# Reaching Into the Dark Side of Organisations:
# The Banality and Emergence of Administrative Evil in the Light of Two Case Examples

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## Abstract

This article uses the tools and distinctions derived from a twofold analysis to develop and refine the perception of administrative evil. First, the general problem of evil is discussed and nuanced, and second, two case examples from the Finnish context are examined and explained – the notion of so-called old boys' networks and the case of unethical behaviour in a psychiatric hospital. The article defines administrative evil as actions by civil servants and government employees when they do what they are expected to do to fulfil their organisational roles and responsibilities without considering or recognising that they are engaging in or contributing to evil. Based on a conceptual analysis, the article suggests that administrative evil is a middle form between moral and natural evil. This view yields a solid basis for further analysis in which the concept of the banality of evil – as introduced by Hannah Arendt – provides valuable insights. The article is based upon the conviction that the concept of administrative evil offers explanatory power to understand and describe why and how people behave badly and even unethically in organisational contexts. In doing so, the article connects the concept of administrative evil to organisational studies and links the concept with the distinction between types of evil. The paper concludes that a major problem in theorising administrative evil is that the concept (as advanced by Adams and Balfour) has remained isolated and is not an organic part of modern organisation theory.

## Introduction

The concept of administrative evil appeared in academic discussions in the late 1990s, introduced by Guy Adams and Danny Balfour in their book *Unmasking Administrative Evil* (1998, fifth edition, 2020). The book took its inspiration from the work of Zygmunt Bauman (1989), especially his treatise on the Holocaust. *Unmasking Administrative Evil* (1998, 2020) also makes several references to Hannah Arendt's deliberations on evil (Arendt 1954, 1958, 1963). Balfour and Adams discussed Arendt's view in detail in their 2008 article that addressed Arendt's controversial concept of the banality of evil (Balfour and Adams 2008).

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Adams and Balfour (1998) consider administrative evil to be a serious ethical problem in relation to modern organisations and public policy. They assume that the existence of evil, both in administrative contexts and elsewhere, is unavoidable and inevitable – in its different forms, evil is part and parcel of the human condition, as manifested most grotesquely in acts of dehumanisation and genocide.

Although the concept of administrative evil has appeared in academic textbooks for more than two decades, it remains somewhat unclear whether it is a properly defined concept, an empirically tested theory, or simply an abstract construct. Nevertheless, the concept has been employed in a wide range of academic studies (e.g. Zanetti and Adams, 2000; Moreno-Riaño, 2001; Adams et al., 2006; Adams, 2011; Reed, 2012; Benton, 2018; Williams and Duckett, 2020; Clark and Nickels, 2021; Lilly et al., 2021; Roberts, 2021), in which stimulating new ideas have been introduced. However, from the outset, the concept of administrative evil has been placed inside the rather narrow and self-referential silo it created, diminishing the usefulness and informational value of the concept (see e.g. Benton, 2020).

Even though organisational problems and unethical behaviour of various kinds have also been widely discussed by Nordic researchers (e.g. Poulsen and Bouey Koch, 2018; Nyström Höög and Björkvall, 2018; Saxlund Bischoff, 2018), administrative evil has remained a rather marginal topic of research in Scandinavia and Finland. This article develops and refines the perception of administrative evil by means of the tools and distinctions elicited through a twofold analysis. First, the general problem of evil is discussed and nuanced, and second, two case examples from the Finnish context are examined and explained – the notion of so-called old boys' networks and the case of unethical behaviour in a psychiatric hospital in Turku. The case examples in this article consider administrative evil to be contextual – and to a certain extent, 'culturally related', at least in the case of old boys´ networks – though still with the aim of shedding light on administrative evil as an everyday practice and with the hope of acquiring general insights drawn from the cases.

The article suggests that administrative evil is a middle form between moral and natural evil, and thus provides a solid basis for further analysis in which the concept of the banality of evil devised by Arendt provides valuable insights. According to Arendt, administrative evil and emergent harm are camouflaged by 'highly efficient talk and double-talk of nearly all official representatives who, without interruption and in many cases ingenious variations, [explain] away unpleasant facts and justified concerns' (Arendt, 1968: viii). This article is based on the conviction that the concept of administrative evil can help describe and understand why and how people behave badly and even unethically in organisations. The paper concludes that a major problem in theorising administrative evil is that the concept has remained isolated and is not an organic part of modern organisation theory. From the perspective of organisation theory, the aim of the article is, of course, not to provide a fully calibrated analysis of how administrative evil resonates with all possible dimensions of organisation theory, but to discuss the 'fit' between administrative evil and organisational theory, making the case for future research surrounding the subject. Putting forward 'antidotes' to administrative evil, such as deliberative democracy,

professional ethics and free media, thus presents 'illuminating examples', not an 'exhaustive' list of institutional mechanisms (e.g., accountability, leadership practice, organisational ethics, and transparency).

## Unmasking Administrative Evil

Below, the concept of administrative evil is initially discussed before the relevant literature is analysed, broadening the context to contribute to theorisation of the topic. To start with, even common wisdom suggests that a necessary step in fighting administrative evil is to identify and unmask it. This unmasking relates in particular to identifying relevant problematic features of administrative systems and contexts. In following this idea, Reed (2012) characterises administrative evil as a conceptual tool to describe the phenomenon 'whereby otherwise well-intentioned individuals participate in systems that cause harm to innocent people'. Reed's view, however, demands clarification and updating. At the outset, human errors and failures caused by the systemic nature of organisations do not leave societal phenomena, public policies or public organisations untouched. Errors and blunders take place, for various reasons, including the complexity of public policies and public organisations. Moreover, human beings and the social systems they create are not infallible. However, the existing literature on administrative evil has approached the topic from the perspective of societal phenomena, mainly by examining what happens in public policies when moral inversion – the transformation of noble ideals into a quest for power and profit – occurs.

Relevant literature related to administrative evil suggests that there are certain characteristics common to it (e.g. Adams 2011; Dillard and Ruchala 2005; Hoffman et al. 2012). First, there is the engagement of people in acts of evil without their being aware, or morally informed, that they are causing harm to others. Second, organizational structures matter – complex organizations diffuse individual responsibility and put forward the idea of the siloed or compartmentalized activities of different professions. Third, moral inversion takes place when something destructive has been presented as something ultimately positive and worth doing. This might be done for various reasons, including the self-seeking pursuit of power.

Fourth, belief in technological progress can be an enabler of administrative evil even when it is not the primary cause behind the phenomenon. This belief is based on a scientific-analytic mindset and on the prevailing idea of progress in productivity. This technical rationality is described by Benton (2018: 196) as 'the most-cited mask of administrative evil'. The recent research evidence on demand failure has pointed out substantial production deficits, such as that bureaucratic and badly run public services can lose the consensus of citizens and service users and still feel important and active (e.g. Seddon et al. 2019). Fifth, individualism hinders pinpointing and understanding destructive organizational dynamics that constitute administrative evil mainly due to the fragmentation of responsibility. Sixth, denial of and covering up mistakes and, more profoundly, the moral inversion from good to bad are also part of human nature and the symptoms of the emergence of corrupt and malfunctioning organizational behaviour (Argyris 1994, 1999). Finally, there is the accountability function that

works with conditions associated with the abdication of moral responsibility. These conditions include authorized violence, organizational routines (see, e.g. the McDonaldization of society, Ritzer 1992) and the dehumanization of the victim.

The concept and phenomenon of administrative evil are neither unproblematic nor self-explanatory. Dubnick (2000) criticizes the ideas of administrative evil presented by Adams and Balfour because of the manipulation of language and the process of moral inversion (an important thread in their argumentation), which makes civil servants 'unknowing and complicitous agents' (Dubnick 2000: 465–466). Another point in Dubnick's criticism is the notion of evil as an autonomous and historical force emerging from modernity's technical rationality. Dubnick (2000: 464–474) claims that the arguments Adams and Balfour advance are to a great extent claims unaccompanied by empirical evidence that could offer a justifying link between facts and theoretical and empirical claims. In comparison to Dubnick, Vickers (2000) is more conciliatory in her remarks on administrative evil and points out that while administrative evil may not be a new phenomenon, it was certainly first identified by Adams and Balfour.

Further scrutiny and understanding – both conceptually and empirically – of the processes and dynamics of unethical actions in an organizational context are warranted. At a more general level, without directly citing the concept of administrative evil, Martí and Fernández (2013: 1198), for example, claim that oppression or inequality in organizational contexts should not be considered in terms of individual acts and events but as 'sustained, routinized and enacted in the form of practices, rules, devices, and discourses'. Their study highlights three different institutional arrangements that can lead to oppression. First, through *authorization*, the personal will of those higher up in hierarchies becomes the guiding principle for individuals' actions, and as morality becomes redefined and certain actions are legitimized, individuals begin to refuse to take personal responsibility for their actions. Second, the *division of labour and routinization* contribute to creating distance between the actions of the (willing or ignorant) oppressors and the final outcomes. What is in reality extraordinary and unacceptable then becomes normal and merely routine, and therefore described in terms of 'just another day at the office'. Third, the *use of euphemism and camouflage language,* such as a *cleansing operation*, 'lock in certain thought patterns by shielding them from alternative interpretations and to affirm the subhumanity of the victim' (ibid.: 1203). Clegg and Pina e Cunha (2012) add the role of a singular *utopian vision* – such as the German Third Reich or Cambodian Khmer Rouge utopia (when connected to a total institution and control commitments) – as a factor in enabling the organization of oppression.

Additionally, Gabriel (2012: 1146) compares ethnic cleansing and modern corporate cleansing, both of which represent a corruption of values and human relations of trust, love, and community. In both forms of cleansing, people suspect their fellow human beings are culprits, conduct scapegoating campaigns, and perpetrate witch-hunts. In the same vein, McCabe (2014) identifies conformity in modern organizations as the root of darkness. He criticizes the idea that the dark side of an organization would result only from routine nonconformity or organizational deviance (see also Parker 2009; Lilly et al.

2021). McCabe (2014) argues that 'routine conformity or things going "right" in organizational settings' can also be part of this darkness. This is due, for example, to thoughtlessness, boredom, or mechanistic thinking.

Resistance has been cited as an antidote to the aforementioned conformity and oppression and, more generally, to administrative evil (e.g. Martí and Fernández 2013; Mumby et al. 2017). Resistance represents 'major efforts to reassert dignity and worth in the face of an essentially dehumanizing situation' (Martí and Fernández 2013: 1211). Interestingly, one form of resistance is whistleblowing – decisions and actions taken by organization members who believe they have evidence of organizational wrongdoing and the reactions of organization authorities (Near and Miceli 1985; see also Clark and Nickels 2021). Stein (2019) questions the assumption that whistle-blowers are disliked and hated because they are the 'others' who stand in opposition to their organization. He suggests, instead, that 'whistle-blowers may unconsciously also represent the lost good part of the "self" of staff members and that this intensifies the hatred of them, increasing the inclination to stigmatize them.

Hatcher (2019a, 2019b) writes of administrative curiosity, essentially manifesting curiosity by asking questions and seriously seeking answers. Ideally, ignorance of the world is then replaced with knowledge. Further, blind obedience to orders diminishes as public administrators try to better understand the basis for the decisions they are making and the actions they are taking. Hatcher (2019a: 366) thus considers that administrative curiosity 'encourages empathy and wisdom in administration and discourages what has come to be known as administrative evil'. One might add that administrative curiosity needs to be ethically specified – not all curiosity is beneficial and benevolent; to be so, curiosity should be connected with empathy and a sense of responsibility even in administrative contexts. In the same vein, Benton (2018: 202) calls for bureaucratic courage that he defines as 'occurring when administrators, during their day-to-day work, consciously choose to commit acts of heroic good', adding that such courage plays a significant part in tackling the issue of administrative evil. As other means to mitigate the sources of administrative evil, for example various training initiatives have been highlighted, such as offering servant leadership training at all levels of an organization and, more specifically, to provide employees training that encourages them to take accountability for their actions (Lilly et al. 2021).

It is important to note that public administration scholars and practitioners have taken a prominent role in the literature on administrative evil. Stivers (2004: 25) suggests that public administration theorists – as individuals with a deep understanding of the administrative state – should speak fearlessly and shine a light on the public space somewhat obscured by a 'rhetorical fog'. Similarly, King (2005: 565) views public administration scholars and practitioners as having a responsibility to illuminate administrative evil and asks: 'If not us, whom? If not now, when?' Nabatchi et al. (2011) share the same views but are sceptical about their realization. That last research paper considers the academic study and professional practice of public administration to be 'rendered impotent to govern' in times of evil, especially due to prevailing 'bureaucratic pathology' (Nabatchi et al. 2011: 34). The argument made by Nabatchi (2010) and Nabatchi et al. (2011) is that the field of public

administration suffers from a growing bias towards a *bureaucratic ethos*, with its values of efficiency, expertise, hierarchy, and loyalty, among others. This trend has contributed to the development of citizenship and democratic deficits, as a result of which the *democratic ethos*, with its values of social equity, justice, transparency, and legitimacy, has been overshadowed. Similar to Arendt's criticism of modernity and the concern expressed by Balfour, Adams, and Nickels (2020) relating to technical rationality, Nabatchi et al. (2011: i41) believe that 'a more democratic public administration will enable the field to better address the challenges of governance' in evil times.

Balfour, Adams, and Nickels (2020) highlight the role of deliberative democracy in discussing the aspect of administrative evil. Deliberative democracy is a form of democracy that values discussion, reflection, and consideration (Chambers 2003). Among other factors, the absence of power and the presence of mutual respect, reason-giving, sincerity, orientation towards the common good, and equal opportunities for influence are seen as defining features of deliberation (Mansbridge 2015). In addition, prior research emphasizes the epistemic goals of deliberation (truth-tracking) as a new standard of deliberation (e.g. Min and Wong 2018). Deliberative democratic practices then provide 'the opportunity for marginalized and "powerless" communities (often surplus populations) to become influential…making administrative evil less likely' (Balfour, Adams and Nickels 2020: 156).

In summary, the concept of administrative evil is compelling since it covers a wide range of unethical actions that take place in an organizational context. However, the concept remains hollow if it is not grounded in a wider philosophical understanding of the nature of evil.

## Evil Takes Different Forms

The concepts of administrative evil and an organizational dark side are part of a wider conceptual net in which the problems of evil, injustice, and oppression are broken down into different types. Despite the multifaceted nature of this set of concepts, any discussion of evil shares common presuppositions and distinctions in different contexts.

The philosophical debate about the problem of evil draws a fundamental distinction between moral and natural evil (e.g. McCord Adams and Adams 1990). The term moral is used to refer to intentional human actions that can be evaluated as good or bad, right or wrong. Humans are held responsible for moral evil; thus, it refers to the harm and suffering caused by intentional human actions or behaviours, subject to moral evaluation. Natural evil, for its part, refers to disasters, damage, and accidents that are beyond human control and occur independently of human activity. Consequently, humans are not responsible for such evil. Traditional examples are earthquakes, years of drought, and famine, and maladies (Lewis 1956).

However, the distinction between moral and natural evil is conceptually, and practically, neither razor-sharp nor unambiguous. The necessary preconditions for many accidents (such as traffic accidents and those caused by submersion, electric current, or falling objects) include human practices (e.g. transportation, energy production and consumption, residential activities, and industrial

processes) and technology that has been created by humans even though the accidents themselves are unintentional and, in that respect, represent natural evil rather than moral evil (Neiman 2015: 23). Accordingly, natural evil is also related to human action even if natural forces and animals are referred to as the major causes of natural evil. Humans make errors and are careless, which can have negative consequences that are not intentional (e.g. driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol and killing another person).

A kind of intermediary between moral and natural evil is related to administration and bureaucracy. The default purpose of both is not evil but good, although much evil can be caused by an unshakable belief in the justification of governance. Such evil is, on one hand, unintentional and, on the other hand, attributable to and dependent on human decisions and actions. Therefore, it is subject to ethical evaluation. Arendt (1963), for instance, called evil banal when it is unintentional but is, at the same time, based on thoughtlessness and the neglect of moral duty. In this respect, banal evil resembles natural evil or is an intermediate form of moral and natural evil.

Adams and Balfour (1998) argue that evil is an essential concept for understanding the human condition and for addressing significant individual and social concerns. Moreover, it is a relevant concept for understanding the causes and motives of human conduct in all organizational contexts: 'Administrative evil is a social phenomenon, and as such is ubiquitous in complex organizations of all kinds' (Balfour, Adams and Nickels 2020: xiv). Balfour, Adams, and Nickels (ibid.: 12) propose a continuum of evil and wrongdoing where 'horrible, mass eruptions of evil, such as the Holocaust and other, lesser instances of mass murder' are located in a continuum at one end and 'the "small" white lie, which is somewhat hurtful' is placed at the other end. At some point along the continuum, wrongdoings turn into evil doings. It seems that administrative evil has – so far – remained somewhat unclear as a concept with multiple dimensions when considering public administration and public services as a potential forum of unethical actions and behaviour: it has been treated in multiple ways, which had led to gradual conceptual stretching of the concept covering issues from pathological mass-murders and 'little white lies'. It is apparent that this has been partly due to lack of analytical empirical research around the subject.

From the perspective of public leadership and administration, it is important to be more specific in using administrative evil as a theoretical and empirical construct. To this end, civil service personnel can conduct their duties and perform according to expectations but might nevertheless fulfil those responsibilities in an evil manner. This dilemma takes us to a specific definition of organizational evil, which is as follows:

> *Administrative evil occurs when civil servants and government employees do what they are expected to do to fulfil their organizational roles and responsibilities without minding or recognizing that they are engaging in or contributing to evil. It is thus a key characteristic of administrative evil that administrators believe they do what they have been ordered to do by legal authorities while being ignorant that, in reality, they are perpetuating evil.*

Accordingly, administrative evil can be seen as a twofold entity. First, it requires or entices leaders, legislators, and those in power to devise unethical or morally intolerable policies and plans of action. Second, administrative evil requires subordinates, civil servants, and government officials willing to put unethical decisions and action plans into practice without calling them into question from a moral perspective. Moreover, members of the public must silently accept the injustices done to minorities and the disadvantaged. Related to the above, Benton (2018) offers a perspective on how administrative evil is masked on different levels of an organization. While the executive level might be fully aware of the evil within, other personnel may have only a vague understanding of the masked evil, if even that. The masking of administrative evil can then take place on a wide spectrum, from 'acts committed in relative ignorance to those committed knowingly and deliberately' (Balfour et al. 2020: 13).

Furthermore, administrative evil can also be more active and concealed. In the two explanatory cases in this article, those in leading positions may try to convince themselves to believe that their actions ultimately serve the greater good while conferring personal benefit: In reality, any civil servant exploiting a position for personal gain is ethically problematic and violates the impartiality of administrators and other principles of administrative ethics. It follows that both seeking to benefit personally or covering up personal wrongdoing, whether or not pretending that the actions in question contribute to the common good, is another form of administrative evil.

From the statements above, it is then but a short step to conclude that the real risk and danger of administrative evil is for it to become banal and commonplace. The banalization of evil can be counteracted by actively seeking to identify legislative and structural factors and practices in society that lead to oppression, discrimination (e.g. regarding ethnic, political, or sexual minorities), and corruption and to which there is a risk both civil servants and the majority of citizens will become indifferent or blind to. Adams (2011: 275–276) also argues that the common characteristics of administrative evil relate to the ways in which ordinary citizens, within the limits of their professional and administrative roles, '[…] engage in acts of evil without being aware that they are doing anything wrong'.

Finally, and importantly, one should not forget that there is the complexity-theoretical notion of the *emergence of evil*. Bella (2003, 2006), for instance, draws on the idea that evil practices can arise in the absence of intentionally bad or harmful decisions or actions. Evil can thus simply happen when ordinary people take actions they consider proper and necessary, as Arendt (1963) pointed out. The emergence of evil is based on systemic triggers and developments and arises out of complexity, typically marked by unpredictability, uncertainty, feedback loops, and interpretation in the system, as described by the paradigm of complexity (see Geyer and Rihani 2010). Even well-intentioned good behaviour can have bad consequences. The concept of the emergence of evil emphasizes the importance of the context of actions. Instead of linear causality, the emergence of evil calls for the understanding of the systemic nature of evil. Bad consequences are enabled by the context that offers incentives to individuals to behave in a way that may lead to systemic distortion. Systemic distortion

emerges even though 'no one need be in charge' (Bella 2006: 110). Therefore, to understand the dynamics of systemic distortion, the actions of individuals must be 'assessed within a context, a particular set of circumstances' (Bella 1997: 986).

## Two Case Examples – A Thematic One and an Empirical One

To provide explanatory contexts for an assessment endorsed by Adams and Balfour and also Bella, the following two examples are discussed: the notion of old boys' networks and a case of unethical behaviour in a psychiatric hospital in the city of Turku. The case examples suggest that administrative evil arises out of well-intentioned, but not publicly disclosed, dynamics within society and various organizations. Old boys´ network builds upon thematic (conceptual) analysis and provides insight for further research by the authors. One interesting research topic related to this is Nuorisosäätiö – a foundation affiliated close with the Center Party providing rental apartments and housing support for young adults aged 18-29 who are working or seeking employment in the near future. In Finland, Nuorisosäätiö has been regularly in the media headlines over the last few years because of indictments addressed for the management of the foundation for losing foundations assets in haphazard housing businesses.

### Old boys' network

Integrity violations in governance and business have attracted the public's attention and fomented outrage in many countries and are currently widely discussed by both academics and practitioners in societies all over the world (Gamba and Kleiner 2001; McDonald 2011; Willimont 2017). As global phenomena, integrity violations appear in various contexts, such as politics, the economy, and administration. In the public administration and management debate, the research on integrity (honesty, respect of laws and moral values, incorruptability) and its violations focuses on several topics, such as

- issues of morality and the integrity of individuals such as civil servants and businesspeople and organizations (e.g. Cox 2009; Lawton et al. 2013);
- ethics management and ethics in governance and administration (e.g. Frederickson and Ghere 2007; Cooper 2012; Menzel 2012);
- causes of corruption; the measuring of corruption (e.g. Huberts et al. 2008; de Graaf et al. 2010); and
- forms of distorted networking and corrupting behaviour (e.g. Khatri et al. 2006; Arasli and Tumer 2008; Begley et al. 2010).

In a general sense, the term old boys' network is used as an idiom to describe top-level politicians' and officials' excessively close ties to business. A naive optimist could say that at the heart of old boys' networks is mutual support and a sense of solidarity with friends and colleagues. These positive factors become an ethical problem, however, if they are related to public positions and the supervision of the vested interests of elites and unjust enrichment, including significant economic or other benefits. The unscrupulous self-interest of people in positions of leadership is socially problematic and contrary to moral norms

since the widely accepted values of governance and management include ensuring the fair treatment of citizens and maintaining trust in the integrity and impartiality of governance. In organizational terms, old boys' networks consist of distorted social networking that can encompass cronyism, favouritism, nepotism, clientelism, and patronage. The activities of these networks are kept hidden and private.

It is important to remember that old boys' networks are culture-related, and accordingly, perceptions of them differ, as does the extent to which they are tolerated. In Japan, these networks often refer to high-profile politicians or bureaucrats who transfer to the private sector with their connections created in public office. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the old boys' network signifies the elite, former pupils of exclusive schools or universities who form a network of friends occupying senior positions in society (Kandola 2019).

Finland and Scandinavian countries are attractive cases for the study of old boys' networks because they are established democracies with a strong legal tradition and are among the least corrupt countries. The research debate indicates that old boys' networks are a form of corruption typical of Finland – corruption that is hidden and more difficult to identify than many other forms, such as bribery (Salminen 2018; Salminen and Viinamäki 2017). The secrecy of the phenomenon is a major reason why old boys' networks remain relatively under researched. In Finland, a significant turning point was reached in the spring of 2012 when a few cases of old boys' networks in business and politics were revealed and widely discussed in the media (Mäkinen 2012; Transparency Suomi 2012a, 2012b).

Based on that discussion, old boys' networks use their power to promote private gain. Public interest is abused, and the common good is realigned for private gain (Saloner 1985; McDonald 2011). Networks also serve as a pathway to bribery and other integrity violations, leading to the overall degradation of morality and values in society. The networks are interactive on the personal level, existing between the partners. The advantages and benefits are divided among the members of the network. Loyalty and solidarity become apparent when any malpractice or mistakes are covered up by co-members.

Roles and functions that link different sectors of society are prone to the influence of old boys' networks. Such roles and functions include public procurement, external election finance, dual roles (such as policymaker and executor), and combinations of business and politics. For a group of people to become an old boys' network requires a common personal interest among those people; influential social positions that are often related to politics, the economy, or administration; the ability to maintain secrecy; the creation of gratitude; and loyalty due to the exchange of services and gifts. These are major arguments for the importance of the ethical analysis of complex and context-related decisions in politics, business, and public administration. In the field of politics, the crucial question is how to maintain trust between politicians and citizens. Recent research shows that the level of trust is declining in the eyes of Finnish citizens. In Finland, district- and municipality-level decision making is especially prone to the influence of old boys' networks (Salminen 2018).

In the economy, the big challenge for firms and other organizations is to maintain a good reputation and avoid unfair competition and financial losses in

the market. Dual roles and positions of influence create a web of reciprocities conducive to old boys' networks. In administration, legal procedures (following rules and orders), integrity, and the equal treatment of citizens are required of public servants. Public offices create a position conducive to the creation of old boys' networks, leading to the mismanagement and abuse of public office. The strong professional ethics of high-profile professions, such as those of doctor, lawyer, police, and prosecutor, may protect against the formation of old boys' networks. However, for vocational professions, common educational background, and common economic interests, among other things, strengthen the mutual solidarity of group members, creating circumstances for distorted networking, such as covering up the wrongdoing of colleagues (Salminen 2018; Salminen and Viinamäki 2017).

How are we to identify integrity violations in politics, the economy, and administration, then? And what are the indicators of the functioning of old boys' networks? Old boys' networks are allegedly difficult to discover and investigate because of their well-kept secrecy and deliberate confidentiality. Given this, there are many rumours and much speculation about the issue, yet empirical research on it remains scarce. Investigative journalism has a certain role, with its close contacts with political and economic life, in scrutinizing and revealing old boys' networks. Therefore, it is important to confirm the requirements and impediments of free media in bringing such networks to light (Willimont 2017; Salminen 2018).

Nevertheless, the media may be able to address merely the surface effects of integrity violations, and in some, if not in many cases, such revelations are motivated or accompanied by envy and vindictiveness. The emergence of administrative evil in the organizational context is – as the notion of old boys' network suggests – itself a systemic phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to merely individual actions and manifestations occurring in an organizational context. This is because administrative evil emerges in an organizational frame constructed by collective motivation structures and communication flows and through various mechanisms of collective consciousness.

## Unethical behaviour in a psychiatric hospital in the city of Turku

The abuse of the elderly within institutional settings is a widespread phenomenon (see Yon et al. 2019) and is also familiar in the Nordic countries (e.g. O'Brien et al. 2016; Botngård et al. 2020). In this article, such abuse is considered in the context of the following case, which describes the emergence of evil in the geriatric psychiatry ward G1at, the Turku City Hospital. Next, the case, which has received widespread national attention, is described, followed by an interpretation based on theory.

At the time of the instances of the abuse of the elderly, ward G1 was a closed, 15-bed acute ward for elderly psychiatry, which mainly treated psychiatric patients over 65 years of age. The unethical behaviour that took place in the ward, especially during 2009–2013, came to light in 2016 with a newspaper article using information provided by a whistle-blower. The newspaper reported inappropriate acts such as the harsh treatment of patients, overmedication, and the seclusion of patients without proper documentation.

Other stated unethical activities of the staff included ward staff sleeping during night shifts and the theft of medicines (City of Turku 2017a).

In 2013, an internal investigation had been conducted. As a result, ten staff members received a written or verbal warning. No one was discharged. Moreover, a request for an investigation was made to the police, but the focus of the investigation was on thefts of medicine, rather than on the abuse of the elderly. Neither the mayor of Turku, the social and healthcare committee of Turku, nor the national supervisory authority for the welfare and health (Valvira) were informed of the identified unethical behaviour (City of Turku 2017b).

With the news article published in early 2016, the matter became the subject of nationwide attention and a more detailed investigation. Valvira and the city of Turku both carried out their own inspections. Due to issues related to internal surveillance and a communication breakdown, four city managers received a written or verbal warning. Additionally, the prosecutor charged three nurses employed on ward G1. In 2017, the city of Turku issued an official apology to ward G1 patients and their family members (city of Turku 2017b).

There are several indications of the emergence of evil in the activities that took place inside the ward. Most evidently, this is highlighted in a statement by the whistle-blower, which indicated that the unethical behaviour arose collectively in the ward – it was not about the malevolence of individual staff members: 'I expected that when these issues came to light, the bubble would have burst. But it did not happen. They did not realize they were doing anything wrong. This collectivity is the only explanation I have found for why I also behaved in such a way there' (Lahdenmäki 2016: 23–24). Part of what had happened was also attributable to there having been little turnover in the ward's nursing staff over the years, a fact that fostered a certain organizational culture. According to the whistle-blower, 'they had always acted this way, and they could not comprehend that there could be any other ways to act' (Lahdenmäki 2016: 21). A representative of Valvira pointed out that leadership deficiencies were also central to the problem, which enabled the emergence of 'a kind of state-in-state culture. The organization had its own grey operating cultures, which were not good at all in any respect' (Yle 2016).

The situation in the geriatric psychiatry ward resonates strongly with Bella's (2006: 113) views: 'evil outcomes can and do emerge, not because the people involved are themselves evil but rather because ordinary people, much like ourselves, fail to live out responsibilities that transcend the emergent patterns (contexts) that they (we) work within'. It can be very difficult to act outside of this context (see Bella, King, and Kailin 2003). This was also evident in the experiences of the whistle-blower as she describes how she was also initially absorbed into the ward's abnormal practices and only, later on, began to wonder about her own behaviour. For example, in relation to one particular incident, she states that 'It's scary that I had laughed at it the same way as the other people around' (Lahdenmäki 2016: 5). As stated by Bella, King, and Kailin (2003), it is then the context that requires attention, not so much the individual people.

## Conclusions and Further Research Agenda

Few people would disagree with the traditional view that people can do evil. While evil can take several forms, such as discrimination in organizations, harassment in relationships, and embarrassment in public life, the underlying causal logic is the same, that is, bad behaviour leads, more often than not, to bad consequences. Accordingly, the relation between bad behaviour and its consequences seems linear, in the sense that the more evil one does, the more harm is done to others.

However, focusing only on individuals' actions constitutes playing a blame game to find those who can be held accountable for wrongdoing. The blame game assumes that there is/are one or more identifiable evildoers who have committed evil either deliberately or accidentally. Referring to Bella, King, and Kailin (2003: 75), this blame game can be understood as a 'linear misperception that fails to conceive emergent wholes'. In other words, the very real possibility that it is the system itself that is the problem is overlooked. The concepts of administrative evil (Adams and Balfour 1998), the banality of evil (Arendt 1963), and the emergence of evil (Bella 2006) all help shed light on this issue.

Benton (2020) has, however, quite correctly noted that Balfour, Adams, and Nickels (2020) fail to connect the notion of administrative evil comprehensively to the contemporary scholarship on organizational theory. The link between the concept of the banality of evil as introduced by Arendt and administrative evil exists, but that link has remained vague and anecdotal, and the empirical link has also been unclear. This article has made these links more explicit. More specifically, a major problem in the theorization of administrative evil is that the very concept – as put forward and advanced by Adams and Balfour (1998) – has remained isolated and is not an organic part of modern organization theory. Thus, it is not actively taken into consideration in practical applications such as leadership, strategy formation, human resource management, operational processes, organizational culture, organizational values, and the structure of the organization, to name just a few examples.

This article concludes that administrative evil has a largely unrecognized and unappreciated dual character; it has a moral (or deliberate) dimension and a natural (or systemic) dimension. It also appears that theories of complexity and the notion of emergence offer useful prospects for the academic discussion on administrative evil. In this article, the conceptual and theoretical considerations related to administrative evil have been scrutinized by distinguishing between different types of evil and by elaborating on the idea of administrative evil. These considerations – as well as the two explanatory examples discussed (i.e. the notion of old boys' networks and the case of unethical behaviour in a psychiatric hospital) – suggest that administrative evil arises out of well-intentioned, but not publicly disclosed, dynamics within society and various organizations. Accordingly, administrative evil is a systemic, self-reinforcing phenomenon that cannot be reduced to merely arising out of the coming together of individuals in organizations or societies. It rests not with the individuals but in the relations and feedback loops of behaviour and interpretation, and thus through organizational sense making. Once the systemic distortion of information, the supra-individual system, has emerged, it becomes resistant to

change. This article thus suggests that administrative evil occurs when civil servants and government employees do what they are expected to do to fulfil their organizational roles and responsibilities without caring or recognizing that they are engaging in or contributing to unacceptable behaviours.

Scholarly discussions about administrative evil have so far neglected a number of relevant theoretical frameworks in organization theory and, more specifically, theories related to public administration. These include meta-governance (i.e. the governance of governance or the organization of self-organization, see e.g. Gjaltema et al. 2019) and metacognition (i.e. cognition about cognition or knowing about knowing, see e.g. Metcalfe and Shimamura 1994). There are also other possibilities for a future research agenda around the topic of administrative evil. These include a more detailed empirical cultivation of the role of administrative evil from the perspective of modern organization theory and theories of organizational ethics, and coupling the concept of dark times (see Stivers 2008; Nabatchi et al. 2011) and administrative evil together in analysing the role of emerging complexity in the form of analytical case studies in an organizational context. Moreover, further elaboration on theoretical and conceptual analyses would be warranted to support analysing the moral inversion from the perspective of leadership in particular. Such analyses would necessarily involve investigating the processes that trigger the emergence of administrative evil in a public organization when such processes are viewed from the perspective of leadership and modern organization theory. The role of the dark side of knowledge and knowing (e.g. Letiche 2009) in the emergence of administrative evil also merits empirical research.

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