPM... Then I had two years writing a strategy. That was with a fantastic Minister, a former academic who was passionate about research. We were given the time and space for research.

### *The patron's view rules*

Of course, Ministers in particular, but senior officials too, had pre-existing views and opinions on issues and, where these were strong, attempts by civil servants lower down the hierarchy to persuade them to support some other position were less likely to have an effect. This Cabinet Office interviewee summed up

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<sup>21</sup> This last quote touches on questions of motivation: the civil servants had different reasons for wanting to secure support for their policies. Apparently most dominant was an instrumental interest in securing influence for whichever policy they were working on at a given time, since this gave meaning to their labour, and was seen to be beneficial in career terms. But in some cases, civil servants strongly believed that the policy they were pursuing would have a positive impact, and in these cases, they were also motivated by personal values. That seemed to be the case for the civil servant of the last quote.

the situation well when he said: ‘The Minister’s opinion trumps everything, but there are lots of things they’re not interested in’ (COP2).

Sometimes a policy proposal might only require relatively minor adjustments or changes of tone to please the Minister or a senior official. For example, I would hear in meetings phrases such as ‘[the Minister] wants the positives emphasised’ (Obs7). Here is another typical example, in which an interviewee tells me about his interactions with a Permanent Secretary’s office during the process of drafting a policy proposal:

DHA6: when I showed them it at an early stage, they were, they did say “ah, but what [the Permanent Secretary] would be really interested in is this” they said “what about the sustainability thing, [the Permanent Secretary] would be interested to know that”, so I introduced that, so you know, it was a bit of a modification as well. In ways that... cause I think that’s the thing it is a bit of a, you know, lots of this stuff you do have to be prepared to [change], even though, [...] people might make changes where you think, that’s not quite right but I think you just have to kind of ... [do it].

But in other cases Ministers and senior colleagues had more developed positions on topics which were more intransigent. In these cases, a proposal may need to be dropped, or fundamentally reworked

Perhaps most challenging for the civil servants was the scenario in which different senior colleagues or Ministers expressed strong and conflicting views. For example, one civil servant described how there was an explicit written Government commitment to the policy his team were responsible for, but that the Prime Minister’s office had ‘pretty much lost interest in it’ (DHP8), making it difficult to create momentum within the Department to meet that commitment. Here is another example of this from a meeting:

Civil servant: There is a potential handling tension we need to work through – key players have very different views. It might be easier now [that this senior official] is in place. But the [Minister] has a very strong view and ultimately has to sign off the regulations. (Obs2)

In summary, the civil servants needed to secure the support of senior colleagues and Ministers to generate momentum and influence for their policies. They needed to identify powerful and not just senior patrons, and enter a process of negotiation in which the proposal is pitched to that individual in terms which play to the patron's knowledge tastes. Ultimately though, the patron's view ruled, and where proposals met with opposition from the most powerful figures in the Department, they were unlikely to survive.

### Connecting to Powerful Agendas

Another means of making a policy happen (and indeed of securing patronage) was to frame a proposal as an example, or even component, of some emerging or established powerful policy agenda or policy instrument; what one interviewee termed 'cultural waves and the big things' (DHP4). There were two main ways in which the civil servants sought to achieve this: through (re)branding their policy as an instance or realisation of that agenda, and through having their policy picked up and incorporated into some already-established instrument.

In contrast to possessing specialist knowledge about particular policy topics, which was viewed as non-essential (and by some as potentially career-inhibiting), *being in the know* in relation to the latest political and policy developments was presented as positively career-enhancing. The civil servants developed their knowledge of these agendas through reading past policy documents, speaking to colleagues, participating in regular meetings where colleagues would update one another on the latest developments, being present in meetings where the latest language was invoked by senior colleagues, and by being copied into email chains in which draft documents and plans were circulated.

In their conversations with one another in meetings the civil servants continually sought to frame or brand their policies as an instance of a broader, powerful policy agenda, or a means of realising the aims of that agenda. For example:

Civil servant 2: I like to think of this as Big Society<sup>22</sup> stuff, whatever that means.  
Charity chief executive: Well, we are a Big Society organisation. (Obs8)

Senior civil servant 1: The SoS [Secretary of State] will not match outcomes in Europe unless you tackle that [issue]. And if we can address the causes of the causes, then you've got a win.

Senior civil servant 2: So there are outcome, QIPP<sup>23</sup> and fairness [...] arguments. It's simple really, isn't it? {laughs}

Civil servant 3: And a political one – if they crack this, they would shit all over the... [opposition].

Senior civil servant 2: Yes, if you want to be seen to be helping all of society...

Civil servant 3: And I think it sells to the voters. If MPs have got constituents who don't like [what is happening], then here's a way to do something about it.

In this second example, the participants are collectively rehearsing how they will sell their policy to politicians and others in the Department by linking it to a whole host of contemporary policy and political agendas. It seems the more agendas they can link the proposal to, the better.

In addition to this conceptual linking, civil servants sometimes also tried to get their policy included into other policy documents or policy instruments, which already had senior sponsorship and an established place in the current policy landscape. In meetings, civil servants commented, 'We have been using the Operating Framework as a lever' (Obs11) and 'we need to get this stuff into the work that's going on around JSNA and the HWBs' (Obs4), a reference to documentation requirements and public bodies being established as part of the

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<sup>22</sup> The Big Society was a key plank of the Conservative Party's 2010 election manifesto, and also featured in the Government's Coalition Agreement. The stated aim of the policy is "to create a climate that empowers local people and communities, building a big society that will 'take power away from politicians and give it to people'" (Number 10 2010).

<sup>23</sup> QIPP stands for the Quality, Innovation, Productivity and Prevention programme. Initiated by the Department in 2009, its broad stated aim at the time of my fieldwork was to improve productivity in the health service. After the reforms associated with the Health and Social Care Bill, this was one of the most high profile policy agendas at the time of my data collection.

Government's NHS reform programme. One interviewee described looking for high-profile policy documents in development to which she could attach her paper in order to give it 'more exposure' (DHA1). In another case I witnessed the excitement with which a civil servant discovered in a meeting that he was going to be able to include an indicator related to his policy area in a new performance framework for the NHS (Obs10).

Making such connections required pitching to a policy's owner or host team in much the same way as the civil servants did when they sought to secure support for policies from individual patrons. They described the Directorate's various policy teams as being like mini-villages, each with their own cultures (DHP4), and each with distinctive tastes for particular forms of knowledge (DHP1). They drew on this anthropological knowledge in seeking to persuade these other teams to adopt or connect to their policy. For example:

DHP1: I used contacts with people I had worked with at the [the two Departments] to start to build momentum, by showing them the evidence, saying "this is profoundly good economic evidence" [...] I was using the evidence to convince people, though in health [...] they are not as swayed by evidence, they are passionate individuals, it's all about [...] patients for them, so you have to translate the evidence to a story about how this will help people. There are others who care very strongly about evidence and have a very analytical background, such as people in the strategy unit.

Knowledge was here used as a tool for persuading colleagues to take up some issue as part of their own work.

### *Agendas in flux*

One of the real challenges for knowing which agendas, instruments or 'cultural waves' civil servants should be seeking connections with was that these phenomena were continually shifting. This was comparable to (and indeed interlinked with) shifts in power between key Departmental figures, which made selecting appropriate patrons such a distinctive skill. Such uncertainty was especially pronounced at the time of my fieldwork, when the Secretary of State's major reform programme for the health service was in the process of

being implemented, while still being debated in Parliament and subjected to strong criticism by professional groups and academics outside of Government.

At one point, criticism of the reforms was perceived to be sufficiently politically damaging that the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister announced that the Bill's progress through Parliament was to be subjected to a *pause*, while they employed a range of independent experts (named the Future Forum) to run a series of consultations and propose amendments to the legislation (itself an example of the status of independent researchers being invoked to diffuse a politically acrimonious situation). The *pause* left the civil servants on uncertain ground. Here are some examples of meeting exchanges from around this time:

Civil servant: Having anything to do with [this policy] is a bit like A Tale of Two Cities - it's the best of times and the worst of times. If you have difficulty with ambiguity you're almost certainly in the wrong room. (Obs2)

Civil servant 1: We've got a [...] sub-group [on this issue]. We're being tripped up by the pause. [Alex], you may know more than me?

Civil servant 2: Not really, I think work is on-going - "should [x] go ahead..." - so on going, just a bit more guarded.

Civil servant 3: It's all pretty fluid. (Obs7)

Civil servant 1: We are ahead of the reforms. But with the reforms, we can't tell FTs [foundation trusts] [what to do].

Civil servant 2: This is a real issue.

Civil servant 3: Who covers it now? Medical Education England?

Civil servant 4: No, it's local now.

Civil servant 3: Okay right, GP consortia. Is this something to get in the mandate? It's not really for commissioners... (Obs6)

DHP9: So we were trying to set up a [programme] for which we had received relatively little by way of policy instructions and we basically ended up making it up as we went along. So we tried to do that in a consultative way with our colleagues who were trying to give us instructions but of course they couldn't give us anything because they haven't developed the policy yet.

The imperative to act, to keep things moving, meant that in the absence of what they termed a 'clear steer' from Ministers or senior officials, the civil servants themselves worked to interpret what might make sense, given what they knew about current political agendas and existing political commitments. These acts

of interpretation are essentially constructive; the civil servants create what they are seeking to know. But they are doing so within the bounds of what they know already; the guiding principle is one of *coherence* with known agendas and commitments:

DHP12: based on the commitments that have been made before, you know, what's been said in party documents and that kind of stuff, you can come to a judgement about how far in line it is, you know, with existing policy. Or whether actually it's contradicting something.

At other points, civil servants would actively exploit the underspecified quality of some policy agendas to interpret them in terms which made them fit with whatever policy proposal they were seeking to promote. For example, in one meeting I observed, a civil servant talking about a new Government policy told his colleagues: 'I think we've got an opportunity here to define [this policy area] in a way that lets us do wider stuff – not just [what has been spelt out in the policy document]' (Obs4). In another meeting, a civil servant says that since the publication of another major Government commitment, 'our focus has shifted onto [this definition of a social group], but we're trying to use that as a pull for developing other things' (Obs3). Here the work of connection makes and remakes the agenda the civil servants seek to connect to.

Connection work also effectively reproduced the power relations it relied upon. The relative power of particular policies seemed to be at least in part established and negotiated as a result of being sought after as a *host* for other proposals. But getting a policy to a place where it might be seen as a desirable host takes work. Here is an interviewee describing the considerable efforts made by him and his colleagues to get support for a policy agenda, which I had heard others in the Department describe as the type of policy area you needed to be seen to be linking with:

DHA4: [...] basically we sort of went around attempting to influence, you know, policymakers across the rest of the Department to get them to develop their policies in such a way that would support [the aims of our policy] [...] both in terms of you know, the terminology and the descriptions and the inclusion of words about [our policy] and the importance of [its aims]. So sort of trying to get that narrative throughout all the policy-making in the Department. But also trying to encourage them, you know, for example, if they have a strategy, and it sort of says all these interventions that are recommended, then maybe to try to prioritise ones that [support our objectives].

Perhaps such agendas only ever look secure from the outside; those inside them must continually work to maintain their position. Developing links with other policies is one of the main ways of doing this.

But there were limits to all this interpretive and constructive work. Just as the views of Ministers or senior colleagues could stop a policy in its tracks, sometimes proposals could not be made to fit with the ideas and policy instruments of the day and, in these cases, they usually had to be reformulated or quietly dropped. Here is an example:

DHP8: [...] there was kind of a feeling when we got the [...] Government commitment that we finally had something quite powerful that would mean that the Department of Health would make this happen [...]. But unfortunately it kind of doesn't sit very well next to pretty much anything else the Department of Health's doing in terms of the way it works with the NHS and all these things. There were quite a lot of conversations, I had a few conversations with a special adviser, we looked at various mechanisms for actually delivering the work and it sort of transpired that basically the NHS performance bit of the Department, they aren't really going to performance manage [the NHS] on doing this thing and therefore the commitment's kind going to... we continue to do all the things around supporting and good practice and promoting the idea, but we're not actually going to make [organisations] do it.

In another case, an analyst described how they had decided to commission external work on a particular issue; the civil servants felt sure it was an important challenge the Department would have to reckon with in the future, but saw that as a topic it was at odds with the tenor of current policy:

DHA3: You know, it was an appropriate thing, I think, to [commission this work]... and there were some very difficult issues that were politically extremely sensitive, that having an external organisation go away and you say, you know, we think it would be great to have a big picture story on this but it might be better coming from, say the Nuffield Trust, rather than say the civil service, because it might then be seen to be less tainted with political, erm, political correctness.

Here, the civil servants used the independent status of external researchers to enable them to pursue work on an issue which did not fit with existing policy agendas.

### **Building a Consensus (or, pre-arming policies against critique)**

The civil servants worked on the principle that for a policy to work (in terms of both being made to happen, and to have its intended effect) it needed to have some kind of support from those individuals and organisations outside the Department who would be involved in, or could influence, its implementation.

As one policymaker put it:

DHP12: a lot of the time, policies [...] they're not things that are imposed by government, they're things that happen, they're delivered by a kind of social structure, a system, you know. You can't just do it on your own, you know? So you've got to involve people. You've got to get their buy in ASAP.

Thus the work of consensus building was presented by a number of the interviewees and the civil servants I observed as a critical element of policy-making:

DHP12: There's a lot around working with stakeholders, you know, trying to understand where they're coming from and actually trying to get to an agreed position on things.

DHP10: it was winning hearts and minds to begin with, of the big organisations around the table [...] I would characterise part of a policy role as being able to [...] build a consensus.

Civil servant: it's all very well for the [Department] to talk blithely about changing x, y, and z, but as [Frank] says, if employers aren't on board... (Obs 6)

A senior civil servant told me that this need to build broad support for policies among groups outside of the Department was going to become more acute in the coming years as the Department's financial resources and directive powers are reduced, and as non-NHS organisations play a bigger role in delivering health services:

DHP6: Quite clearly in the past we've had lots of money and we've solved problems by throwing money at it. Well, you know we're not going to do that anymore I'm afraid. [...] So building, I think the prerequisite now is to build a consensus, and that part of our job is to, here, is to be consensus builders, to bring people along with you [...] At the moment it feels to me like local government are hugely important. In a funny way, because we are, well I suppose it's because we are, err, less directly involved, or have an, err less directive relationship with, with local government.

### *How to build a consensus*

So how did the civil servants go about trying to generate external support for policies in development? Just as the civil servants needed to be able to identify powerful internal patrons, and influential policy agendas or instruments as hosts for their policies, they also needed to know which outside organisations had to be 'kept on board', and which individuals within those organisations they should speak to. There was a considerable overlap between the organisations and individuals the civil servants went to when seeking to understand a topic (see Chapter 3), and those they needed to secure support from, for reasons I explore below. However, in the context of organisations, the individuals the civil servants approached to learn about an issue tended to more junior and closer to the front-line, whereas when it came to enrolling support for a policy, senior staff were more often the target audience. As one interviewee explained:

DHA6: Talking to more senior staff is more useful in terms of getting their kind of views on some of the more kind of political difficulties, you know with a small p, and a big P, and then of course the kind of whole enlisting support for things.

In terms of using meetings to generate support for policies, the civil servants would first seek to understand the current views of the individual or organisation prior to meeting them, so as to judge how to frame or pitch the

policy they were promoting. As we saw in Chapter 3, consultation responses were used as one source for this. Policy-making civil servants also developed knowledge of different groups and their views through experience of working with them on past policies, and this was seen as an important part of their contribution to a team's work, as this analyst describes:

DHA6: [...] we had a grade 7 policy person. So I think she, the policy person who's not an analyst [...] she was the one who injected the other bit of thinking, and she worked on the [previous strategy document on this issue] as well.

JM: What's the "other" bit that she brought? Can you say a bit more-

DHA6: I think just understanding where different stakeholders are coming from [...] having been through it before, you know how stakeholders might think about some of this stuff, I don't know, it was a different perspective I think.

Once relevant stakeholders had been identified, and civil servants had developed a sense of their views, a common approach to trying to secure their support was to enrol them in the policy-making process. The civil servants used meetings with stakeholders to try to enlist their support. In such meetings they were often genuinely consulting the participants (see Chapter 4), but they were also (and sometimes principally) *performing* consulting these groups. Some of the interviewees were fairly explicit about this:

DHP6: [...] if they feel that they've had a role in shaping some of your thinking, cause actually you've asked some questions of them, that's even more powerful then. So getting their support because they then feel they're kind of part of this, rather than just telling them this will [happen].

DHP9: So it was about going round [these external individuals], actually having one to one conversations, "who are your constituents?", "who would you like to have involved?", and very carefully negotiating that. And I think that was successful to some degree [...] I think there was a lot of good will around the table and the fact that we were so consultative in doing that, won their cooperation. And ultimately they had to buy into what we proposed and what the board proposed.

The very act of granting a group or an individual a meeting and being seen to listen to them was one means of starting to build a relationship of trust, in which the group might be more open to adjusting their position, or at least less publically hostile about the Department's plans. Sharing advance or even draft copies of policy documents with selected outside individuals was intended to

further strengthen such relationships. In the context of the Department's culture of secrecy around its inner workings, sharing such texts could give the outside individual the sense of being part of an inner circle, and gave the policymaker the opportunity to gauge likely future reactions to the policy and, where possible, to make adjustments, outside of the public gaze. For example:

DHP9: [...] we're giving the paper to... starting off with some of the more difficult people, on very, very limited, you know, for your eyes only, let us know what you think, type of operation.

Developing these relationships of trust required strong social skills, and the way in which references to 'policy skills' and 'social -' or 'people skills' were used almost interchangeably in the civil servants' own narratives indicates the importance of such coalition building within policy work. Strong colleagues were described as 'great relationship people' (DHP4), and weaker colleagues were presented as lacking interpersonal skills. For example:

DHA1: He doesn't understand cooperating, because that's how you get things done – even if your original position might be right. He's missing the ability to capture people's ears, gain their confidence.

Another policymaker put it this way:

DHP10: a lot of the impact that you have is often through verbal communication. And I do think one of the reasons why I sort of, have had a very, a series of really interesting jobs and have had quite a lot of responsibility and things is that I'm usually an okay verbal communicator.

### *Managing conflict*

Of course, in the case of many (if not most) policies, constructing a true consensus among parties was beyond the powers of the civil servants. There was too much disagreement, and too little room for manoeuvre where Ministers or senior staff had strong views (recall from Chapter 4 that civil servants as the agents of Ministers are effectively restricted in their capacity to be 'transformed' by dialogues with outsiders). Stripped back to its core, the work of building a consensus was really concerned with managing disagreement: identifying potential criticism, trying to reduce the likelihood of strong, vocal dissent, and

pre-arming policies against critics where they cannot be won over. Here are some examples:

DHA5: [...] I think the phrase was “does anyone particularly disagree with this?” because getting common agreement was quite hard, but to get some level of agreement by them not disagreeing was something... umm, something that I think we tried and then we were very careful to phrase it afterwards. People didn’t agree, but they didn’t not agree {laughs}.

DHA8: I’ve got quite a good reputation with [those senior civil servants] at the moment, cause a lot of the stuff I’ve done around [this policy document] had managed risks quite spectacularly shall we say because [... I was in charge of] this document that oversaw everything else, explained how it all fitted together and also took out some of the most controversial aspects, that then went reasonably well in that we didn’t get too badly criticised for it which I’m taking as a win {laughs}, given how badly it could have gone.

Getting to know the views of stakeholders and identifying possible tensions is one of the principal functions of the ‘idea testing’ meetings with external contacts described in Chapter 4. In the same way that the civil servants sometimes commissioned external research on issues which could not be made to fit with existing policy agendas, they also described using the *impartial* status of researchers and research knowledge as a resource for managing and arbitrating in conflicts between external parties, and between external parties and the Department. For example:

DHP10: [...] a lot of the time it does get very personal and for me the evidence is a way of depersonalising that and actually saying “you’re wrong, not because I think you’re rubbish, because I think it’s not immediately obvious, and this person has gone away and studied it, and this is actually what is actually happening”.

Here, evidence was invoked in order to uncouple knowledge claims from particular interested positions or individuals; to provide some *view from nowhere*, outside of existing, tense relations.

Another interviewee described agreeing to commission an evaluation of a pilot policy as a means of persuading external stakeholders to give at least temporary support for the policy. In this case, the interviewee told me that the evaluation

was in earnest, in the sense that his team really did want to know whether or not the policy would have its intended effect. But it was also clearly serving a dual function of deferring dissent in the short-term, and acting as a means of selling the policy in the medium- to long-term:

DHA8: [this] evaluation for example, we'd be essentially bugged without [it], because we are quite heavily reliant on it for a number of reasons [...] we spent a lot of time speaking to workforce, err, professional organisations, especially to begin with because we knew there was likely to be some reticence on the side of the NHS workforce [...] And so when we were doing the engagement initially we got [various professional organisations] to a position where they were happy to not block the pilot programme or not be overly averse to it provided that there was a strong evaluation to actually see whether this was working for the patient or not, because this was a big concern. And so that's what we also needed an evaluation for, cause as and when we look to the end of the pilot programme if this is getting rolled out then we need to persuade a lot of these people to be actually taking it on. So the evaluation for that is integral and if we didn't have it we would be screwed completely.

Whether or not agreement around a proposal had been reached, or disagreements resolved, civil servants described reaching points with projects where they had to move forward with the policy. The action imperative, and the ever-present perception of time pressure, ruled. The focus on delivery, on *making policy happen* meant keeping things moving. Finding a 'way through the middle' (DHP10) was ideal, but even where crucial disagreements remained, the civil servants had to develop a position to be pursued, whichever side it might be on:

DHP10: you have [this group of scientists] who can't agree on anything, and you want to try and take that group of very disparate people with hugely defensive views on things and try and find some way through the middle.

Senior civil servant: Well there are arguments on both sides and you know my position, but we need to come down on one side or the other. (Obs7)

DHP2: I shared drafts with the working group.

JM: How about with the wider reference group?

DHP2: No, I didn't share with them because given the amount of views, you have to at some point cut through it all and come down on one side or the other.

DHP11: And then there's [disagreements] that we still haven't... there's the fudge aspect, of actually those really difficult ones that I don't think we ever do answer. We just fudge around it to make it possible for everything else to carry on.

In this way, although securing agreement and avoiding disagreement were critical parts of policy-making, whatever the outcome of these negotiations, if a policy had strong political support then it may have to proceed anyway. In the course of my fieldwork, I heard of policies not reaching fruition where they failed to secure sufficiently powerful patrons within the Department or had conflicted with dominant policy agendas, but not of policies getting shelved because external parties could not be persuaded to agree to them.

In these cases the civil servants continued to seek to pre-arm the policy against potential subsequent criticism and resistance, but this was a harder form of persuasion; here civil servants used knowledge to justify decisions taken and strengthen the intellectual defences surrounding a policy:

DHP7: I'm also trying to backfill a bit, to make the policy a bit more solid [...] So I did a lot of work with the analysts [...] to try to develop an impact assessment.

DHA2: Sometimes [the impact assessment] is a handmaiden to the Minister, and about finding good bits of evidence to support an already selected position.

DHP1: What we didn't talk about today is when you get policy-based evidence {smiles knowingly}.

This was less a matter of 'winning hearts and minds' and more a case of not losing arguments in Parliament or in the media. And not surprisingly, given the findings set out in Chapters 3,4, and 5, the types of knowledge invoked for these purposes were quantitative analyses and claims from authoritative academics.

## Summary

There are commonalities to the ways in which knowledge and knowing were entailed by each of these articulation practices. The civil servants needed the

judgement skills to be able to identify the phenomena to which they should seek to link their policy: the powerful patron, the emergent or salient policy agenda, and the relevant stakeholders. They also needed to learn about these people and these ideas. They needed to know the content of the latest policy trends and to get a feel for the pre-existing views and particular knowledge tastes of patrons, of civil servants overseeing particular levers or agendas, and of outside individuals and organisations.

They had to adopt a range of techniques to enrol the support of these individuals and groups, including deploying particular forms of knowledge claims to persuade them of the merit of some proposal, to defuse disputes and to demonstrate their command of the subject area. They created conceptual and symbolic links between their proposals and salient agendas, and sought to (re)interpret those agendas in order to make them cohere with their policy proposals.

This work notwithstanding, such connections could not always be made to hold. A patron's views on a matter may be already well established and at odds with the proposal in question. The content of the proposal may be in tension with dominant political agendas, or not deliverable in the context of available policy instruments. And conflicts between outside groups on an issue may be (or at least appear to be) irreconcilable. Where the proposal was in conflict with the views of internal individuals or a policy agenda, it would often have to be sidelined or dropped. Where external resistance was strong, but there was considerable internal support for a proposal, the policy might be pursued anyway. In these cases the civil servants' focus shifted to identifying how and by whom the policy was likely to be criticised, and to strengthening the proposal's defences accordingly. This often meant invoking authoritative knowledge forms to justify the proposals.

## Discussion

What do we learn about the role of knowledge in policy from these accounts? The purpose of describing these policy practices in such detail is to illuminate the ways in which the practices themselves are rich with knowledge and knowing. In the second half of this discussion, I explore this theme in relation to the theories of knowledge described in Chapter 1. But first, I focus on the instrumental ways in which the civil servants used knowledge to persuade, negotiate and justify, and draw on the work of John Dewey to suggest that we can understand these practices as an instance of pragmatic inquiry.

### Knowledge as a tool for action

The account of knowledge use offered by this chapter could be the basis for a strong critique of the civil servants' practices. It could be argued that it is wilfully deceptive to present some knowledge claim as the *reason* for pursuing an action, when in fact it was only being used to persuade others of the value of that action, and the reason comes from somewhere else entirely. But there are ways of thinking differently and, perhaps, more productively about this form of knowledge use. We saw in Chapters 1 and 5 that Majone makes the claim for a legitimate difference between knowledge used for discovery, and knowledge used for justification (Majone 1989). Another approach is to conceive of the civil servants' practices as an example of *pragmatic inquiry*.

Pragmatism is a broad school of thought which resists easy definition, but the claim by the logician Charles Sanders Peirce that the meaning of a proposition is to be found in its consequences, in 'its conceivable bearing on the conduct of life' (Peirce 1905, p.252),<sup>24</sup> is commonly identified as the founding principle of the approach (Thayer 1968; Margolis 2006; R. Bernstein 2010). For Peirce, and the

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<sup>24</sup> The first published formulation of this claim appears in Peirce's 1878 paper 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear', in these (slightly less clear) terms: 'Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object' (Peirce 1878).

other two founding figures of the tradition, psychologist William James and philosopher and educationalist John Dewey, there is an 'inseparable connection' between 'cognition' and 'purpose' (Peirce 1905, p.253). Knowledge is not for representing the world, but it is rather a tool for action.

In the work of John Dewey, knowing, or the logic of inquiry, is conceptualised as a form of situated problem solving. Inquiry starts with a 'perplexed, troubled or confused situation at the beginning and a cleared-up, unified, resolved situation at the close' (Dewey 1910, p.106; cited in Thayer 1968, p.191). The process of inquiry is thus defined as 'the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole' (Dewey 1938, pp.104–5; cited in Thayer 1968, p.172). This form of inquiry sounds something like policy-making as articulation work: ideas or knowledge claims are relevant to the extent that they enable things to move forward, and for the envisaged resolution to be reached. Furthermore, the things to be known and connected (people and ideas) are (to some extent) transformed by the process itself. In his critical history of pragmatism, H.S. Thayer summarises Dewey's account of inquiry as follows:

The "function" of ideas here consists in their use, or suggested use, as means to the resolution of the problem. "Reasoning" is an examination of ideas in an attempt to discern the relevancy and pertinence of their function within inquiry and its movement toward a solution...Reason terminates with what is or is not an "answer" to the problematic situation. The "test" of that answer is whether it in fact is a solution to the problem... a "successful" conclusion, when reached, marks a transformation of a problematic situation into one that is clear, untroubled, settled... *truth* refers to just that set of conditions and operations which renders a problematic situation unproblematic.  
(1968, pp.192, 199)

In the context of this theory we can gain a richer understanding of the significance of the civil servants asking of knowledge 'is this useful' or 'workable' (DHA6), or remarking of a proposed way of thinking about a policy problem, 'oh that's why we do it like that, because it works!' (DHP11).

It is debatable whether Dewey himself would have accepted this application of his theory; the account of 'inquiry' directed towards such instrumental ends as getting a policy document published does not sit comfortably with Dewey's idealism. In his essay on the *Need for a Recovery of Philosophy*, Dewey warned:

the pragmatic theory of intelligence means that the function of mind is to project new and more complex ends – to free experience from routine and from caprice. Not the use of thought to accomplish purposes already given either in the mechanism of the body or in that of the existent state of society, but the use of intelligence to liberate and liberalize action, is the pragmatic lesson. Action restricted to given and fixed ends may attain great technical efficiency; but efficiency is the only quality to which it can lay claim.

(Dewey 1917, p.137)

There were a few occasions where civil servants reported having something closer to a 'blank slate' with an issue, when senior views were not yet established and the policy was somehow independent of or separate from the focus of existing and recent policy agendas. Here perhaps, their work more closely resembled Dewey's vision of proper pragmatic inquiry. But for the most part, articulation work involved working with 'purposes already given'; with a Minister's view, or some existing political commitment. I would suggest, then, that we can understand the ways in which the civil servants drew on issue-specific know-that to support articulation work as thoroughly pragmatic. In doing so, however, we ought to recognise that these practices were predominantly focused on realising established ends and, as such, would not yield the true transformation of situations which Dewey envisaged.

However, there is another theme in pragmatism that can help to illuminate a different way of thinking about the role of knowledge in articulation practices; this is the extent to which such practices are themselves *knowledgeable*.

### **Action as knowledgeable**

One of the distinctive features of pragmatism as a new philosophical approach in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was its call to study logic and knowing as *empirical* phenomena, which are situated, task orientated and

embedded in action. Indeed we saw in Chapter 1 that pragmatism influenced the writers in the social sciences who theorise knowledge as practised. At the heart of the pragmatic approach is a refutation of the split between 'doing' and 'knowing', which Dewey saw as an artefact of classic philosophy being formulated in Athens, with its division between slaves and philosophising free men (Dewey 1920, p.ix). Carried over into empiricist and idealist modern philosophy, Dewey criticises this distinction for presenting knowledge as 'extra-natural and set over and against the world to be known' (1917, p.122); knowing in this vision means 'viewing from outside' (1917, p.135).

Dewey challenged the knowing-doing distinction, drawing on the practice of modern science to claim that 'science is a *pursuit*, not a coming into possession of the immutable' (1920, p.xvii), and pointing out how individuals as selves are necessarily a part of the situations which are the objects of their inquiry. He wrote:

if it be true that the self or subject of experience is part and parcel of the course of events, it follows that the self *becomes* a knower. It becomes a mind in virtue of a distinctive way of partaking in the course of events. The significant distinction is no longer between the knower *and* the world; it is between different ways of being in and of the movement of things [...].  
(Dewey 1917, p.135)

So in what ways was articulation work *knowledgeable*? In what senses did these practices constitute forms of knowing? These activities can be understood as entailing and producing three forms of knowledge or knowing: know-how; cultural rules; and what S.D. Noam Cook and colleagues have termed 'the epistemic dimension of practice' (Cook & Seely Brown 1999; Cook & Wagenaar 2012).

### **Know-how**

Policy work entailed what we saw one civil servant describe as 'generic competencies'; a set of skills, which constitute *policy know-how*. These were the aptitudes which individual civil servants possessed, and though they could be named and reflected upon, their enactment involved drawing on some tacit

form of knowledge which could not be fully articulated. These were the social and communication skills that enabled some civil servants to make outsiders feel heard and included in the policy process, to 'win hearts and minds' (DHP9) and to 'capture people's ears and gain their confidence' (DHA1). As Hecló and Wildavsky wrote of Treasury civil servants nearly four decades earlier, 'Their supreme skill lies in personal relations. When they succeed where others fail, it is because they recognise the overriding importance of giving and getting a personal commitment' (1974, p.xiv).

This know-how also included the ability to make political judgements which enabled the participants to identify which patrons are not just senior, but also powerful; to decide which agendas are in the ascendance; to back policies that *succeed*; and to have a sense for 'how stakeholders might think about some of this stuff' (DHA6). They also included a certain entrepreneurialism; the ability to act with confidence and without hesitation when opportunities to promote a policy proposal presented themselves.

### *Cultural rules*

A second form of knowledge can be found in the implicit rules which guide articulation work – or perhaps better put, the abstract maxims through which we can make sense of this work – which were described in the first two-thirds of this chapter. This type of knowledge resembles the knowing involved in organisational culture, which we encountered in the final section of Chapter 1. It is something like 'how we do things around here.' In order to function successfully in this context, to act like one of the natives, the civil servant needed to know that policy must be 'made to happen' and that this involved securing a patron, linking to powerful agendas, building a consensus around a proposal and pre-arming policies against anticipated criticism.

There were also lots of other local knowledges entailed by these activities: understanding the grading system; knowing about past policy and contemporary policy developments; knowing who are the powerful

stakeholders and so on. This recalls Donald Schön's account of organisations, in which they are described as repositories of built-up knowledge, comprising 'principles and maxims of practice, images of mission and identity, facts about the task environment, techniques of operation, stories of past experience' (Schön, 1983, p.242 in Weick & Westley 1996, p.443). It might also be understood a version of what sociologists have termed 'encultured' or 'embedded' knowledge (see Chapter 1).

These ways of doing policy-making were nowhere written down; they were learned through experience, through watching others, and through stories from colleagues of past policy experiences. For example, we saw earlier in the chapter how DHP11 had not engaged senior Department figures when developing a strategy, and attributed the subsequent failure of the policy to this oversight. This time round, she said, I know to get the directors on board. As a quote on the cover of Dunsire's 1956 collection on 'The Making of an Administrator' puts it, 'Knowledge gained by personal experience may remain indispensable groundwork of the success of the administrator' (Dunsire 1956). Indeed the Treasury civil servants of Hecló and Wildavsky's 1970s study also all described the importance of learning on the job:

From permanent secretary to assistant principal, Treasury officials learn what is expected of them by actually making recommendations, taking decisions, and discovering how others react to what they do... Novices grope their way through.  
(Hecló & Wildavsky 1974, p.41)

And so it was for the civil servants in my study: local, cultural knowledge (and the policy know-how skills which accompanied it), was learnt principally through 'partaking in the course of events' and 'being in and of the movement of things' (Dewey 1917, p.135). This knowledge was 'embodied' (Lam 2000; Blackler 1995; Freeman & Sturdy 2011) but it was also shared. As civil servants learnt these ways of doing, they also reinforced or modified them in ways which made sense to their particular task and context, thus in turn shaping this shared knowledge.

These rules and their related skills could also be conceptualised as the knowledge or knowing aspect of *practice*. In Chapter 2, we saw how practice has been understood as arrays of activity which are both guided by and (re)constitute some shared understanding of how things are done in a particular community; and how policy practices thus ‘both entail and reproduce particular knowledge of when and how they are to be performed’ (Freeman et al. 2011, p.129). But Cook and Seely Brown (1999), and Cook and Wagenaar (2012) have suggested a more radical conceptualisation of the knowing involved in practice, which offers a third perspective on the ways in which articulation work can be understood as knowledgeable.

### *The epistemic dimension of practice*

In Chapter 1, we saw how S.D. Noam Cook and colleagues have identified what they term the ‘epistemic dimension of practice’ (Cook & Seely Brown 1999; Cook & Wagenaar 2012). For these authors, whether knowledge is conceived as know-how or know-that, as tacit or explicit, or as held by individuals or groups, it is still conceptualised as ‘knowledge’; as something ‘possessed’ and ‘static’ (Cook & Seely Brown 1999, p.387). As such it fails to capture the ‘dynamic, concrete, relational’ (1999, p.387) nature of knowing that is a part of action itself. The knowing that Cook, Seely Brown and Wagenaar describe is not the knowledge which ‘underpins’ or enables actions (like the cultural rules I have described), or which is invoked in action (like the pragmatic, instrumental use of knowledge claims), but rather it is an ‘*aspect of action*’ (Cook & Seely Brown 1999, p.387).

This kind of performative knowing is described as ‘the ways in which [someone] deploys the knowledge he possesses in his interactions with the materials of a specific concrete task’ (Cook & Seely Brown 1999, p.387). That knowledge being deployed in practice might be the knowledge claims the civil servants used to persuade colleagues or defend proposals; or the capacity or know-how to ‘capture peoples’ ears’; or the cultural rules about how to get work done in the

Department. But for Cook and Wagenaar such accounts still assume that knowledge is ontologically prior to action (Cook & Wagenaar 2012). The point here is that the act of deploying these knowledges in the navigation of some task in a particular and emerging situation is in itself knowledgeable. It is the activity of dynamically addressing the 'facilities and frustrations' of the materials (including knowledge) and people with which one is interacting in pursuit of some task that affords this in-practice knowing (Cook & Seely Brown 1999, pp.390, 394).

This aspect of the knowledgeable nature of doing is part of what Ryle tries to capture in his account of know-how, though perhaps with less success. Polanyi seems to be discussing a similar phenomenon in part of what he writes about the character of tacit knowledge. Thinking back to his example of the experiment involving electric shocks associated with particular syllables described in Chapter 1, for Polanyi tacit knowledge seemed to comprise both the subjects' hidden (inarticulable) knowledge of which syllables prompted electric shocks, *and* their ability to apply that knowledge in particular relevant instances, 'thus achieving an integration of particulars to a coherent entity to which we are attending' (1967, p.18). The distinctive move made by Cook and his colleagues is to separate out this second aspect, focusing solely on this epistemic dimension of practice which engages, but is not constituted by, tacit skills and cultural rules.

This form of knowing as doing is particularly hard to conceptualise. Perhaps the ways in which I do and do not *know* what it is to work as a civil servant in the Department of Health can provide us with an example. Let us assume that in this chapter I have correctly identified at least some of the in-practice cultural rules which guide the civil servants' practices. Through my professional role and from having conducted this research project, let us also say that I am familiar with the local knowledges required by these cultural rules (who is in and who is out; which policy agendas are in the ascendance, and so on). Finally, let us assume that I have strong social skills, that I am good at understanding others'

perspectives and at making them feel heard; and that I have a strong sense of personal confidence in my capacity to make judgements and decisions when under pressure.

All of these things are plausible (if not strictly true). Would this mean I could step into the shoes of a civil servant tomorrow and perform as well as someone already doing the job? I think that one of the reasons that the answer to this question is *no*, is that there is a kind of knowing which can only be produced through doing, and I would not yet have had experience of this doing. I might be well placed to be a good apprentice-civil servant, but only through full participation in the action could I become an accomplished colleague to the participants of this study.

## Chapter 7 Forms of Knowledge and Knowing in Policy Work

### Knowledge Practices Compared

I want to begin this final chapter by offering some reflections on my own practices of knowing and knowledge use in the process of producing this thesis, and how they compare to those of the civil servants. Inquiry is not outside of practice, and some of the ways in which I learnt how to study knowledge use in the Department of Health resembled how the civil servants themselves learnt how to make policy there; they were learnt 'on the job'. There were no codified rules which specified how I should apply to conduct research in the Department or whom I could ask for help, and yet it soon became clear that there were some ways of requesting access which were considered by the Department's staff to be more appropriate than others; and that some approaches were more effective than others. To secure research access, and to refine my research design, I had to learn some of the local cultural rules of the Department: the ways in which the civil servants behaved differently in email exchanges as compared to face-to-face interactions; the different social interaction styles which dominated the various units; the importance of securing senior sponsorship for any kind of project in the Department, and the means of identifying suitably powerful, and potentially sympathetic, patrons.

I had to employ a range of social skills to interpret the signals I received in response to my access requests, and to gain the trust of potential patrons. I learnt that patrons came in chains, and that I needed to work my way through contacts-of-contacts to get to some target interviewees or potential sponsors for meeting observations. Though I received advice from sympathetic insiders, much of this Departmental know-how was gained through trial and error, and through *doing*. As such, my own approach to negotiating the Department in order to conduct this research, and the ways in which I developed that

approach, reflected how the participants themselves learnt to negotiate the Department in order to produce policy. I was sharing in some of their know-how.

Furthermore, when it came to understanding the nature of their work, in the same way that personal encounters were a powerful influence on civil servants' beliefs about a phenomenon, my own sense of *knowing* the nature of civil servants' practices came from *being there*. From observing meetings, travelling with the participants, waiting in their offices and conversing with them. These encounters, or perhaps my interpretations of them, felt *real*, and gave me a strong sense of what sounded right, and what did not, when I came to subsequently analyse my data, and re-engage with the academic literatures. It was through this fieldwork, and not through reading theory, that I was able to challenge my own core beliefs about the nature of knowledge.

I used interviews for many of the same reasons the civil servants wanted to speak to people directly. Compared to drawing on official written documents, they offered a greater promise of understanding what the nature of their work was *really* like. They enabled quick and basic translations ('what does this process involve?'; 'what does that acronym stand for?'); they allowed me to direct the civil servants' accounts and thoughts to my concerns and interests; they also allowed for the discovery of unknown unknowns. Like the dialogues the civil servants engaged in with others, the back-and-forth of the interview conversation provided me with new ways of reflecting on the objects of my inquiry; the interviewees and I co-constructed knowledge on my research question.

When it came to analysing my findings, I created a critical dialogue between the personal beliefs and understandings I had gained from the observations and the interviews; the corpus of transcripts and notes; and ideas, claims and theories from the academic literature. While I used both the corpus of data and the academic literature to think through, elaborate and challenge the

understandings I had gained from being in the field, I also used them to defend, authorise and justify those understandings. Because my research data are the product of a formal research method, for which I can produce an audit trail, they carry more authority than my reported impressions from the experience of fieldwork. Furthermore, quotes from interviews and observations have a similar effect to the stories the civil servants brought back from their front-line encounters: though their persuasiveness and authority have to be established, they nonetheless have the peculiar quality of being difficult to dispute.

In the same ways that the civil servants' conversations with outside experts provided them with new ways of thinking about issues and authoritative claims with which to bolster particular policy positions, my own use of the academic literature enabled me both to see my data in new ways, *and* to lend authority to findings already settled. I also located my sources in similar ways. Although in producing my formal literature review, I had to follow academic rules of practice for identifying and selecting texts, when it came to finding relevant theory from outside of these bodies of literature, I drew on recommendations from peers and my supervisor; texts mentioned in seminars and conferences; and references cited in authoritative articles.

Like the civil servants, I also used interactions with others, and representation practices, to think through and test-out my emerging thesis. I *brainstormed* and *idea-tested* through discussions with the participants themselves, with my supervisor, with other academics in seminars and conferences and through many informal discussions with peers, friends and acquaintances. I was seeking to understand whether there were other, or additional, more productive ways to think about my data; and to see how credible these audiences found my claims. Criticism prompted either a reworking of the claim, or an effort to find resources to strengthen its credibility. I also used simplified representations to enable me to see my data in new ways, and to control it. I constructed themes under which the many data parts might be grouped; I sketched tables and diagrams to try to *pin down* the ideas I was engaging with and to conceptualise

their relationship to one another. And the presentation of findings in this and all the preceding chapters necessarily simplifies the material I am drawing on; it 'lumps' and 'splits' my data in ways that make it thinkable and susceptible to analysis.

Where the civil servants are working to make policy happen, my own research was ultimately directed towards producing a doctoral thesis. The thesis had to conform to canons of appropriate academic practice. Accordingly, I have used a traditional chapter ordering (literature review, methodology, results), implying a logical, rational chronology to the research project which bears only some resemblance to how these tasks were ordered in practice. I too am *performing* a legitimate and rational means of reaching conclusions on an issue. The thesis needed to meet other requirements of acceptable practice. It needed to be internally coherent; to invoke authoritative and current bodies of research; and to offer some original contribution to a field. Just as the articulation requirements of policy-making shape the kinds of knowing and knowledge that are permitted to play a role in that process, so too do these academic criteria influence the forms of knowledge and knowing which are emphasised, and those that get left out, of doctoral theses.

### **Forms of Knowledge and Knowing in Policy Work**

I began this project by asking, 'how do policymakers use different kinds of knowledge in the context of their work?' My research question was intentionally open, and its terms under-determined. I felt we had heard the researcher's version of this story in the burgeoning evidence and policy literature. I wanted to understand the issue of knowledge use from the policymakers' perspective; to get a sense for how they did use different kinds of knowledge and why, situating these practices within the context of their everyday work. Whilst I was determined to understand what knowledge was for the civil servants, and had tried to sensitise myself to some very different possibilities through reading

different accounts of knowledge in philosophy and sociology, I nonetheless entered the field with a particular set of lay understandings about its character.

A lifetime's habit of conceiving of knowledge as something like an object, which gets lifted from one location to another and 'used' to perform some rational, decision-making task is not easily relinquished. And yet this form of knowledge, and this model of knowledge use, did not feature much in the civil servants' extended accounts of their work in interviews, and nor did it seem an important feature of the meetings I watched. This was not what policy-making was about.

By loosening the grip of my own understanding of my research question on my field research, and by spending a period of time being guided by an interest in better understanding the nature of the civil servants' work practices in general, I was able to discover that the civil servants were in fact engaged in various activities which produced new ways of seeing and thinking about the objects of policy, and the possibilities for their transformation.

When I came to analyse my data, to revisit theoretical resources, and to articulate my findings, I came to see that the account of the civil servants' practices I have drawn in this thesis involves three distinct forms of knowledge and knowing, which cut across each of the last four chapters. They are:

1. **The practices of knowing** by which the civil servants come to understand and think about the world they seek to act upon;
2. **The pragmatic use of knowledge claims**, in which claims about the objects of policy are used instrumentally as tools to make policy happen; and
3. **Policy know-how**, which comprises the knowledge required by (and generated through) policy practices.

By focusing only on evidence, or on traditional conceptions of know-that, I would only have learnt about the second of these practices. I would not have

been able to see beyond the pragmatic use of authoritative knowledge claims. By opening my attention to a broader focus on the nature of policy-making practices, and by engaging with literature that conceives of knowledge as practised, I came to see and understand the significance of the two other forms of knowing in policy work. In what follows I offer a synoptic account of these three ways in which knowledge and knowing featured in the civil servants' work. I conclude by drawing out the implications of this account for further research.

### **1. Practices of knowing**

Throughout the results chapters, and especially in Chapters 4 and 5, we have seen the civil servants engage in activities through which they developed an understanding of, and new ways of seeing and thinking about, the objects of policy. These can be understood collectively as 'practices of knowing'. They fall into three main types. Firstly, the civil servants' own understandings of issues, in the sense of their personal comprehension of, or beliefs about, the nature of the objects of a policy, which were most powerfully shaped through personal encounters; through going to see local areas or services, and through non-professional, personal experiences of services or diseases or other social phenomena. These visits included meetings and conversations with front-line staff in which the civil servants were keen to gain an understanding of what things were 'really like', and to discover 'unknown unknowns'. Through these practices, the civil servants felt they had engaged directly with what was *real*, and we saw in Chapter 4 how the knowledge generated by first-hand experiences can be distinctively easy to recall, and gave the civil servants a strong sense of confidence in their understanding of an issue.

Secondly, the civil servants came to conceptualise the objects of policy by producing representations of them using a variety of techniques. These included defining and categorising the objects of policy, determining who counts as this or that category of patient or professional, and which issue sits under this or

that policy programme. In Chapter 5 I drew on theory and research from sociology and psychology to illuminate how these practices involve 'lumping' and 'splitting'; emphasising the similarities within categories and suppressing their internal differences, while also stressing the differences between them. Such categorisations not only enable the civil servants to construct mental representations of the objects of policy, they also determine the form that such representations take; they shape how the civil servants see the world. Quantifying, mapping and drawing diagrams, enabled the civil servants to visualise and conceptualise phenomena that were distant, disparate, numerous and complex. This is perhaps the closest the civil servants' practices came to the Weberian conception of rational bureaucracies; they were rendering the world knowable, and there was a sense in which they were seeking to 'master all things by calculation' (Weber 1918b, p.139).

Although they were both used to understand the objects of policy, these two sets of practices, site visits and interactions in situ, and representing phenomena, performed distinct functions. First hand encounters were where the civil servants formed personal beliefs about issues. Unlike numbers and diagrams, which were very clearly not the *real thing*, these encounters were highly convincing for many of the civil servants, enabling them to *see* phenomena for themselves.

While representation practices did not necessarily furnish the civil servants with strong beliefs about the reality of some situation, their ability to simplify phenomena made those phenomena, and the possibilities for their reform, more *thinkable*. This function of representations falls under a third cluster of practices, which were oriented towards thinking-up and thinking-through proposals, both in relation to the in-practice criteria for a successful policy, as described in Chapter 6, and in terms of the impact they might have in the outside world. Much of this thinking work was performed through face-to-face interactions in the form of meetings: brainstorming sessions with colleagues, and knowledge-gathering and idea-testing meetings with external individuals

from professional associations, charities, think-tanks, academia and public service organisations. Through internal meetings, the civil servants generated possibilities for action; their proposals were subjected to challenge in terms of their internal coherence and their fit with wider policy agendas; and collectively the civil servants 'thrashed out' and worked through problems and tensions. Meetings with external contacts were sites for testing out the acceptability of ideas and for seeing them from relevant alternative perspectives, as well as opportunities for enrolling support for proposals.

I set-out in Chapter 4 how we might understand how and why the civil servants think in conversation with others by reference to: the ways in which infants first learn to think through interaction with others; the calming and stimulating physiological effects of interaction; the ways in which conversations permit simultaneous translations and enable the participants to see issues anew, from another perspective; and the generative power of dialogue to link knowledge to tasks and to generate new meanings. In this context, knowing did seem to have many of those qualities identified by the knowledge-as-practised theorists as described in Chapter 1: it was collaborative, culturally embedded, and task-orientated. It was also interested; both the civil servants and their interlocutors were pursuing particular agendas.

## **2. The pragmatic use of knowledge claims**

The second way in which knowledge featured in the civil servants' work was as a pragmatic tool to support the requirements of policy-making as a political (with both a small and big 'p') activity. Here the civil servants used knowledge claims to symbolise their own mastery of an issue; to persuade patrons, other colleagues and outsiders, to support a proposal; and to justify decisions taken, and perform a legitimate means of decision-making.

Knowledge used for the purposes of persuasion took a variety of forms; the civil servants described tailoring their selection of supporting knowledge to the

particular predilections of their audiences. Some people needed to be convinced by hard evidence, while others were better influenced by stories from the front-line. Taking colleagues on site visits was a particularly powerful tool. The civil servants also made tactical use of the neutral status of research evidence and independent experts to de-personalise and diffuse conflicts about proposals.

Once proposals had been settled within the Department, to defend and justify them against criticisms in Parliament and the media, the civil servants invoked authoritative forms of knowledge and rational models of decision-making. Impact assessments, commissioned research and the claims of authoritative academics were important resources for bolstering a policy's defences and symbolizing that its formulation was based on legitimate forms of decision-making. I reflected in Chapter 5 on how the particular power of numbers in this context seems to reside in their apparent simplicity and wholeness, which creates the impression that they enjoy a direct and unmediated relationship with the objects they represent. In invoking findings from research evidence to justify proposals, the civil servants here too seemed to be appealing to the alleged objective and neutral status of such evidence. The civil servants also drew on the work of authoritative academics in particular to secure added credibility for proposals. The knowledge invoked to justify policies was knowledge that has the appearance of being complete, neutral, fixed and, by virtue of being produced by specialist knowledge workers, authoritative.

### **3. Policy know-how**

The third form of knowing is the knowledge which was required for (and (re)produced by) being a competent and effective policymaker in this context. Here I use the term 'know-how' loosely to group together the skills required by policy-making; the local cultural rules by which policy-making practices were organised; and the knowing involved in applying these knowledges to the particular, complex and ever-unfolding situations within which the civil servants found themselves. We saw that those policymakers who were

considered effective at their job had strong social skills and were able to gain the confidence of their colleagues and external contacts; to persuade them of the merit of proposals, and to make them feel listened to and included. This policy know-how also involved political judgement skills as well as a certain entrepreneurial spirit. Not all civil servants shared all of these qualities, of course, but these were the mark of an effective policymaker. More essential still was that the civil servants knew the cultural rules by which policy-making was organised. These included an understanding of the need to 'make policy happen' and to do so through connecting a proposal to powerful individuals and ideas, and building agreement around it.

At the end of the last chapter I drew on work by Cook and Seely Brown (1999), and Cook and Wagenaar (2012) to suggest that there might also be a third sense in which policy-making practices can be understood as knowledgeable, whereby the practices themselves have an epistemological dimension. This is the knowing involved in applying the skills and local cultural rules (as well as knowledge claims as tools) to the particular and emergent situations in which the civil servants find themselves. It is the knowing produced in doing.

Though these kinds of knowledge seemed to be the least relevant to my initial understanding of my research question, once I was in the field, they demanded my attention. Gilbert Ryle could have been describing the participants of my study when he wrote: 'In ordinary life... we are much more concerned with people's competences than with their cognitive repertoires', and that we are much less interested in 'the stocks of truths they acquire and retain than in their... ability to organise and exploit them' (Ryle 1949, p.28). This set of know-hows was the knowledge that the civil servants could not be without and upon which their professional identities seemed to be founded. Furthermore, understanding the implicit rules evident in the civil servants' practices enabled me to better make sense of the pragmatic and instrumental ways in which the civil servants used knowledge claims; and to better appreciate the multifaceted nature of the interactions within which the civil servants sought to learn about

policy issues. In the terms of the evidence and policy literature described in Chapter 1, attending to policy practices more broadly conceived, enabled me to unpick the work that 'context' is doing in these processes.

### **An Agenda for Further Research**

This thesis shows how the civil servants engaged in two contrasting sets of knowledge practices: one for understanding and thinking; and another for legitimating and justifying. The first was often informal and took place on site visits, in meetings and chats, as well as through constructing simplified representations of phenomena. The second involved invoking authoritative forms of knowledge and rationalist ideas about decision-making; drawing on cost-benefit analyses, academic evidence and the claims of authoritative researchers. How the civil servants come to know the world, and how they performed knowing the world, were two different things.

To point this out is not to discredit or undermine the civil servants' practices; after all, I have shown how my own knowledge practices shared many of the same characteristics, and I have drawn on theorists who describe related practices in the natural sciences. It is rather to call for a better, and non-judgemental, understanding of how and why policymakers, and other practitioners, do knowledge and knowing as they do. To achieve this, researchers need to move beyond a narrow focus on authoritative knowledge forms, which may only permit them to see the pragmatic deployment of knowledge claims, and instead take seriously the informal practices through which understanding is generated. By relinquishing a pre-occupation with how such practices can be made to look more like rational models of decision-making, researchers may be able to better understand why these practices take the forms that they do. Making sense of these forms requires researchers to give a sustained attention to the multi-faceted nature of the tasks towards which such understandings are directed; to the know-how of policy work. In doing so,

they will need to draw on intellectual resources from outside the confines of political science. In this thesis, I have suggested some ways in which this might be done.

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## Appendix A Fieldwork Context: England's Department of Health in 2010-11

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### A Shifting Context

At the time of my fieldwork, in 2010-11, the Department of Health was entering a period of significant change, which would affect its responsibilities, structure and size. The UK Coalition Government, formed by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties in May 2010, had set out a programme of reform for public services which expressed 'a determination to oversee a radical redistribution of power away from Westminster and Whitehall to councils, communities and homes across the nation' (HM Government 2010b, p.7). The following month the then Secretary of State for health, Andrew Lansley MP, set out his programme for a major restructuring of the national health service, intended to reduce the role of the state and managers in the running of the service; give a greater role to clinicians and to voluntary and private sector organisations in the commissioning and provision of care; and make the service accountable to citizens and consumers rather than to Whitehall (Secretary of State for Health 2010).

Furthermore, although the health budget had been protected from the stringent cuts proposed in other public service Departments, the Government was committed to cutting management costs and 'inefficiencies' in the NHS and the Department of Health itself, in order to reinvest finances into front-line services (Department of Health 2010b).

The Government's reform programme met with significant criticism from a range of unions, membership organisations, charities, academics and think-tanks, and in 2011 the legislative passage of the Health Bill was subjected to a *pause* by the Prime Minister, who appointed an independent group of experts called the Future Forum to conduct a 'listening exercise', and propose improvements to the legislation (for an overview and analysis of events during this period, see R. Klein forthcoming). Although, after modifications and further debate, the Health Bill was subsequently enacted (HM Government 2012a), at the time of my fieldwork, this was not a forgone conclusion. The civil servants faced considerable uncertainty over the future direction of policy, and relatedly, about their own job security.

This Appendix sets out background information about the Department, describing its structure, and the roles of Ministers and civil servants of different grades; its size and the location of its offices; and the policy responsibilities of its various directorates. In each case I describe the state of affairs at the time of my fieldwork, together with what information was available then on planned changes.

### **The Roles of Ministers and Civil Servants**

The Department is led by a Secretary of State, with the support of his or her ministerial team, comprising between four and six Ministers of state and parliamentary-under-secretaries (known as junior Ministers) (Department of Health 2012c). Ministers are drawn from members of the House of Commons or the House of Lords, and are appointed by the Prime Minister. Collectively ministers are responsible for establishing strategy and policy frameworks; agreeing resources for the Department with the Treasury and setting out the principles by which the resources will be distributed; as well as for setting performance objectives for the Department (Department of Health 2007, p.42).

Ministers are accountable to Parliament for all aspects of the Department's policies and performance.

In the Departmental hierarchy, civil servants sit beneath these political leaders. According to the Department, their role is:

- Providing accurate, timely and clear advice to Ministers to enable them to set the overall strategy and policies;
- Ensuring the delivery of the strategy and policies Ministers have set within agreed timeframes;
- Identifying and developing control strategies for key risks and putting in place an appropriate escalation process for Ministers;
- Ensuring that there is a clear performance framework, resource allocation and prioritisation process in place; and
- Supporting Ministers effectively in discharging their responsibilities to Parliament and in communicating on policy and delivery.

(Department of Health 2007, p.46)

Civil servants are also legally required to abide by the Civil Service code, which is organised around the values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality, defined in the following terms:

- 'integrity' is putting the obligations of public service above your own personal interests;
- 'honesty' is being truthful and open;
- 'objectivity' is basing your advice and decisions on rigorous analysis of the evidence; and
- 'impartiality' is acting solely according to the merits of the case and serving equally well Governments of different political persuasions.

(Cabinet Office 2010, sec.3)

The civil service staffing hierarchy follows a government-wide grading system (see Table A.1 Civil Service Grading Structure).

**Table A.1 Civil Service Grading Structure**

<b>Current title</b>	<b>Previous Title *</b>
Permanent Secretary	Permanent Secretary
Director General	Grade 2
Director	Grade 3
Deputy Director	Grade 5
Grade 6	Grade 6
Team leader	Grade 7

\*The participants of my study used a mixture of old and new titles.

(Source: Civil Service 2011)

The Department of Health is unusual in having three (rather than one) civil servants at the Permanent Secretary level. These individuals are responsible for providing leadership, political advice and accountability for their respective areas of responsibility. Under each of these three leadership positions sit a series of directors general, responsible for specific policy areas and accountable to one of the permanent secretaries, and under each director general sits directors, deputy directors, team leaders, and their staff (see Figure A.1 Department of Health Structure, 2009, p. 254). These staff, who are on more junior grades include senior executive officers, higher executive officers, and individuals on the civil service fast-stream training programme.

The majority of civil servants in the Department are classed as *policymakers*, but there are also a small number of *analyst* civil servants, with skills in economics, statistics, operations research and the social sciences.

## Analysts

The Department has a cadre of approximately 165 analysts, employed as professionals in economics (n. 60), statistics (n.48) operational research<sup>25</sup> (n.40) and social research (n.5).<sup>26</sup> These four groups have distinct professional identities; their members belong to the Government Economic Service, the Government Statistical Service, the Government Operational Research Service and the Government Social Research Service respectively, which serve as professional bodies. Most of the analysts I encountered in my fieldwork were economists. Although data indicates that there are five social researchers in the Department, they were never referred to in interviews or meetings. In fact in an informal conversation a senior civil servant wondered aloud why the Department did not have sociologists, psychologists or anthropologists, as well as economists, serving the Department.

Notwithstanding their distinct subject-related affiliations with analysts in other departments, these civil servants have a single professional identity in the Department of Health as *analysts*, and they are all professionally accountable to the Department's Chief Analyst (though they may be line managed by policymakers). In recent years the organisation of analysts within the Department has changed. They used to be based in one single central team, but have since been split up into around fifteen separate groups each supporting a particular policy area. The Chief Analyst had retained a small central office of around half a dozen individuals; all other analysts were serving either as singleton members of policy teams (a position referred to informally as being

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<sup>25</sup> Operational research is defined by the Government's Operational Research Unit as 'the application of scientific methods to management problems. It aims to provide a rational basis for decision-making, by understanding and structuring complex situations. Often this involves building mathematical models to predict system behaviour and thereby assist the planning of changes to the system.' (2008, p.8)

<sup>26</sup> Data are full-time equivalent, representing people in post in February 2012 (personal communication, DH-wide statistics team, 13/02/2012).

'embedded'),<sup>27</sup> or sitting in groups of analysts supervised by a senior analyst, attached to particular policy areas.

At the time of writing, the implications for analysts of the reduction and restructuring of the Department had not yet been announced, but the central unit of analysts (the Office of the Chief Analyst) was already undergoing change. According to my participants, its function was being revised from that of a think-tank to a more consultancy-type model; rather than working on discrete projects initiated directly by permanent secretaries or the chief analyst, the group was now intended to serve as a flexible resource, with its staff working for whichever part of the Department is considered most in need of analytical support at any given moment.

### Location and Size

The Department's headquarters are located in London and Leeds. Around two thirds of its staff are based in London, working across four different sites (Richmond House on Whitehall, Skipton House, Wellington House and New Kings Beam House). During my fieldwork the Department had an additional nine regional public health offices within England's Offices for the Regions, and was responsible for a host of arms-length bodies including executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies and special health authorities.

In 2010 the Department's staff, (excluding these agency employees) numbered 2,630 (full-time equivalent) (Office for National Statistics 2010). This is a significant reduction on ten years earlier, and staff numbers were set to be reduced further as the Department's role was reconfigured in the context of the Health Bill reforms and as the Government pursued its commitment to securing efficiency savings. Such pressures were a common experience in the

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<sup>27</sup> The term 'embedded' carries connotations of war correspondents out on missions with army units; this seemed pertinent in the context of the 'them and us' culture which persisted among some analysts and policymakers, and the potentially 'dirty' nature of policy-making by contrast to 'pure' analytical work; see Chapter 5.

Department. For the last eight years of the previous administration the Department had been subjected to government-wide requirements to reduce the costs and increase the efficiency of its operations, in order to release further funding to front-line services. The number of core (e.g. non-agency) staff posts in the Department was reduced by over 40% between 1997 and 2009 (Civil Service 2010a). Staff surveys conducted in 2006, 2007 and 2008 all found fewer than half of staff agreeing with the statement 'I feel I have job security' (Civil Service 2010b).

In the run-up to the 2010 general election, both the Conservative and the Liberal Democrat Parties pledged significant cuts to the Department's size; the Liberal Democrats said by half (Liberal Democrats 2010) and the Conservatives committed to reducing both Whitehall and NHS administration costs by a third (Conservative Party 2010). Although neither of these commitments featured in subsequent Government statements, programmes to reduce management costs in the health service together with the reduced role envisaged for the Department by the Health Bill reforms sent a clear message to staff that further cuts were likely.

During my fieldwork interviewees reported that an initial round of voluntary redundancies had taken place in the first quarter of 2010. In July 2011, towards the end of my fieldwork, two PowerPoint slides were circulated internally within the Department of Health, setting out the planned timetable for changes to posts (Department of Health 2011a). This was set to begin with appointments to the Department's new senior civil service positions in autumn 2011, and showed 'DH staff mov[ing] progressively into confirmed posts using the HR framework' in the first six months of 2012. During the course of my fieldwork it became clear that posts would be established according to a new organisational structure, and at least in some cases, existing staff would have to reapply for their posts, or for newly created alternatives.

## Functions and Structure

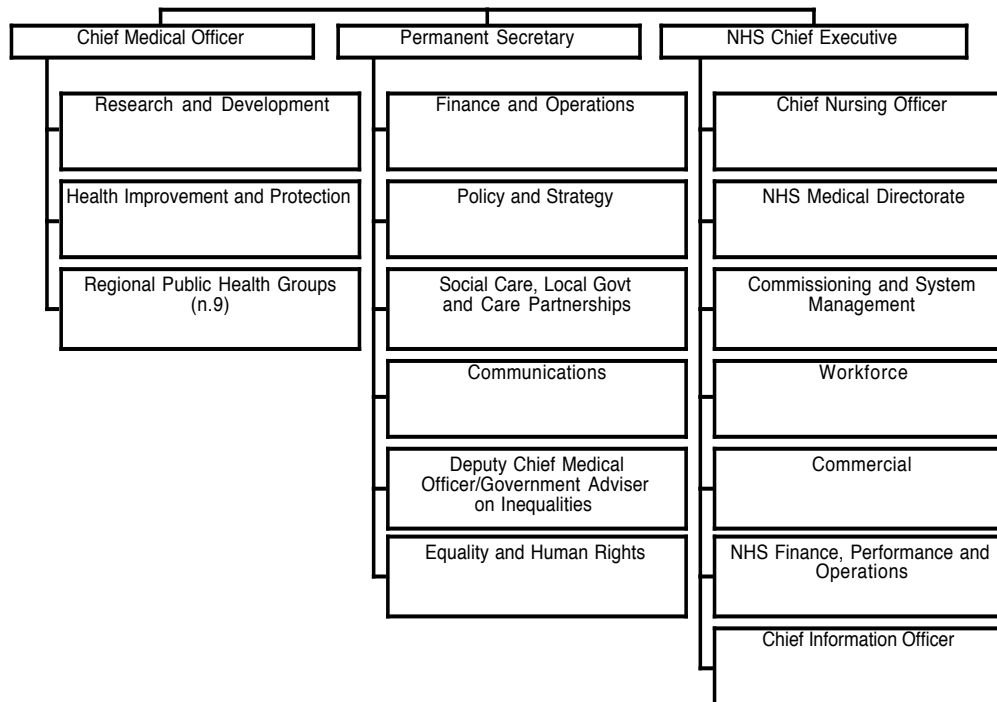
### 2010

The organisation of the Department has been subject to frequent reviews and reforms ever since it took its contemporary form after splitting from the Department of Health and Social Security in 1989. As Day and Klein reported in 1997, 'The regularity of these introspective exercises over the decades underlines the difficulty of bringing together the various strands of the DoH's multifarious activities into a coherent pattern' (Day & Klein 1997, p.13). These changes notwithstanding, over the past fifteen years or so, the Department's organisation has tended to coalesce around two or three relatively distinct groupings: policy development; NHS management; and technical medical and public health advice (Day & R. Klein 1997; Civil Service Capability Reviews 2009; Jarman & Greer 2010).

Throughout my fieldwork, the Department was divided into three formal streams which map roughly onto those groupings (see Figure A.1 Department of Health Structure, 2009). These three areas, which were each overseen by a civil servant at Permanent Secretary grade, covered:

- (i) Medical advice; oversight of health-related research and development; and leadership on public health, led by the Chief Medical Officer;
- (ii) Policy development; the 'Department of State' functions such as advice to Ministers, developing legislation, supporting Ministers to account to Parliament, and acting for the Department on international issues; leadership on adult social care; and communications for the Department led by the Permanent Secretary; and
- (iii) Management of the NHS, led by the NHS Chief Executive.

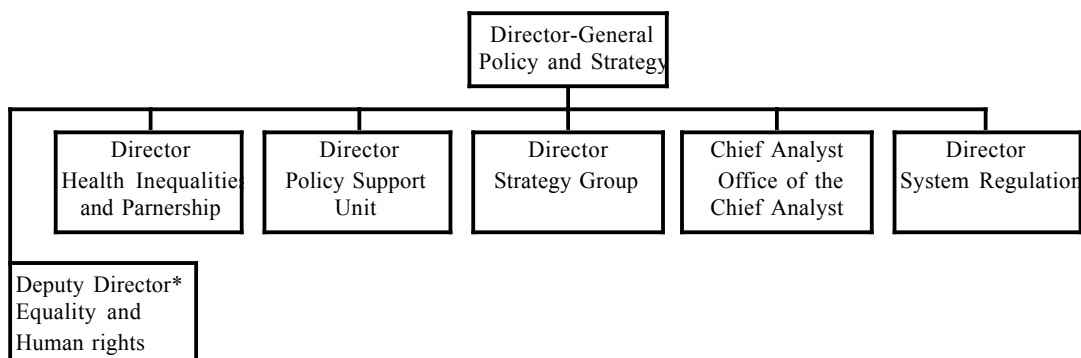
**Figure A.1 Department of Health Structure, 2009**



(Source: Department of Health 2009c, p.5)

As I set out in Chapter 2, my research was focused in the Department’s Policy and Strategy Directorate. This directorate’s responsibilities were described by the Department in 2009 as ‘to develop Departmental-wide policy and strategy, lead on health system reforms policy, and improve the Department’s capability in strategy, analysis and policy’ (Department of Health 2009, p.23). The Directorate was organised into six groups (see Figure A.2 Policy and Strategy Directorate Structure, 2009).

**Figure A.2 Policy and Strategy Directorate Structure, 2009**



\*Reports directly to the Director-General, but not included in descriptions of the Directorate's 'top team'.

Sources: (Department of Health 2009a; Department of Health 2009b)

### Post-2010

The *Equity and Excellence* health white paper, published in July 2010, together with a host of further consultation and command papers published over the following eighteen months, set out plans to significantly reform the Department's role. Responsibilities for managing the NHS would be transferred to a new non-Departmental body, the NHS Commissioning Board (Secretary of State for Health 2010) and a number of the Department's public health functions would be moved to a new executive agency, Public Health England (Secretary of State for Health 2011a). Responsibility for setting the legislative and policy framework for the NHS, in addition to overseeing adult social care services, would remain with the Secretary of State and the Department (Secretary of State for Health 2010). These plans were ratified in the Health and Social Care Act 2012 (HM Government 2012a).

At the time of my fieldwork, the plans had just been published and the Department's staff were required to 'flesh out the policy details' of the proposed reforms to its own structure, as well as for the establishment of the various new quasi-independent bodies, and for the proposed reorganisation of public health services and the NHS (Secretary of State for Health 2010, p.48).

In anticipation of these reforms, the Policy and Strategy Directorate entered a new transition structure during 2010-11. When the Directorate's director-general was promoted to the post of Permanent Secretary, her position was not refilled, and the Directorate's groups were temporarily distributed among other directorates in the Department. However, the Directorate's functions are those which the Department is envisaged to keep, and by late autumn 2011 it looked likely that many if not all of its groups would survive in some form as part of a new System Design, NHS & Finance Directorate (Department of Health 2011c).

## Appendix B Participant Information Sheet and Consent Forms



### Participant Information Sheet

#### Knowledge Work in Policy-making

**Jo Maybin**

PhD student & Sir Bernard Crick Fellow (part-time),  
Department of Politics, University of Edinburgh  
Tel. [provided in original], email [j.maybin@kingsfund.org.uk](mailto:j.maybin@kingsfund.org.uk)

#### Project information

This research aims to identify and understand how national policymakers in health mobilise different types of knowledge in the course of their work. It is concerned with three main questions:

- How do policymakers put together policy documents?
- What are the different types of knowledge they are drawing on in this process?
- What purposes are these different types of knowledge serving?

The principal research methods are interviews with current policymakers and non-participant observation of project meetings within England's Department of Health. The project's outputs will include a doctoral thesis to be submitted in 2012/13; a summary of key findings for participants and other interested parties; presentations at academic seminars and conferences; and at least one peer-reviewed journal article.

#### Your participation in the research

##### *Interviews*

The purpose of the interviews is to gain a range of perspectives from policymakers and analysts on their experiences of policy-making, and in particular of producing policy documents. It will be a one-on-one interview that will take place at a location of our agreement or over the telephone and should last around an hour. At the start of the interview I will ask you to sign a consent form to indicate that you have read and

understood this information sheet and agree to the terms of your participation. With your permission I will audio record the interview to ensure that I accurately reflect our discussion. If you would like to see a copy of the transcript after the interview in order to make any necessary corrections, please let me know. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate in the project at any time.

### *Observation*

Through my first phase of interviews I have identified meetings as important moments in the work of policy-making. The purpose of observing such meetings is to gain a better understanding of what is being achieved through these interactions and how. Prior to the meeting I will ask you to sign a consent form to indicate that you have read and understood this information sheet and agree to the terms of my access. I would also request that at the start of the meeting either you or I inform meeting participants that I am observing the meeting as part of a research project and that the names of participants and the substantive content of the meeting will be treated confidentially. I will take notes during the meeting but will not use a recording device. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate in the project at any time.

### **Storage and use of data**

All recordings, notes and transcripts will be stored securely. I will produce anonymised versions of notes and transcripts that redact references to individuals, teams and the substantive content of policy discussions, except where a participant explicitly states that they want the information they provide to be ‘on the record’. I will analyse these anonymised texts and may refer to them directly in my thesis and related publications.

Participants will be given generic job titles – for example ‘a policy adviser in the Cabinet Office’ or ‘an analyst in the Department of Health’ – for the sake of reporting findings. I will only do this in cases where I have interviewed or observed more than one person belonging to this category.

All recordings will be destroyed after submission of the thesis, but anonymised versions of notes and transcripts will be retained to allow for the possibility of further analysis.

### **Funding and supervision**

I am funded by a Sir Bernard Crick Fellowship (2010-11) and the Graduate School of Social and Political Science Research Student Award (2008-14) from the University of Edinburgh. I also work part-time as a senior researcher at The King’s Fund. This project is entirely separate to my work for The King’s Fund.

My doctoral supervisors are Dr Richard Freeman, Senior Lecturer in Politics ([http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/staff\\_profiles/freeman\\_richard](http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/staff_profiles/freeman_richard)) and Dr Christina Boswell, Senior Lecturer in Politics ([http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/staff\\_profiles/boswell\\_christina](http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/staff_profiles/boswell_christina)), both at the University of Edinburgh. The research is also subject to periodic review by other academic staff at the University of Edinburgh.

The project is being conducted in line with the University of Edinburgh’s Research Ethics Policy and Procedures. **Thank you for your time.**



## **Interview Consent Form**

### **Knowledge Work in Policy-making**

Jo Maybin

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet (PIS). I agree to take part in an interview and I consent to the data obtained in the interview being used in accordance with the terms set out in the PIS.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent to participate at any time.

Name (printed):

Signature:

Date:

I would like to be notified of any publications resulting from this project



**Research participation  
Consent Form**

**Knowledge Work in Policy-making**

Jo Maybin

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet (PIS). I agree to granting Jo Maybin access to observe project meetings and I consent to the data obtained being used in accordance with the terms set out in the PIS. In particular, I understand that the data will be stored securely and will be anonymised prior to being used in any subsequent publications.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent to participate at any time.

Name (printed):

Signature:

Date:

I would like to be notified of any publications resulting from this project

## Appendix C Formal Knowledge Resources in the Department

The participants in my study described using a number of the Department's formal knowledge resources and processes in the course of their work, namely impact assessments; public consultation exercises; commissioning research through the Policy Research Programme; and requesting literature searches by the Department's library service. This appendix provides a short description of each of these resources and the formal requirements around their processes.

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<i>The Policy Research Programme (PRP)</i> .....	264
<i>The Department of Health Library Service</i> .....	265

### Public Consultations

When developing significant new policy on a topic, civil servants can use formal written public consultations. This usually involves publishing a series of policy proposals in a document, accompanied by a series of questions on which interested parties can submit written responses within a specified timeframe. At any one time there will usually be at least one and sometimes more than half a dozen open consultations advertised on the Department's website (Department of Health 2012b). Whether civil servants consult on any given policy development seems to be at the discretion of Ministers and Department officials,<sup>28</sup> though the practice is standard when formulating significant policies which are set out in, or will eventually take the form of, a white paper.

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<sup>28</sup> The government Code of Practice on consultations does not specify when the process ought to be used. I sought clarification on this point from a number of my informants, none of who was quite sure of the situation. I was directed to someone who has a role in relation to managing consultations in the Department, but they did not respond to my requests. Perhaps it is anyway more significant that the civil servants in mid-ranking roles were not aware of any compulsion.

The Department of Health is a signatory to the government's *Code of Practice on Consultations* (HM Government 2008). First introduced in 2000, the code offers a series of principles for good practice when conducting written consultations, though even for signatories, this guidance is not binding. According to the code, using formal, written consultations 'makes preliminary analysis available for public scrutiny and allows additional evidence to be sought from a range of interested parties so as to inform the development of the policy or its implementation' (HM Government 2008, para.1.1). Consultations should take place 'at a stage where there is scope to influence the policy outcome' (HM Government 2008, para.1.0) and once a consultation period is complete, 'All responses [...] should be analysed carefully, using the expertise, experiences and views of respondents to develop a more effective and efficient policy. The focus should be on the evidence given by consultees to back up their arguments' (HM Government 2008, para.6.1). Organisations following the code are expected to provide a summary of who responded to the consultation, and the views they expressed, and should 'normally set out what decisions have been taken in light of what was learnt from the consultation exercise' (HM Government 2008, para.6.4).

### **Impact Assessments and Equality Impact Assessments**

All policy proposals whose implementation could change the costs or regulatory burdens that the government places on organisations in the public, private or third sector, must be accompanied by an Impact Assessment (IA). According to government guidance, these assessments are intended to serve as:

- A *continuous process*, consistent with the policy appraisal cycle, [...] to help policy makers to fully think through the reasons for government intervention, to weigh up various options for achieving an objective and to understand the consequences of a proposed intervention; and

- A *tool* used by policy makers to assess and present the likely costs and benefits (monetised as far as possible) and the associated risks of a proposal that might have an impact on public, private or civil society organisations [...].  
(HM Government 2011, p.4)

A generic impact assessment template is issued by the Department for Business, Skills and Innovation (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2010), which requires the following information:

- A summary of the problem under consideration;
- Details of the purpose of the proposed policy;
- Details of the policy options which have been considered; and
- The estimated costs and benefits of each option, supported by an 'evidence base' comprising a narrative, accompanying references and details of analysis undertaken to reach the estimations.

Each impact assessment is completed by an analyst, in consultation with the relevant policy team, and must be signed off by a Minister and the chief analyst (in practice this is delegated to senior analysts in the Department). When an impact assessment accompanies a document containing firm proposals or enacting policies, this sign-off process is intended to vouch that 'given the available evidence, [the IA] represents a reasonable view of the likely costs, benefits' and that for the selected policy, 'the benefits justify the costs' (HM Government 2011, p.15).

As a public authority, the Department is also subject to various duties imposed by the Equality Act (HM Government 2010a). This includes the requirement that they consider how their functions could be carried out in way that reduces inequalities in outcomes associated with socio-economic disadvantage; eliminates unlawful discrimination; advances equality of opportunity for

particular protected groups or ‘characteristics’;<sup>29</sup> and fosters good relations between those who are protected and those who are not. The Department seeks to meet these duties through its ‘equality impact assessment’ process, through which all documents must pass before being published. The requisite form asks for an assessment of whether the policy is likely to have a differential impact on any of the specified protected groups.<sup>30</sup> If it is judged that it will, the relevant policy team has to undertake a full equality impact assessment, detailing how the consideration of equalities in this context has fed into the various stages of policy formulation and informed the selection of a particular policy option.

### **The Policy Research Programme (PRP)**

This programme sits within the Department of Health, and provides funding, support and a gate-keeping role in the commissioning of external research to inform policy development. The programme commissions single studies (which may be a literature review), large-scale, linked original research studies, and ‘policy research units’ (PRUs), which are based in universities. Each of these units focuses on a particular policy issue or area (such as social care funding), and is commissioned on a five-year contract. They conduct long-term research projects, as well as providing a ‘critical mass of individuals with essential research-based knowledge in key policy areas’, and a ‘rapid response function’ for fast turn-around research on demand, to serve the Department’s policymakers (Department of Health 2011b).

At the time of my fieldwork, the PRP team was based within the Research and Development Directorate within the Department, and comprised a head of programme and ten to twelve research liaison officers, who work between the

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<sup>29</sup> The ‘protected characteristics’ include age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity (Equality Act 2010).

<sup>30</sup> In addition to the characteristics detailed in the Equality Act, the Department also includes in its Equality Impact Assessment template specific references to carers and to residency status (e.g. migrants) (Department of Health 2010a, p.3)

civil servants and the commissioned researchers. According to a promotional leaflet, the PRP:

- Influences the setting or assessment of policy priorities;
- Informs the formulation of new policy, e.g. White/Green Papers;
- Underpins the process of policy review and implementation;
- Assists in the development of innovation, e.g. via the evaluation of policy pilots or demonstration sites;
- Advises on assessment measures to evaluate the quality and impact of services;
- Provides evidence for policy impact assessment and modelling activity;
- Informs the production of DH advice and guidance in specific policy areas; and
- Assesses the impact and cost-effectiveness of policies and their consequences for people and their organisations.

(Department of Health 2011b),

The fate of the programme and its staff following the Department's restructuring programme were not in the public domain at the time of writing, although given the scale of the changes to the Department it looked unlikely that the programme would survive in exactly the same form.

### **The Department of Health Library Service**

The government library and information service staff are intended to 'be experts in finding information', identifying and acquiring the resources relevant to their Department, including by creating and searching databases for staff (McFarlane 2011, pp.1-3). The Department of Health's library service, based since 2008 in Leeds, oversees 'DH data', a database of over 174,000 records relating to health and social care management. The database covers:

official publications, journal articles and grey literature on: health service policy, management and administration, with an emphasis on the British National Health Service; the quality of health services including hospitals, nursing, primary care and public health; the planning, design, construction and maintenance of health service buildings; occupational health; control and regulation of medicines; medical equipment and supplies; and social care and personal social services. The majority of records are from 1983 onwards, although coverage of departmental materials dates back to 1919. (NHS Evidence 2012)

The database itself is accessible to staff (and also to NHS staff and many university researchers), but the civil servants require library support to access full-texts.

