

Informality in Policymaking

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Informality in Policymaking: Weaving the Threads of Everyday Policy Work

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Being able to think and act in the moment, as any administrator and politician knows, is the hallmark of being an effective practitioner. It is the only way to tame the intrinsic uncertainty and unpredictability of the organization and its environment. This insight, which is backed up by a sizeable literature - on practice, know how, tacit knowledge, improvisation, wisdom, administrative discretion, informal organization, playing the system – backs up this everyday observation. Yet, in policy analysis and political science this practical common sense is inexplicably ignored. Instead, the formal aspects of organizations – institutions, laws, rules, procedures, constitutions – are considered the standard of epistemic and social authority. One of the many achievements of this book is it brings the voice of practice back into the conversation. It invites us to think in a non-dualist way about the formal-informal distinction. Another strength is the all-female line-up of contributors, which in itself is a commentary on the hegemonic distribution of epistemic authority in policy research. Nine detailed, carefully researched case studies demonstrate that only a thorough immersion in the formal aspects of policy and organization allows the practitioner to improvise on the spot to get things done and successfully solve problems, and also what that means for the organization. I expect this book to be a lasting contribution to bridging the divide between the formal and informal aspects of public policy and administration.

Hendrik Wagenaar (Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna; Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global governance, University of Canberra)

Brilliant and insightful, this forceful intervention challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions and paradigms in public administration and governance. This book tells an alternative, less-told story of in/formality in policy studies, one that is grounded in feminist methodologies, contextualized practices and localized knowledges. Broad in its scope, the book details how informality is used to negotiate boundaries, transfer knowledge and maintain infrastructure using a fascinating array of visual, material, and ethnographic methods. It is a must-read for anyone wishing to develop a complete understanding of how governance actually works on the ground.

Ayesha Masood (Associate Professor, Suleman Dawood School of Business, Lahore University of Management Sciences)

This edited collection is an insightful reminder of the unseen interstitial spaces and occasions where the (hyphenated) work of doing policy gets done. Beautifully presented and full of rich ethnographic accounts from a range of contexts, a great read for practitioners, managers and academics alike.

Rob Wilson (Professor of Digital Social Innovation, Manchester Metropolitan University)

This book vividly presents how informality gains shape in the daily practice of professional policymakers. The refreshing approach goes beyond binary thinking and considers the complex intertwining of informality with formality. It will be a key resource for anyone interested in informality in policymaking, and recommended reading for those who want to understand how informality always seems to elude definition.

Martijn Koster (Sociology of Development and Change, Wageningen University)



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About the Editors

Lindsey Garner-Knapp, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom. Lindsey's work bridges academia and policymaking and she is committed to building and maintaining connections in both worlds to facilitate research that addresses real-world problems and supports informed policymaking practices. She is a doctoral candidate at the University of Edinburgh in Politics and International Relations and a Researcher at the Centre for Inclusive Trade Policy. Broadly, her work explores international trade policymaking focusing on the multiplicity of heterogeneous actors involved in these entanglements and how they (re)assemble throughout the processes. With her background in anthropology and public policy, Lindsey draws on a variety of qualitative approaches to better understand policymaking in situ highlighting the affects of the human and nonhuman relations. As a practitioner, she has experience in policymaking processes as a policy analyst and policy advisor to multiple regional and city governments in Canada and the United Kingdom.

Joanna Mason, is Research Fellow with the Menzies Centre for Health Policy and Economics, University of Sydney, Australia. Joanna conducts research across the broad fields of public policy, health policy and public administration. Using interpretive and actor-centred approaches – and drawing on her public sector experience in policy – her work contributes to macro policy debates through a focus on the micro-setting and the practical challenges encountered by policymakers. Recent ethnographic work addressed expectations for policy practitioners to utilise academic research in view of the evidence-based policy paradigm which was conducted within the national-level civil service, the Australian Public Service. A recent publication explores how policy ethnography and the sense-making journey that follows can usefully deploy an anthropological orientation that attends to underlying methodological, theoretical, analytical and conceptual precepts and practices. Currently, her work examines health policy and governance focusing on reform to primary care through a comparative study of Australia and Canada.

Tamara Mulherin is a Lecturer in Organisational Studies with the Newcastle Business School at Northumbria University, having completed her PhD in Politics at the University of Edinburgh. She has been a Research Fellow with the Usher Institute at the University of Edinburgh, and the Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing Department at Northumbria University. Her doctoral research was an inter-organisational, multi-sited ethnographic study into

health and social care integration in Scotland, exploring how collaborative practices were enacted for the implementation of new legislation. She has more than 25 years of experience in the public and non-government sectors in roles, including management, planning, policy, evaluation, service delivery and community development, across a multiplicity of domains, e.g., mental health, health inequalities, homelessness, social care and domestic violence. She is interested in posthumanist public sector organising, mundane governance and infrastructuring of care, collaboration-as-practice and repair practices in the context of public sector reform.

E. Lianne Visser is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Public Administration at Leiden University in the Netherlands. Originally trained as an anthropologist at Utrecht University, and with experience as a public policymaker, she is fascinated by the mundane, tacit and often informal practices through which abstract concepts such as policy, governance, and accountability are performed and brought into being. Her research and teaching focuses on customisation and responsiveness by street-level workers; the changing relationship between street-level and policy departments; and mundane aspects of the work of street-level workers, managers and policymakers. She also writes about qualitative, ethnographic methods and practice theory. Her research has been published in leading international journals such as *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *Public Administration Review*, *Public Administration* and *Public Management Review*.

About the Contributors

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Evelijn Martinius works as a doctoral researcher at the Department of Organization Studies at the Vrije Universiteit in the Netherlands. Her research examines the management of underground public infrastructures in urban regions in the Netherlands. She is interested in sensory methods such as ethnography and writes about imagination, routines and grassroots pioneering solutions to overcome issues with bounded manageability in societal transitions.

Neha Mungekar is a PhD candidate at the Dutch Research Institute for Transitions (DRIFT), affiliated with the Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Currently, she is engaged in the Water4Change project, investigating how to nurture informal governance capacities for transitioning to water-sensitive cities in India. Her professional background encompasses significant roles as an urban designer and environmental photojournalist. Her academic and practice interests are centred on exploring the power dynamics associated with the distribution and allocation of water resources, particularly within the context of the Global South. Her research integrates complex systems thinking and anthropological approaches to provide nuanced insights into water governance and its implications for diverse stakeholders. Her key expertise lies in facilitation, knowledge brokering and consensus building through innovative participatory strategies.

Peregrine Schwartz-Shea is Professor Emerita, Department of Political Science, University of Utah. She published her early research using experimental methods and rational choice theory. Shifting theoretical interests led to research focusing on methodological practices in political science and interpretive methods. With Dvora Yanow, she is co-editor of the Routledge Series on Interpretive Methods, and their coauthored *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes* (2012) is the first volume in the series. She is past president of the Western Political Science Association (2012–2013) and recipient of two mentoring awards. She received a National Science Foundation grant to co-organise the Workshop on Interpretive Methodologies in Political Science (2009) and served on the Ad Hoc Committee on Human Subjects Research (2017–2020), which produced research ethics guidelines for the American Political Science Association. Since 2020, she serves on the editorial board of *American Political Science Review* and its Advisory Board for Research Ethics.

Meera Sudhakar works as an interdisciplinary researcher studying policy issues in the domain of water and energy. She completed her doctoral studies from National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, India in 2022. Her research has focused on tracing changes to policy ideas and institutions that structure energy and water politics in the context of environmental limits.

Larissa Versloot is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen and an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Security and Global Affairs at Leiden University. Her research interests are in multilateral cooperation, diplomacy, EU foreign policy and the maintenance of trust in world politics. Her work has been published in *International Affairs* and *Review of International Studies*.

Dvora Yanow is political/organisational ethnographer and interpretive methodologist. Dvora explores the generation and communication of knowing and meaning in policy and organisational settings. Her current project – working title *The Treachery of Categories* – explores category theory and state-created categories for immigrant integration policies and race-ethnic identities. Other interests

include social science research ethics and their regulation, work practice studies and science/technology museums and the idea of science. Her most recent work is 'Interpretive policy analysis: Origins and current challenges' (forthcoming, Elgar). With Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, she has co-authored *Interpretive Research Design* (2012), which launched their co-edited Routledge Series on Interpretive Methods, and co-edited *Interpretation and Method* (2nd ed., 2014). She has held fellowships at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center and the Käthe Hamburger Institute for Global Cooperation Research and visiting positions at the Danish Institute for International Studies, Vienna's Institute for Advanced Studies and Shenyang's Northeastern University (China), among others.

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Foreword

What if we began our thinking about public policy here, with conversations in corridors and coffee rooms, with a tap on the shoulder just before the meeting resumes, out on a site visit or with piles of paper on the passenger seat of the car? Not with the political, legislative, ideational, organisational or financial parameters of decision-making but with the physical, material, haptic, affective, familiar, embodied, situated, provisional, contingent and emergent, with the encounter and the casual conversation? For isn't this in fact where policy begins, along with most other human things?

That's not to claim that policy is anything but a public, formal affair, documented and institutionalised – for if it weren't recognisable, repeatable, replicable and communicable in some stable form it would fail in its essential functions. By the same token, however, understanding how something which is none of these things, how something essentially and necessarily informal comes in the end to be formal, must be essential to our understanding of what policy is and the work it does. For policy is not a priori formal but has been made so: it is no more and no less than the formalisation of what has been informally problematised, proposed, argued over and agreed. So why don't we begin with people engaged with each other rather than with that vague, abstract, ultimately ethereal and ephemeral thing we call policy? And then go on in this way, drawing attention to the continued work of informal interaction in sustaining the form and function of policy, in nurturing it, making sense of it, assessing it, perhaps resisting it or putting it into practice.

For that's what's happening here, in this book. Its argument is not that we must now turn our attention wholly to the informal or that we should in any sense look away from what we took to be policy and its principal characteristics. It is, instead, that we might ask how the formal and the informal are mutually constitutive in the making of policy. It's not 'either/or', it's 'both/and' or perhaps 'not only, but also'; it's to say the formal is only part of the story. It's precisely not to construct a new binary, a dualism of formal and informal, but it is to draw new attention to the boundary between the two and to the ways it might be drawn differently in different contexts. Its purpose is to posit a new holism, however hesitant and unsettled, in our thinking about public policy.

There's no surprise that it's these authors who should begin here, with the informal. They were and are themselves first of all practitioners – policymakers and public officials – and they're writing about a world they know from experience, working if not living in it, sharing its values at least in part, having been

socialised into its norms, acquired its assumptions and habits of thought, having become skilled in its established ways of doing things and so able to pass as experts, authorities. They've then entered another world of teaching and research and found the one they came from reflected back to them, represented in theories and models and approaches and frameworks, in carefully crafted case studies, in books and journal papers, that is in relentlessly *formal* ways. This book results at least in part from that friction, from wanting to show and say what their world is really like, how policy really happens.

It's no accident, either, that these stories of the informal should be told by embracing ethnographic methods, by researchers engaging in close and sustained relationships with those around them (more formally known as 'participants'). For those relationships themselves, like those among others we call 'policymakers', are constantly shifting between the informal, sometimes casual, sometimes private and even intimate and varying degrees of legal and professional formality. Nor is it any surprise that their authors should be women, sensitive to the ways different spaces of policy work differently because they are – at least informally – differently gendered.

So we might wonder about the origins and production of this book in the same way we wonder about the origins and production of policy (because of course research, like policy, is a text-based practice). It's been produced by a network of practitioner-researchers with shared if not common interests, that shared interest being in part in discovering what interests they have. It's come from a sense of something missing, first intuited then argued and explicated, in myriad conversations, in the idea for a book, in loose formulations, reformulations and re-visionings, in calls for contributions and expressions of interest, in playing with titles and drafting proposals, in writing and reading the papers themselves, commenting and revising, agonising over an introduction, more writing, more reading and more discussion. And so in the end, a text becomes settled, material and fixed – formal, perhaps – only in order that it should go out in the world, prompting more talk and perhaps more writing.

This book tells us other things about the informal, though they are as germane to social life in general as they are to public policy more specifically. They are that the informal is intrinsically social, always a form of interaction and therefore invariably conventional and rule-bound: that is to say that the informal happens in normal ways. Yet it can also be a source of the new, of the unscripted, critical and questioning.

Richard Freeman
Edinburgh
September 2023

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Where do we begin to express our gratitude to the people who have seen this endeavour to its completion? Positioned around the ‘shareable workbench’ (Braidotti, 2019, p. 146), we believe we have much to be thankful for. We are thankful to the people, things, and ideas that have all helped this book materialise, and as a collective accomplishment, it is vital to acknowledge the entanglements with these others through which this book emerged.

To our contributors:

As editors, we welcomed the chapter authors into our community as co-creators of this book and as peers who were equally committed to exploring informality and formality differently. Our approach with all of the authors throughout this book’s making was built on multiple forms of engagement along the way. We were fortunate to be a part of the development of such a generative group of authors without which this book would not be possible. In particular, we appreciated their trust in joining with us to work within and expand the universe of the concept of informality. We are grateful to them all for the profound ways in which they have thought with and through the concepts, and concomitantly, their diverse perspectives and expertise enriched the construction process and the content of this book.

We want to acknowledge Richard Freeman as the lively conduit through which we came together and are very thankful for his generous and fitting Foreword. He recognises our positionality and our ‘pracademic’ efforts as producing the conditions for the empirical theorising of the ‘both/and’ of the in|formal, mutually constitutive making of policy and our embrace of ethnographic methods as a method of inquiry most amenable for ‘mak[ing] things visible, audible, tangible, knowable’ (Gherardi, 2019, p. 202).

Additionally, we owe a large debt of gratitude to Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea for their Afterword reflections and thoughtful consideration of this book’s intentions and empirically how it seeks to show this through ethnography. They identify our efforts from the outset to patiently sit in a muddle of the in|formal, not trying to solve it but to take time to consider incommensurability. Their sensitive assessment of each chapter, how they can be read in various ways and the implications are invaluable. We also want to thank them both for their constructive advice regarding the book structure, which we regard as substantively enhancing this book’s academic quality. Also for their attentive suggestions which helped us to solve the bumps in the road we encountered during the publication process.

xxii Acknowledgements

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We want to thank our respective universities, as educators and employers, for their flexibility, time and space, both as doctoral students and scholars working on this book. Special thanks goes to Leiden University for providing funding for the purchase of the artwork images used throughout this manuscript.

To the peer reviewers:

We appreciated the anonymous peer reviewers who provided constructive feedback on the initial book proposal, as well as John Boswell and Helen Dickinson's challenging and valuable insights on the introductory chapter. All these comments alerted us to how this book's themes may be received by those within the policy field and ultimately have helped improve the quality of this book and its contribution.

To the editorial team at Emerald:

We are grateful for Emerald Publishers and their support in the development of this book. From the outset, Iram Satti, as the then Commissioning Editor, welcomed and encouraged our efforts. This encouragement continued under the stewardship of Daniel Ridge, Lydia Cutmore, Brindha Thirunavukkarasu and Lauren Kammerdiener as the production process evolved. They took a risk working with us as a group of – at the time – PhD students with little experience as editors but have been invaluable to our development and to what the book has become. Their accommodating and diligent work has helped ensure this book meets academic standards and is ready for publication.

For the artwork:

Emma Weale, as the artist-weaver, has been both open and giving of her time and practice in taking on the commission of creating a tapestry and its accompanying images for our book cover and section breaks. She listened closely to apprehend what we were trying to achieve, capturing a weaving in the making and as a completed work. The images of her work are a testament to the beauty of the weaving, which we think metaphorically aids communicating the in|formal.

And on a personal level:

As we have foregrounded, the making of a book is an endeavour multiplied that emerges from varied collaborative interactions, but it is also underpinned by the support of family, friends, and mentors who have provided encouragement and understanding throughout the process. We want to express our gratitude for their patience, encouragement, and belief in our ability to undertake the project. We also want to share that as doctoral students and early career scholars (ECRs) that *it is possible* to 'grasp the nettle' and collaboratively produce academic texts.

Tamara – Given my feminist praxis, the collective approach to this scholarly project has reaffirmed to me what can emerge when shared interests, curiosity, and collective writing, diffracted through our respective experiences, come together. To have the opportunity to build our writing together as an editorial team of incredible and diverse capabilities has been generative, supportive and creative.

Lindsey – There are moments in our lives where we each have the opportunity to do something new and create something amazing – this book has been that for me. As ECRs, we experienced adversity in getting here, but we shared a vision, worked together, and found the most amazing support system with our interlocutors making this collective dream a reality. Together we learned, thought, grew, shared, supported, and wrote – I am grateful for every moment.

Lianne – Making this book has taught me how to do academia differently, write academia differently, present academia differently. To be able to share this book is the culmination of this collective, creative endeavour.

Joanna – Bringing this book to fruition has been a rewarding experience that invigorated, enriched, and extended how I thought about policymaking. The project came about at a crucial stage in my doctoral journey, with the resulting friendships and collegial relationships taking me through this uncertain transition and creating the potential for new, collective endeavours into the future.

As it goes out into the world, we hope we have conveyed through this book what it means to incorporate diverse practitioner sensibilities into scholarly knowledge-making, indicative of what's possible in a collective effort to do academia otherwise. In occupying a feminist standpoint, we attempt to express through the chapters that the ruse of the Eurocentric bifurcated lens through which we encounter the world diminishes our sense of the possibilities and potentialities held within circumstances which unfold. Ours then is the story of relational text work, attuned to the political in the mundane, of co-labouring as a form of care in our writing, that we think brings to life the everyday policy work enmeshed in the in|formal. Accordingly, even as the creation of this book has come to an end, we are all aware that our inquiry into in|formality continues. For, as Donna Haraway (2016) explains,

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (p. 12)

Tamara, Lindsey, Lianne and Joanna
April 2024

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Introduction



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From Informality and Formality to In|formality: Troubling Absolutism in Policymaking

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Abstract

This opening chapter introduces key debates in relation to informality in policymaking, laying the theoretical and conceptual groundwork for the individual empirical chapters, beginning with a provocation for how informality can alternatively be understood. Through illustrating where gaps in understanding within current literature exist for how informality acquires meaning, and the physical and material relevance for how it manifests across contexts, this chapter introduces the three thematic clusters that thread through the book's chapters: boundaries, knowledge mastery and networks. In doing so, it briefly positions each chapter in relation to these flexible and overlapping categories, drawing attention to how each chapter presents a different understanding of informality. Key to this chapter is our contention that while informality escapes definition, without binary or fixed conceptualisations of this concept we are better able to take in its fluidity and envisage how it is interwoven in everyday policy work and its human and non-human enactment. Underpinning this contention is a key contribution of this work, a proposition for a re-conceptualising of informality and formality as in|formality. Methodologically, this chapter argues that informality is better 'shown' than 'told' – and that this can be achieved through interpretive and socio-material approaches woven through disciplines that foreground narrative, ethnographic and creative approaches to research.

Keywords: Informality; public administration; policymaking; interpretive research; qualitative research; public policy

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How and Why Informality Matters

This book is about informality in the policy process, not from 1,000 metres above but from everyday accounts. We invite readers to think differently about informality, particularly through recognition of its entangled relationship with formality. The association of informal with formal plays into how binary relationships narrow and confine the understanding of given concepts through reference to their opposite. Throughout the coming pages, we shed light instead on how policy is made in different contexts from around the globe to explore how and why informality matters – and why this should come to matter – or be of interest to policy scholars, students and professionals. What follows, therefore, is a focus on the everyday policymaking activities from professional policy actors' experiences.

As a collaboration of four female policy scholars and former policy professionals – who all returned to academia to complete doctoral degrees on policymaking using ethnographic approaches – we recognised a gap in the literature that spoke to our previous involvements. The gap we recognised was the lived experiences of policy professionals from across the globe, not as homogeneous but as situated and inclusive of this diversity. Added to this we noticed a dependency on binary thinking within traditional discourses of our disciplines, especially around the concepts of informality and formality. We recognised that our experiences as policy practitioners/academics afforded us unique insights into this matter and skills to work collaboratively to create a text reflective of this.

Why produce a book on informality in public policy and administration? While public policy actors spend considerable time writing policy, advising politicians, eliciting stakeholder views and implementing initiatives – we had witnessed that they also make jokes and gossip during coffee breaks, debrief after meetings at the water cooler or wander outside for a quick word or to avoid prying eyes, thereby creating supportive coalitions with colleagues inside and outside their organisations (Green, 2011; Wagenaar, 2004). Complex emotions also arise in the course of enacting their duties, like doubt or sympathy, and policy actors engage in repeated discussions as a form of therapy (Dorren, 2021) or magical thinking (Boswell, 2022) in which actors cling to seemingly naive ideals in the face of inevitable failure. Furthermore, they engage in tacit, unnoticed work which is entailed in the sensory and aesthetic via materials, bodily movements or voice (Gherardi, 2019). Although scholars have drawn our attention to the informal in policy work (Bevir & Rhodes, 2001; Colebatch, 2014; Lindblom, 2020; Metze, 2010; Yanow, 1996), empirical studies have been limited in exploring these other aspects. A desire to capture everyday accounts and explore how and why they matter provided the impetus for us to bring together a collection on informality in policymaking.

Readers looking for a set definition of informality are encouraged to look elsewhere. This book endeavours instead to show how empirical and theoretical expositions of informality can be threaded together to form a rich tapestry of meaning running across and through policy fields, contexts and situations. As this chapter goes on to argue, little is known about informality without formality as its normative referent. While the term is frequently used generically, purposive framings of informality can also be found within the literature on policymaking across accompanying fields of governance, public administration and bureaucracy.

Here, accounts of informality describe its binary relationship with formality and by what the formal lacks, such as an absence of official rules and procedures or a lack of transparent and accountable processes and decision-making. Through this dichotomisation, the informal acquires a shadowy, dark side coterminous with undesirable qualities of policymaking such as undemocratic, illegitimate and unscrutinised.

How context and local understandings are embedded in the way informality unfolds is conveyed throughout this book. Through immersive engagement so typical of ethnographic approaches (van Hulst et al., 2017), chapter authors unpack the complexities of policy life in the setting under study, capturing the situated intricacies and ambiguities of informality and formality. We argue that with a concerted interest in informality in policymaking and related fields (Boanada-Fuchs & Boanada Fuchs, 2018; Koutkova, 2016) comes a need for a theorisation of *informality* that is robust and attuned to the particularities of discrete cases; one that embraces uncertainty, ambiguity and facilitates conceptual evolution. In keeping with this book's analogy of a tapestry, our claims on why and how to engage with informality can be likened to the *warp* (or vertical) threads running throughout this collection which are subsequently interwoven with the *weft* (or horizontal) threads carried by individual chapters and the insights they bring.

Explaining how and why informality matters is no small feat. In resisting the urge to homogenise the concept, chapters in this book tease out what is unique through contextualising what informality represents, how it manifests and what it affords – bringing into relief the human acts and agency that make the informal possible. Throughout the making of this volume, we have taken informality to be a *sensitizing concept* (Blumer, 1954) that ‘merely suggests directions along which to look’ as we afford it no ‘precise’ or ‘clean-cut identification’ (p. 7). As a lens, the informal draws attention to the fluidity and craft entailed in policy work and how the spaces where this occurs are multiple and creatively established. This book shows how policy is never enacted alone; it is relational, and its engagements are multifaceted, with the informal enmeshed in what actors in policy settings think, do and aspire to. And so, this book seeks to explore how informality emerges in interaction with people, materials and spaces – and how it is intertwined with formality in different contexts.

This chapter proceeds with a discussion of extant literature on informality to demonstrate how we have engaged with and through multiple perspectives to expand our understanding of how different scholars have approached informality over time. This discussion leads towards our novel contribution: a proposition for re-conceptualising the informal/formal as in|formal.¹ Last, but certainly not least, we introduce the chapters within this book using the themes of *boundaries*, *knowledge mastery* and *networks* as supplementary, nested sensitizing concepts to draw together how chapters relate to each other.

¹ Both informal and in|formal is used throughout this text. Where the bar is present, this refers to the editors' distinct conceptualisation of this word. Where the bar is absent, this refers to any other usage.

Thinking With the Informal

We are not the first to interrogate the concept of informality, as this concept has featured widely across disciplines and contexts as both a generic term with assumed understanding and as a concept with prescribed meaning. Our engagement with current bodies of knowledge has been iterative, going back and forth between our lived experiences in conversation with these literatures. As a result, our approach is one of weaving our thinking-with and reading-with scholars writing on informality. While focused on policy literature, our enquiry has been eclectic and inclusive of cognate disciplines that explore policymaking with interpretivist and ethnographic sensibilities (McGranahan, 2018). In our aim to assemble insights that would be useful for scholars, students and practitioners to delve deeper into their own policymaking context, we were attuned to what can be borrowed and adapted (Ulmer, 2020) in synthesising what we learned but also to what cannot. Therefore, this section aims to make connections across disciplinary and temporal boundaries to show how informality has been used while creating conduits towards informality – our approach to enquiring differently into informality. Put differently, this section involved simultaneously *thinking-with* and *thinking-through* the lens of informality as a ‘sensitizing concept’ (Blumer, 1954), with what follows best described as a patchwork of literatures that foreground (or background) the informal from multiple disciplines and lines of inquiry.

We recognise that there are already literature reviews on informality which provide rich insights into this concept. We have found value in two particularly, upon which we briefly touch (Boanada-Fuchs & Boanada Fuchs, 2018; Polese, 2023). Writing from a regional studies context, Abel Polese (2023) presents informality as a (weakly) universalisable phenomenon with shared characteristics, suggesting that informality is a performance enacted by individuals or groups that ‘bypasses the state’ (p. 324). Differently, Anthony Boanada-Fuchs and Vanessa Boanada Fuchs (2018) develop a taxonomy based on the particularities of literature exploring informality and conclude that ‘there is no single-dimensional understanding of informality’ – yet there are shared, intersecting qualities (transversal relationships) between literatures (pp. 415–416). Like Boanada-Fuchs and Boanada Fuchs’ piece, this volume seeks to explore the nuances of how informality emerges and comes to matter in situ, while uniquely focusing on making policy (work). We believe that this volume is unique in concentrating on the informal within the policy domain and within government institutions and organisations. This is now the context to which we turn.

Turning with Informality

As practitioners, the institutions and organisations of government are ever present as the formal locations of policymaking. The discipline of public administration has traditionally treated these structures as rigid and ossified and viewed policymaking as guided by formalised – almost mechanistic – procedures to achieve neutral administrative practice (Koutkova, 2016; O’nday, 2016). In this vision, anything informal is quickly perceived as the opposite of those ideals.

This vision emerges within distinct Anglo-American and European Public Administration traditions (Lynn, 2006; Ongaro & Van Thiel, 2018) described as the Wilsonian, Westminster and Westphalian traditions based on the application of idealised, consistent and impersonal rules for policymaking and for the design and implementation of policies in response to politically defined objectives. In shifting the analytical focus from the macro structures of the government and their working principles to the administrative actors tasked with enacting policy, commensurate expectations emerge for them to act according to principles such as impartiality, predictability and accountability (de Vries & Kim, 2011; Jun & Sherwood, 2006; Lasswell, 1956; Lynn, 2006; O'Flynn et al., 2013; Simon, 1955). These expectations do not appear out of place when considering that the antecedents of the emphasis on the formal can in part be traced to the influence of Max Weber's theorising of bureaucracy, whereby bureaucracy is the 'organisation and administration "*ohne Ansehen der Person*" (without consideration of the person)' (Weber, 1922/1972, p. 563, in Steenberg, 2016, p. 300). This understanding suggests that informal processes are considered equivalent to state malfunctioning and regarded as illegitimate or undemocratic.

While such perspectives attend sufficiently to the rule-bound interactional conditions among administrators, elected officials and citizens – what actually occupies the time of bureaucratic actors and how they interact with one another appears of lesser interest. Barbara Misztal (2000) reflects on how an understanding of informality developed within social theory, concluding that while '[t]he founding fathers of sociology did not scrutinize ephemeral phenomena such as informality' (p. 23), Weber recognised the role of social relationships, networks and collective action as 'non-instrumentally oriented types of interaction'; concluding that his 'analysis provides a general scheme for the description of informality as a pattern or style of interaction' (p. 23). More recent readings of Weber counter 'the customary view' of bureaucracy (Perrow, 1972/2014, in du Gay & Pedersen, 2020, p. 221) as 'stifling the spontaneity, freedom and self-realization of those in its employ' (du Gay & Pedersen, 2020, p. 221), to suggest rather that Weber regarded the bureaucracy as 'a distinctive "*life-order*" with its own ethos' to which the authors interpret as expressing 'a casuistical insistence on the necessity of a principle of situation-specific judgement' (p. 227). This transition to exploring situation-specific judgement is a significant pivot towards recognising the role of bureaucratic actors independent of organisational structures.

Erving Goffman's (1969) dramaturgical insights encouraged us to consider a broader arena of where policy activities occur and the different types of doings and sayings that take place in those spaces. Reading Goffman, and using the language of 'convention orders', David Morand (1995) concludes,

[f]ormality and informality are understood as two different types of interaction orders because each embodies a distinct set of understandings or conventions about how actors are to orient and conduct themselves. One set dictates looser, more casual modes of behaviour and situational involvement, the other tighter, more disciplined modes. (p. 832)

Goffman's ordering separates that which is formal from informal to recognise that both are performed within their unique set of conventions – or ordering rules. Goffman's orders differ conceptually from those where logic and order are assigned only to the formal category. However, these conceptualisations of informality as forms of interaction maintain a binary understanding of formal and informal, and ascribing certain characteristics to either formal or informal inhibits analysis of how views might change over time or even from situation to situation.

Considering interactional practices from a range of sociological perspectives, Misztal follows Goffman to define informality as a 'form of interaction among partners enjoying relative freedom in interpretation of their roles' requirements' (2000, p. 46). Commenting on the process of societal change and innovation, Misztal (2000) suggests informality has been associated with the private sphere or equated with unstructured, spontaneous, unpredictable and face-to-face interactions. She also maintains that informality contributes to trust, positive emotions and reduced power–distance relations that enable cooperative, quick, flexible arrangements – such that informality is just as necessary for creating order as formality and that a balance needs to be found between the two.

Critically, more nuanced understandings of the informal in public administration theories arose with the emergence of implementation studies. Particularly influential has been Michael Lipsky's (1980) work and his concept of 'street-level bureaucracy' that considered the daily struggle of public servants who mediate between policy directives and the delivery of these policies to government clients. Facing dilemmas of action, he proposed that bureaucratic actors 'at the coalface' develop routines and simplifications to deal with these dilemmas and to maximise control over their work (Lipsky, 1980). Practitioner-initiated routines were perceived as informal when they were contrary to institutional policy – although Lipsky (1980) acknowledged an unclear line between formal and informal due to the tendency for public sector organisations to transform informal practices into formal procedures.

In response to Lipsky, there has been a development of additional scholarship on the use of discretion at the street level in policy (e.g. Evans, 2011; Hupe & Hill, 2007). Evelyn Brodtkin highlights that in responding to demands, a lack of resources contributes to 'overdetermining the development of informal practices', inferring this results in 'robbing services of their substantive value and skewing the distribution of benefits' (2012, p. 943). More importantly, although this literature hints at the responsive potential of informal routines, informality poses a risk to upholding impartial and democratic practice (Brodtkin, 2012, p. 944). Even though this literature has opened up opportunities to scrutinise the situated enactment of the informal in policy work, the tendency to position the informal in contrast to the formal and to treat the informal as a fixed notion has remained (Visser & van Hulst, 2024).

Augmenting our understanding of who is involved in government (as both elected and unelected officials), 'the governance turn' has been vital to exploring the involvement of non-state actors, non-binding arrangements and voluntary agreements in co-ordinating action (e.g. Christiansen & Neuhold, 2012; Kleine, 2014; Whetsell et al., 2021). Exploring informality across empirical contexts,