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The psychology of bureaucracy: A normative account inspired by Rom Harré

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Abstract

During the last years of his life, I had a number of discussions with Rom Harré about the puzzling growth of inefficient bureaucracy around the world. He was particularly critical of the sharp rise in the number of administrators at Oxford, Georgetown, and other universities in which he had invested his academic life. In this paper, I provide a normative account of inefficient bureaucracy inspired by Harré. I give priority to narratives that sustain normative systems 'out there' - both beyond individuals, and enmeshing individuals. Through the metaphor of an inverted pyramid with seven levels of identity threat, I interpret the growth of inefficient bureaucracy in organizations as associated with collective narratives about threats against 'us,' with identity threat serving as justification and motivation to adopt and expand inefficient bureaucracy. In the final section, I briefly discuss the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in bureaucracy, and possible solutions to inefficient bureaucracy suggested by the normative model.

KEYWORDS
bureaucracy, collective, conformity, inefficiency, normative, organization

1 | TOWARD A NORMATIVE ACCOUNT OF BUREAUCRACY

1.1 | Reflecting back on Harré's approach

> ...also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.
>
> Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*, I, 202)

> Rules do not determine what *happens* in the future. They determine what *should* happen.
>
> Rom Harré (Cognitive Science, 2002, p. 125)

During the last years of his life, I had a number of discussions with Rom Harré about *inefficient bureaucracy*, a system of decision-making in an organization that is characterized by continual increases in the number of its employees and the wasting of resources, but poor outcomes. An integral part of inefficient bureaucracy is *red tape*, the rules, regulations, and procedures that must be abided by, but do not advance the *legitimate* goals of either service providers or users (Bozeman, 2000). A hallmark of inefficient bureaucracy is its pervasive growth in organizations of both Western and non-Western societies, including in universities. Harré noted that during his lifetime of scholarship at Oxford University, Georgetown University, and other institutions, he had observed a dramatic increase in the number of university administrators, relative to faculty. Extant research supports his observation: since the 1970s the pace of growth of the numbers and costs of administrators has been *considerably* higher than for faculty (Ginsberg, 2011; Greene, 2015; Lindsay, 2015; Srigley, 2018). Moreover, authors have noted the relative decline in faculty status and "The rise of the all-administrative university" (Ginsberg, 2011, p. 1), as well as the rapid rise in tuition in large part as a result of administrative bloat at universities (Greene, 2015).

In this paper, then, I build on my earlier conversations with Harré to provide an account of the growth of inefficient bureaucracy. Such bureaucracies can come into being within any institution, including those that house seniors in need of special care (see Sabat's discussion of Alzheimer's disease patients, in this Special Issue). Two basic ideas guide my discussion. The first is an emphasis on rules as ways of doing things, as *practices in everyday life* (see Wittgenstein, quoted above). Second, I am guided by the idea that rules are not causes, they are guides for correct behavior (see Harré, quoted above). Thus, my account of inefficient bureaucracy is normative rather than causal, and in this sense, it contrasts sharply with traditional psychology where the goal is to discover the causes of behavior (Harré & Moghaddam, 2012). I begin by further clarifying the causal and normative accounts.

1.2 | Causal and Normative Accounts of Behavior

> Experimental research is the most powerful research method because it allows experimenters to manipulate, isolate, and control chosen variables, and thereby determine cause and effect.
>
> Huffman (2012, p. 21)

Harré repeatedly criticized traditional psychologists for their assumption that in order to be accepted as a *bona fide* science, psychology must adopt a positivistic causal model of behavior. In the traditional psychology laboratory experiment, independent variables (assumed causes) are manipulated in order to measure their impact on the dependent variables (assumed effects). The laboratory is the most commonly used experimental research method, seen by Huffman (quoted above) and numerous others as best determining cause and effect. In a study of 15 widely used traditional introductory psychology textbooks (Dunstan & Moghaddam, 2016), we discovered that the determination of cause-effect relations is persistently identified in these textbooks as the key to 'scientific psychology.' In a more extensive study of textbooks in psychology, physics, biology and other disciplines, Winston and Blais (1996) showed that psychologists repeatedly claim that their ideas about causation, variables, and research methodology generally have been imported from physics and other sciences. However, Winston and Blais (1996) argue that this claim is without merit, and is repeatedly made by psychologists without citing physics sources. A wider criticism is that irrespective of where psychologists derive their ideas about scientific research methodology, it is incorrect to assume that in order to be a science, psychology must focus exclusively on discovering the causes of behavior.

While some human behavior is causally determined, a great deal is not (for more extensive discussions of causation, see Harré & Moghaddam, 2016). For example, imagine if I am standing close to a gas explosion, which is so loud that my auditory capacity is detrimentally impacted. Even a month later, I am not able to hear well. The loud explosion had a causal effect on how well I hear. A medical doctor tests my hearing by asking me to listen to different sounds; I am to respond 'yes' when I detect a sound. Now, imagine if after I respond "Yes," the medical doctor asks, "What was the sound?" and I answer "It was an orchestra playing." Next, the medical doctor asks, "Did you recognize the piece of music being played?" I respond, "Yes, it was a part of a *Brandenburg Concerto*. It has a special meaning for me." "Really?" Responds the doctor, "What meaning does it have for you?" We have now slipped from the domain of causal determinism (the gas explosion causing damage to my auditory abilities), to that of meaning systems (the meaning a piece of music has for me). This difference is of key importance: in the domain of meaning systems, the correct interpretive frame is normative, not causal. To re-phrase Harré (quoted above), rules and other parts of a normative system do not determine what *happens* in the future. Rather, they determine what *should* happen according to local practices for correct behavior as long as these practices are followed.

Most human behavior is normatively regulated, in the sense that "...people behave in orderly ways which can be assessed with respect to the local standards of correctness and propriety. Sometimes these standards are already expressed as explicit rules, or implicit in criticisms, advice and so on. Sometimes they exist only as patterns of taken-for-granted practices" (Harré, 2012, p. 24). From this point of departure, clearly our explanation for inefficient bureaucracy must focus on the local standards of correct behavior that support inefficient bureaucracy.

2 | TOWARD A NORMATIVE ACCOUNT OF INEFFICIENT BUREAUCRACY

Some negative aspects of bureaucracy have been discussed in classic (Weber, 1947) and contemporary works (e.g., Balla & Gormley, 2017; Kaufmann et al., 2019). It has also been noted that inefficient bureaucracy tends to use, expand, and sometimes add to *red tape*, the rules,

regulations, and procedures that "...entail a compliance burden without advancing the legitimate purposes they were intended to serve" (Bozeman, 2000, p. 12). Theories of bureaucracy have, sometimes explicitly, given attention to psychological processes (e.g., Lipsky, 2010; Moe, 1995; Nørgaard, 2018; Wood, 2010). But the puzzle of how inefficient bureaucracy expands and persists needs more research attention from psychologists, particularly because inefficient bureaucracy can magnify injustices. For example, inefficient bureaucracies allow more opportunities for women and ethnic minorities to be targeted through microaggression (Holder et al., 2015) and incivility (Cortina et al., 2013).

My first proposition is that in some contexts, behaviors supportive of inefficient bureaucracy come to constitute 'correct' behaviors. That is, employees come to see such behaviors as 'how we should do things.' Examples of such behaviors in organizations are: withholding information, making access difficult, adding unnecessary additional steps to a decision process of a project, rubber-stamping, screening the identities of individuals responsible for particular tasks, minimizing transparency, and using stereotypes to channel services away from particular individuals and group (e.g, ethnic minorities).

My second proposition is that collective narratives develop which serve as justifications and motivations for behaviors integral to inefficient bureaucracy, around the theme of identity threat. Narratives such as 'we are under attack' and 'we are not given the benefits we deserve,' come to characterize organizational culture (Schein & Schein, 2017). Identity needs and motivations are collectively constructed and mutually upheld in this process. Thus, unlike traditional discussions of identity (Ashworth & Schinoff, 2016; Tajfel &. Turner, 1979), 'identity needs' such as the 'need for a positive and distinct identity' are interpreted as arising out of, and existing within, *collectively shared narratives*, rather than as context-independent and fixed characteristics of individuals. For example, Carol was not born with a 'need' to belong to a positively evaluated university, but learned this 'need' through socialization and coming to share the narratives of her society about 'university rankings' and 'academic prestige.'

Third, inefficient bureaucracy is interpreted as a means through which employees, very often collectively, attempt to *gain greater control to protect their interests* in the organization. For example, by hiring additional employees and creating additional tasks for her department, a department manager increases the relative importance and 'clout' of her department in the organization. This expansion increases the sense of control among employees in the department, even though the additional tasks created add to inefficient bureaucracy in the total organization. Indeed, the additional tasks simply make tasks take longer to accomplish, without adding to productivity.

The collectively constructed and shared narratives in the organization about identity threat can be conceptualized as a hierarchy, from the lowest (leveI 1) to the highest (level 7). In the next section, I outline a seven-level identity-threat model of bureaucracy. I then briefly discuss the expanding attempts to use artificial intelligence (AI) to improve bureaucracy (Bullock, 2019). I end by briefly presenting certain questions that must be addressed in order to decrease inefficient bureaucracy.

Before discussing the details of the identity-threat model of bureaucracy, I want to deal with an objection that inevitably arises from a rationalist perspective. Why would managers in an organization put up with employees who use inefficient bureaucracy as a way to cope with identity threat? Surely such employees would be fired, and/or reprimanded. If we assume a rational model of organizational and economic behavior, this is what we would assume. However, as research in behavioral economics has made clear, the rational model of human behavior in the marketplace and in organizations is too simplistic (Chen et al., 2020;

Kahneman, 2011). Also, research on conformity and obedience demonstrates how arbitrary and incorrect norms can influence people to do the wrong thing (Moghaddam, 2008, Chap. 15 & 16). The power of context, and particularly a social reality constructed and upheld through shared narratives, works against the rationalist model that the organization will always correct itself, and that employees supporting and extending inefficient bureaucracy will always be corrected or expelled. Moreover, organizational leaders are as likely as other employees to become enmeshed in collective narratives supportive of inefficient bureaucracy.

## 3 | THE IDENTITY-THREAT MODEL OF BUREAUCRACY

The Identity-threat model of bureaucracy proposes that groups and individuals in bureaucracies construct narratives that depict different levels of identity threat, from Level 1 where there is no perceived threat, to Level 7, where there is maximum perceived threat against both ingroup and individual interests, including organization leadership. Very importantly, *'threat' means possible losses of prestige and resources, but it also means a diminished ability to gain prestige and resources.* Thus, threat concerns not only potential losses, but also potentially diminished gains.

Associated with narratives of identity threat are narratives of 'how we should behave.' The higher the level of narratively constructed identity-threat, the higher the adoption (and sometimes manufacture) of bureaucratic red tape as protection and as a means to gain greater control for both the ingroup and individuals. Narratives of identity-threat can be associated with different types of sources, including material factors (e.g., 'this is a threat to our job security, our income'), status factors (e.g., 'this threatens our prestige and power in the organization'), relationship factors (e.g., 'this damages our friendships and creates enemies for us'), as well as a general sense of loss of control over one's ingroup and/or individual status, power, and resources in the organization.

3.1 | The seven-level inverted pyramid

Imagine an inverted pyramid with narratives depicting seven levels of identify threat, with Level 1 (no identity-threat) at the bottom, the narrowest part of the inverted pyramid and Level 7 (highest collective identity-threat) at the top, widest part of the inverted pyramid (see Figure 1). The width of the pyramid increases with increased threat, as well as the number of people who share the perception of threat. A feature of narrative constructions of identity-threat is that it does not necessarily have an objective basis. A group or an individual employee may not be the actual target of criticism or other actions, such as complaints about services from clients of an organization, and threat of dismissal or demotion or restrictions on power by management, but the *perception of threat* can be sufficient to result in the group or individual adopting (and sometimes manufacturing) narratives leading to 'defensive' inefficient bureaucratic behavior. For example, a group of employees may mistakenly construct narratives depicting a particular client of the organization as hostile to them, and apply rules and regulations in such a way as to hinder the progress of the client's project(s).

The location and number of employees at a particular level of the inverted pyramid depends on the narratives of threats. As the narrative of threat changes, so does the location and number of the employees on the inverted pyramid. Groups and individuals can move from one level to another, so that, for example, those who begin at Level 4 (perceiving high identity-threat), could
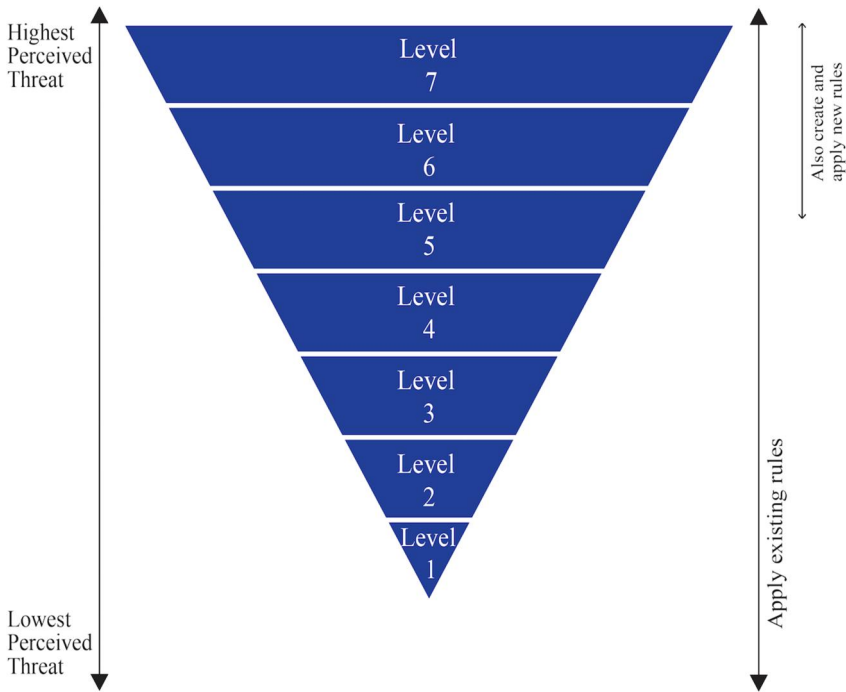
Level 7: Highest collective identity threat (create and apply new rules, beyond the local)

Level 6: Highest individual identity threat (create and apply new rules locally)

Level 5: Intense identity threat (expansive use of existing rules)

Level 4: High indentity threat (initiative-taking)

Level 3: Moderate identity threat (moderate reactivity)

Level 2: Minimum identity threat (minimal reactivity)

Level 1: No identity threat (inactive)

Figure 1. The seven levels of perceived threat that motivate different types of use and manufacture of inefficient bureaucracy.

FIGURE 1 The seven levels of percived threat that motivate different type of use and manufacture of inefficient bureaucracy

move down to Level 3 (perceiving moderate identity-threat), and further down to Level 2 (perceiving minimum identity-threat), and then back up again to Level 5 (perceiving intense identity-threat). The higher the level of threat in narratives adopted by employees, the higher greater numbers of them move on the inverted pyramid.

Throughout the first six levels of the inverted pyramid, inefficient bureaucracy is shaped by narratives about identity threats experienced by both groups and individuals. When identity threat is experienced by groups, the result can be formal actions on the part of work units, departments, and even entire organizations to strengthen inefficient bureaucracy. This involves groups and organizations developing a corporate culture (Schein & Schein, 2017) strongly influenced by narratives of identity threat, as well as the attraction and retention of employees who come to share this corporate culture, and attrition of those who do not (Schneider

et al., 2000). Whereas departments and organizations can change formal rules and regulations to increase inefficient bureaucracy (for example, by unnecessarily but officially increasing the number of steps required to complete a task), individuals must rely on informal (and officially banned) actions to do the same. When identity threat is only reflected in the narratives of individuals and not shared by a collective, actions by individuals in support of inefficient bureaucracy can still be disruptive, but are more easily corrected by colleagues and management. On level 7, however, identity threat depicted in collective narratives is so intense that the majority of employees collectively act in support of inefficient bureaucracy, with only a minority of 'non-conformist' employees not supporting.

The collectively shared narratives dominant at each level of the inverted pyramid are characterized by particular psychological processes. These processes include social attributions and categorization, moral cognition, exaggeration of intergroup differences and stereotyping, conformity and obedience, empathy, ego-depletion, and tolerance for ambiguity. These psychological phenomena are 'out there' in the social world, properties of the flow of the meaningful activities of people (see in particular, Harré's, 2002, discussion of the "The 'mind behind the mind' fallacy," p. 142). Thus, what in mainstream research are described as 'cognitive processes' (such as attributions, attitudes, group biases, and so on) are not fixed and stable properties of individuals, but socially constructed phenomena imbedded within and carried by collective narratives. These narratives are already present when the individual arrives in this world, and continue (with fewer or more changes) after the individual has exited.

3.1.1 | Level 1: no identity-threat

Collective narratives depict no identity-threat at Level 1, and there is no activity to add or subtract from the regular use of bureaucratic rules. In other words, there is no tendency for employees to use or expand red tape and inefficient bureaucracy more broadly. However, employees within bureaucracies are looking for ways to improve their status and resources, and also vigilant to threats, which include criticisms and complaints about their on-the-job performance from both outside and inside the workplace, as well as attempts to diminish their status, resources, job-security, and organizational connections (for example, attempts to relocate a group of employees, to a less central and less well-positioned and favorable location in a work organization). Those employees who come to perceive some level of identity-threat (including too limited a means to improve their status and resources) adopt narratives justifying their move to Level 2.

3.1.2 | Level 2: minimum identity-threat

The move from Level 1 to Level 2 involves the beginnings of the construction of collectively shared narratives about 'threats against us' (including, 'we lack opportunities to improve our situation'). Employees adopt narratives that justify occasionally extending and over-applying bureaucratic rules and procedures. These occasional actions are associated with sporadic increases in the perception of identity-threat, seen as stemming from both inside and outside the workplace. For example, employees who were applying rules and regulations efficiently, and not reverting to red tape, come to see their boss as overly critical. As a result, more of them

adopt narratives about being threatened and needing to 'more strictly' apply bureaucratic rules and regulations. This means that what needs to be done takes longer.

Most importantly, at Level 2 changes take place in employee narratives with respect to attributional style and subjective justice (regarding the importance of attributions and fairness in organizations, respectively see Harvey et al., 2006, and Seifert et al., 2016). Employees who climb to Level 2 are starting to adopt narratives that attribute the causes of events as 'unfair attacks' from others inside and/or outside the organization. The perception of unfair treatment will involve both *distributive justice*, fairness in the allocation of resources among people, and *procedural justice*, the fairness of procedures for making distribution decisions among people (Tyler, 2015). Narratives reflecting unfairness are a key factor swaying employees to shift behavior to being less constructive organizational citizens (Lim & Loosemore, 2017). Examples of such behavior shift on this level include not taking the initiative when it is needed, and doing less work when this is possible without being detected by management.

At Level 2, shared narratives evolve to categorize the social world into 'us' versus 'them,' 'friends' versus 'enemies.' The socially constructed outgroup might include customers and broadly those who use the services of the organization, and it might include those within the organization (e.g., management, other employees seen as competitors) perceived as potential threats. Research shows that perceived threat from outgroups can have an array of consequences, including lower support for the rights of others (Carriere et al., 2019). Perceived outgroup threat starts to result in subjective justifications for the negation of outgroup rights. In practice, this manifests in passive-aggressive behavior, such as the periodic but increased use of red tape in dealing with perceived outgroup members, resulting in expanded inefficient bureaucracy.

Research on the displacement of aggression (Miller et al., 2003) suggests that, in some cases, the perceived source of identity threat could be too powerful to attack and a weaker target might be selected. For example, one or multiple departments in the organization might adopt narratives depicting top management as a source of identity threat, but displace their aggression against a less powerful target–such as customers or smaller suppliers heavily dependent on the organization. This kind of passive-aggressive behavior becomes more likely when it is done in a way that is more difficult to detect and does not result in penalties by management on those misbehaving.

3.1.3 | Level 3: moderate identity-threat

The most important behavioral change at Level 3 is the shift to the more systematic, but moderate use of red tape to regulate interactions with those perceived as outgroup members ('moderate,' in the sense that the normal business of the organization is still allowed to continue). Instead of being an occasionally used behavioral style, red tape now becomes the normative behavioral style for employees. This change is reflected in shared narratives in three ways. First, the social world is now strictly divided into 'us' and 'them,' 'the people I trust' and 'the people I distrust.' Categorization is common in human narratives (Cohen & Lefebvre, 2005), but on Level 3 the sharper distinctions between ingroup and outgroup(s) establishes the foundation for developing not only ideas about ingroup and outgroup(s) characteristics, but also more differentiated styles of behavior seen by employees to be appropriate for interacting with ingroup and outgroup members.

Employees now see it as correct to provide ingroup members with services in an efficient manner, but their behavior toward outgroup members comes to involve more red tape and greater inefficiency. For those seen as part of the ingroup, short cuts are taken and red tape is minimized; but for those seen as part of outgroup(s), red tape is used to lengthen and complicate administrative processes. For example, outgroup applicants for permits are not given the correct application forms and guidelines, shortcuts are not pointed out to them, fee schedules are not explained, and in general they are hindered rather than helped so that their projects are slowed down, diverted, or even stopped.

The second key change at Level 3 involves narratives of morality: employees move from thinking that it is wrong to use red tape and to behave in ways that increase inefficient bureaucracy, to thinking that such behavior should be adopted when dealing with outgroups. Researchers have explored moral decision-making (Laible et al., 2019; Modgil & Modgil, 2011) and values (Maio, 2017), as well as ethics in the business context (Rothlin & McCann, 2016), but moral thinking in the use of red tape needs more research attention. This topic should be considered in relation to social categorization, because it is the narrative demarcation of others as being part of the ingroup or belonging to outgroup(s) that facilitates and enables the decision that it is morally correct to use red tape to regulate interactions with particular others. After employees have reached Level 3, they feel morally justified to behave toward outgroup members in ways that enhance and expand inefficient bureaucracy. A substantial research literature on motivated cognition demonstrates how people subjectively interpret fairness in ways that fit their goals (Barclay et al., 2017), and on Level 3 people interpret fairness in a way that justifies their expanded use of inefficient bureaucracy.

A third psychological transformation that begins to take place in narratives adopted on Level 3 involves ego-depletion, "...a state in which the self does not have all the resources it has normally" (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007, p. 115). Employees adopt narratives about 'being burned out' and 'under pressure.' In the research literature, self-control is conceived as a limited resource (Baumeister, 2018), which is depleted by the challenge to deal with increased perceived threat on higher levels of the inverted pyramid (hundreds of studies demonstrate ego-depletion to be valid, although critical discussions suggest limitations, Friese et al., 2019). Ego-depletion leads to unethical behavior becoming more probable among employees, including leaders (Lin et al., 2016), particularly when the ingroup endorses such behavior (Yam et al., 2014). This third psychological transformation, involving an increasingly collective sense that 'we are overworked and taken advantage of,' gains prominence as threat narratives intensify and employees move further up the levels on the inverted pyramid.

3.1.4 | Level 4: high identity-threat

Employees who adopt narratives depicting high identity threat and climb up to Level 4 take the initiative in applying red tape and using inefficient bureaucracy to slow down or even in some cases block normal functioning in the organization, or at least their section of the organization. Employees who climb to Level 4 adopt narratives that exaggerate intergroup differences and incorporate strong stereotypes. The ingroup consists of 'me and my team,' those who are (depicted as being) under attack; the outgroup consists of those who are depicted to be too critical, demanding, and potential or actual threats to ingroup interests. The most important segment of the outgroup consists of 'customers' broadly, those who believe they have a right to demand services from the ingroup. However, other segments of the outgroup consist of those

inside the organization, often part of management and also competing teams within the organization, who place what (at least some) work units and individual employees perceive to be 'excessive' and 'unwarranted' demands on the ingroup. Ingroup and outgroup become evaluated and talked about differently (Presaghi & Rullo, 2018). On Level 4, there develops the classic intergroup exaggeration of differences and within-group minimization of differences well-known to students of intergroup relations (Moghaddam, 2008): differences between the ingroup and outgroup become exaggerated, while differences within the ingroup and the outgroup become minimized, resulting in a perspective that "They are all the same; we are all different individuals."

Stereotypes of the ingroup and outgroup become more fully formed on Level 4, with intergroup differentiation and ingroup favoritism prominent in shared narratives (DiDonato et al., 2011). In a study of how employees in an organization talk about their colleagues in other countries, Ladegaard (2011) found that employees used their personal experiences to justify stereotypes of 'the other,' as well as to differentiate between the ingroup and outgroups. The power of these stereotypes is that they are collaboratively constructed and collectively upheld. They arise out of share, collective experiences, as Ladegaard found "...group stereotypes become consensual through sharing and talking, and consequently, ingroup-outgroup boundaries become reinforced, and ingroup identity more salient" (2011, p. 98). On Level 4, these shared narratives help justify differential treatment of ingroup and outgroup(s).

3.1.5 | Level 5: intense identity-threat

As they adopt narratives depicting intense identity-threat and restrictions on 'how we can improve our situation,' employees climb to Level 5 and develop a stronger sense of ingroup identity, perceiving themselves as part of a clearly identifiable collective that is under attack. These employees now use red tape expansively and damage the efficient functioning of the organization. But organizations often continue to exist and operate under these conditions, particularly when their competitor organizations are weak, when they enjoy a monopoly position, and/or have a 'captured' audience. On Level 5, employees show extreme obedience and conformity to their 'threatened' leadership and the normative system of the 'threatened ingroup.'

Some level of conformity and obedience is characteristic, and a necessary part, of all effective organizations (Abel, 2013; Durand & Kremp, 2016). *Prosocial conformity*, when group norms influence people to be helpful, can result in higher donations to charity (Shang & Croson, 2009), greater efforts to protect the environment (Goldstein et al., 2008), and fairer actions (Fowler & Christakis, 2010). Furthermore, prosocial conformity can have broad consequences, leading to helping behavior and empathy for others in new areas (Nook et al., 2016). Similarly, obedience has important social benefits: without some level of obedience, it would be impossible for complex organizations to function (Hamilton & Biggart, 1985), particularly in the context of 21st century security challenges (Sommestad, 2015).

However, research has demonstrated that under some conditions conformity and obedience can have highly detrimental consequences. Early research by Muzafer Sherif (1906-1988), Solomon Asch (1907-1996) and Irving Janis (1918-1990) highlighted how incorrect norms can influence individuals to 'do the wrong thing' (e.g., report a certain amount of movement in a spot of light that actually remains static, report a line length incorrectly, or agree to a disastrous national policy decision) even though they later report knowing the correct way they should

have acted (Asch, 1955; Janis, 1982; Sherif, 1936). Subsequent research has shown that individuals are influenced by interlocuters to change their opinions of a conversation target (Hausmann et al., 2008), and being influenced by arbitrary norms put forward by others is also reflected in neural responses (Nook & Zaki, 2015). In the domain of obedience, the seminal research of Stanley Milgram (1933-1984), replicated in the 21st century (Burger, 2009), has famously demonstrated how individuals can be influenced by authority figures to act destructively (Milgram, 1974).

Particularly because of their collective nature, conformity and obedience processes that thrive on Level 5 in support of inefficient bureaucracy become highly potent.

3.1.6 | Level 6: highest personal identity-threat

Level 6 is the final stage where employees adopting identity threat narratives take group and/or individual actions in support of inefficient bureaucracy (on level 7, such actions are exclusively collective). Employees whose narratives depict a high enough level of identity threat to climb to Level 6, help to create and apply additional rules and regulations that add to inefficient bureaucracy, at least at the local level (i.e., organizations within nations, and often within a region or city of a nation). The behavior of those who climb to Level 6 is characterized by drastically diminished empathy for the victims of inefficient bureaucracy and, second, extreme ego-depletion. Both of these behaviors first emerged at lower Levels, but reach their peak and become extreme at Level 6.

Inefficient bureaucracy has victims, who can come to suffer both serious psychological and material damages. Their projects are delayed or even abandoned, their time is wasted, their appointments are cancelled, their files are 'lost,' and in many other ways red tape is used to thwart their efforts and to frustrate them. Victims who are powerful (e.g., those with sufficient resources to take legal action against the organization) have some possibility of achieving justice, but many individuals lack such resources and do not win any form of compensation. Research shows that victims would be helped by shows of empathy from the organization (Helmreich, 2012), but victim-blaming is common and organizations typically avoid any sign that might be interpreted as culpability (Myers, 2016). Besides, there is another key reason why victims do not benefit from sympathy, and this has to do with the reasoning employees use in their narratives in order to justify their actions in support of inefficient bureaucracy.

The narratives adopted to interpret events in organizations tend to be biased. In a study of how objective performance information in public and private organizations is interpreted, Baekgaard and Serritzlew (2015) found that prior beliefs strongly bias interpretations. The launching of new products in the marketplace is influenced by such biases, including strong overconfidence in the face of objective measures that suggest more caution is needed (Simon & Shrader, 2012). There is also evidence that professional training can have a limited and relatively small impact on how prior biases influence judgments (Braman & Nelson, 2007). Biased narratives mean that empathy for victims is often greatly diminished.

3.1.7 | Level 7: highest collective identity-threat

On the final Level of the inverted pyramid, narratives about collective identity-threat and lack of opportunities for 'us to improve our situation' dominate behavior in the organization.

Employees who climb to Level 7 support the creation and application of new rules beyond the local; for example, they are able to help strengthen inefficient bureaucracy across national boundaries - such as the ability of inefficient bureaucracy in Brussels, the center of European Union (EU) government, to impact all EU member states. The 'attackers' (i.e., the source of threat) represented in narratives can include customers, shareholders, the press, politicians, rival organizations, among others. The defensive reaction within the organization is also collective: the normative system and corporate culture (Schein & Schein, 2017) of the entire organization now endorses not only using existing red tape, to pass on 'inherited' poor practices (Vermeulen, 2017), but also manufacturing additional new red tape, which they use as a buffer between themselves and the perceived attackers. The use and manufacture of inefficient bureaucracy becomes supported by collectively shared narratives and presented as the 'right thing to do' and necessary for 'our survival, our progress.'

The transformation of organizational culture in line with inefficient bureaucracy both influences, and is influenced by, leadership. On the one hand, this process gives greater opportunities to leadership who endorse collective threats and the use of inefficient bureaucracy. On the other hand, this process is accelerated and exacerbated when the leadership is characterized by narcissism and other features of 'toxic' leaders (Goldman, 2009). The result is a destructive process, with those within the organization seeing 'our people' as under attack and justified to use any means possible to survive.

But this is not necessarily the 'creative destruction' which Schumpeter (1950) saw as "...the essential fact about capitalism" (p. 83), which can be beneficial to the larger economy. Rather, this is more akin to organizations developing ways of continuing 'business as usual' in the face of various pressures (such as climate change, Wright & Nyberg, 2017) which actually require innovative and constructive transformations. Organizations characterized by inefficient bureaucracy can continue 'business as usual' for very long periods, through achieving monopolistic positions, capturing a particular client group, and weakening their competitors.

The survival of organizations characterized by inefficient bureaucracy is, in the short-term at least, helped by extreme insularity. Narratives supportive of intolerance for ambiguity and categorical thinking, are present to some degree in everyday life and in the organizational context (Clair et al., 2019), but on Level 7 they reach new extremes. Employees and leaders within the organization now use narratives presenting the world strictly in collective terms, as 'us versus them,' with a huge and unbridgeable gulf between the ingroup and outgroup. Inefficient bureaucracy becomes the normative reaction to this heightened perceived identity-threat.

4 | CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND STEPS TOWARDS SOLUTIONS TO INEFFICIENT BUREAUCRACY

In the first half of the 21st century AI will continue to transform the workplace; many of the jobs that are carried out by humans today, including white collar jobs, will be carried out by machines tomorrow (Makridakis, 2017). AI can improve problem solving (Bullock, 2019), an example being Expert Systems (ES) used in the health sector (Abu-Nasser, 2017). There are already experimental demonstrations of how AI can in some respects replace traditional bureaucracy, for example by using vast data-sets and machine algorithms to generate faster and in some cases better decisions (Vogl et al., 2019) and by anonymizing the employee selection interview process (Houser, 2019). One possible consequence is that inefficient bureaucracy will

decline, because machines rather than humans will be doing many more of the jobs. This claim has some validity, but is too simplistic.

First and most obviously, the increasing use of machines and artificial intelligence may be narratively interpreted as a threat, guiding employees collectively and individually to react by increasing red tape and inefficient bureaucracy in defense of their interests. Second, as AI gains a more prominent role in white-collar work and middle-class professions, there will be new opportunities for machine decision making to be entangled in, and supportive of, red tape and inefficient bureaucracy. Third, it is invalid to assume that AI is necessarily neutral. Biases against women and ethnic minorities can become integral to artificial intelligence systems (Raghavan et al., 2020; Zou & Schiebinger, 2018). The result could be inter-group biases and inefficient bureaucracy that is even more resilient and resistance to reform. Solutions can involve more efficient machines, but they will not succeed without dealing with the initial impetus (i.e., narratives of identity-threat and loss of control among employees) for humans to create, support, and expand inefficient bureaucracy.

This normative approach inspired by Harré suggests certain long-term solutions to inefficient bureaucracy. Central to helping employees climb down to lower levels of the inverted pyramid, is the strategy of mapping out how employees collectively construct and try to manage identity threat. These behavioral styles can be subtle and disguised. For example, a new department, *D-New*, is set up within the organization to make decisions on issues previously decided on by a number of managers in different parts of the organization. *D-New* could work efficiently to make the necessary decisions using internal resources, there being no objective need to pull in employees and resources from outside their unit. However, because employees in *D-New* share narratives about serious collective threats against them, they feel they must justify their organizational role, jobs, and resources. As a result, they continually set up unnecessary meetings and events, pulling in employees from other departments, ostensibly to improve decision-making, but actually to publicize their activities and raise the profile of their department in the organization. Soon, numerous other departments feel obligated to dedicate scarce resources to meetings and events set up by *D-New*, even though this does not enhance decision-making and project outcomes. But when they object, they are told that *D-New* is not able to make decisions without *their* cooperation. Indeed, those who refuse to participate in the (actually unnecessary meetings and events) set up by *D-New* find themselves positioned as 'uncooperative.' The solution to the expansion of such inefficient bureaucracy is to intervene to change the shared narratives guiding behavior within *D-New*.

An essential goal of such psychological intervention is to develop shared narratives that support a sense of control and 'being valued' (Rogers & Ashforth, 2017) among employees, as groups and individuals. These goals can be reached through different strategies, including: strengthening narratives that clarify and give importance to the organizational role of each group and individual, improve communications between different groups of employees, share more information between departments, and strengthen a sense that the voices of employees matter. Solutions can, but need not, involve climbing down the inverted pyramid in the same sequence of steps as was followed when climbing up. Most people in the organization begin at the lowest level of the inverted pyramid, where narratives depict minimal identity-threat. The challenge is to prevent the manufacture and sharing of narratives that guide employees to higher levels of the inverted pyramid.

Solutions are reached by successfully addressing four questions, starting with a question that directly deals with the current state of narratives influential in the organization. First, *which level of the inverted pyramid do dominant narratives guide employees to be at?*

Answering this question is challenging, because it requires the correct identification of perceived identity-threat in narratives guiding groups, individuals, and in some cases the organization as a whole. Second, *what is the nature of current change and the potential for future change in the organization?* Organizations are in a continuous state of change. Some change enhances, some change is neutral to, while other change lowers, perceived identity-threat depicted in narratives. An accurate assessment must be achieved of the ongoing change in the organization and the relation of this change to identity-threat narratives: is the ongoing change increasing, decreasing, or not impacting identity-threat narratives? Next, the potential for future change in the organization must be assessed, to arrive at an accurate picture of the potential for creating changes that would lower the influence of identity-threat narratives. *Third*, *what are the available and necessary mechanisms for lowering the influence of identity-threat narratives in the organization?* In any organization there are already in place certain mechanisms for lowering this influence, but often these are not sufficient for achieving the necessary change. Through an accurate assessment of available and needed change mechanisms, the nature of the required future work will be precisely calibrated. *Finally*, *how can change be sustained to ensure that identity-threat narratives remain inconsequential in the future?* This challenge must be met to ensure that inefficient bureaucracy is diminished in the long-term.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing not applicable – no new data generated.

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