

The Absurdity of Bureaucracy: How Implementation Works*Edited by Vohnsen N.*

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There is something delightful about a new book, fresh off the press. The smell. The feel of the cover – almost silky in this case. It is a pleasure that I always look forward to, almost as much as the contents of the book concerned! But the title under review promised to be better than that initial experience.

Nina Vohnsen (2015) has written for the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* before. This book takes some of the insights found in that paper and follows the story of the policy through other offices and other hands. As such, and as the subtitle of the book indicates, this is a book about implementation. This is a well-trodden field, but she approaches it in a very particular way. And this is part of the promise of the book. She opens with some helpful advice for different readers, those too busy or too easily bored to simply start at the beginning. Among the audiences are consultants, who are offered the following advice: “stop wasting our taxes by charging huge fees for consultancy work [...] Have the decency not to pretend that you can make implementation work” (p. xiv). We now know we are reading a book that has something pointed to say. It is not a simple critique of bureaucracy, another in a long line of texts that suggest that policies fail because of inadequacies in public services and public servants. And we have some sense of where this work is going and of where to find those things we will be interested in.

We are then immersed in characters, both in the form of *dramatis persona* and in a montage consisting of a series of notes from the field. These quickly cohere around ideas of work but in a manner intended to shake us out of our “thought habits” (p. 6) and to emphasise the different perspectives and the non-linearity of implementation. Form and theory are interwoven from the very outset in a way that keeps the reader’s attention on the fieldwork while never describing without purpose. Montage. Absurdity. Non-linearity. These themes return and repeat. And they do so in a tightly written and intelligent manner.

But what are we to understand by absurdity? Implementation studies have long recognised failure as a problem. Good intentions often go awry (see the long title of Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973). Unintended consequences abound and perfection is never achieved (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984; Mosse, 2004). Indeed, failure comes to dominate implementation studies (e.g. Butler *et al.*, 1994). But absurd? Vohnsen is careful to elaborate what she means. Absurdity is a perspective; a judgement made when there appears to be no logic, no sense to decisions or to what is happening. Her purpose is to “unravel this experience of absurdity in order to show the multiplicity of logics at work in implementation” (p. 23). Revealing these logics and the absurd ways in which they play out is then the key to interpreting the material in the subsequent four chapters in the book.



These four chapters (titles: Anticipations; Mutations; Multiplications; and The quest for meaning), these logics are presented. Each chapter is built around two extended portraits. These keep our attention on the fieldwork. Each chapter concludes with a brief analysis, again a device to allow the reader to read the work “efficiently”, avoiding the portraits if that is what you wish. But for the reader of the portraits, the analysis is a helpful summary, reconnecting us to the themes as we come up for perspective. But the portraits speak for themselves in many ways. And we understand the absurdity very quickly. The policy, at face value, is commonsensical, proposing that those unable to work because of ill-health might be assisted to return to work by targeted interventions. At first, it is also welcomed by those street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) who will have to see it through. But it unravels from the very outset of the pilot study. From the first discussions to the detail of when and how to introduce the pilot project to clients, the portraits reveal that nothing is as simple as it might at first appear. As a former civil servant, I particularly appreciate the simple decision to select the trial study participants by the use of the birth date. All those born on the first of the month will be included in either the control or intervention groups (p. 57). This overlooks the practice of assigning a first of the month birth date to immigrants whose actual date of birth is unknown. Despite this obvious (at least, obvious to those at the local level if not to the policy makers) problem, the plan has to be adhered to. Absurd!

Developing the different perspectives, the competing logics and the ensuing absurdities through these detailed portraits is both easy to engage with and plays with the themes identified earlier. We have montage. We have absurdities. And it is non-linear. We do not have a story told from beginning to end (this is no retelling of Pressman and Wildavsky’s story). We move between the local, to the policy world and to the private providers. This is not a policy, an object, followed through in that sense. And this non-linear structure is followed through to the very end. The book closes with a throwback to my childhood. Vohnsen constructs a story format of the kind that sets up decision points for the reader to choose a course of action. Does this work? Not for me. It does not feel real, like the cases I dealt with in those long distant days I spent in the Department of Social Security in the UK. But I love the idea of trying to do this.

In short, this is a beautifully crafted book. A great deal of thought has gone into the style and the structure. This is not artful for its own sake but serves to underline the points being made in the very way the work is put together. It adds a fresh and illuminating perspective that should challenge and engage academics interested in welfare and in implementation. It should also become a resource for teaching, whether for students of social and public policy or of anthropology and ethnography. It ought to be read by those consultants advising governments – they are well paid, so they can afford the price.

Finally, as the first title in a new series from the Manchester University Press, it sets a very high standard. I look forward to the second, third and subsequent books arriving.

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