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How does government *feel?* Toward a theory of institutional pathos in public administration

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Abstract

In the study of policy and administration, emotions are largely conceived as an exogenous factor that impacts on institutions and processes. Still ignored are the emotions felt and performed not just individually by civil servants, but collectively within government organizations. This article turns to insights on emotions from organizational studies to offer a conceptual framework through which to understand the lifeworld of government, or "institutional pathos." It then applies this framework to an extreme case: Whitehall's response to the Brexit vote. Drawing on rich interview material from the Brexit Witness Archive, this article illustrates how the experience of individual and collective emotions deeply colored the work of British Government in delivering Brexit. The article concludes with a research agenda for public administration that foregrounds emotions.

Evidence for practice

- The emotional lifeworld of government is important for explaining a contemporary context defined by political turmoil.
- Public servants can struggle to experience and express the emotions expected of them under pressure, leading to greater internal dysfunction or external criticism.
- Public institutions need to provide more space for actors to experience and express emotions without undermining their authority.

INTRODUCTION

In early September 2022, incoming UK Prime Minister, Liz Truss, sacked Tom Scholar as head of the Treasury on the grounds that "new leadership" was needed. The move took many within the civil service by surprise. Speaking anonymously, one Treasury official told *The Guardian* (August 22, 2022) that colleagues were "angry and really shellshocked." Others said that staff were "very, very upset" and had been "in tears." Such revelations offer a glimpse of the real people—sentient, emotional, partial—who constitute governments and the way they manage their emotions as a collective. This paper argues for the need to take these emotions seriously—theorization of government and governing is incomplete unless it incorporates an understanding of the way that emotions impact policy makers.

Public administration scholarship has always been most comfortable thinking about governing as systems of rules, processes, and procedures (for a classic statement, see Peters, 2018). This is no mistake; the traditional distinction between politics and administration assumes that passions and grievances belong in the realm of the former, whereas, the latter is avowedly legal-rational (du Gay, 2000). When public administration scholars do think about bureaucrats as people, they tend to imagine them tightly constrained by either sociological logics of appropriateness or rationalist logics of consequences (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). Even amid the recent "affective turn" in political science more broadly (see Davies, 2018; Hoggett & Thompson, 2012), there remains a curious lack of attention to the emotional experience of governing. To the extent that emotions are acknowledged in the study of policy and administration, they are

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presented as an external force which administrative institutions and policy processes must accommodate or ameliorate.

The cognate field of organizational studies offers useful footholds for a more nuanced account of the emotional lifeworld of government. In contrast with policy and administration scholars, organization and management scholars have long recognized the importance of emotions in shaping cultures and business practices. The field is typified by two broad approaches to emotions: one that sees emotions largely as individual bodily and mental states—personal, but measurable experiences accompanied by changes in sensations, expressive gestures, and action tendencies (Scherer, 2005)—and one that sees emotions largely as social, collective performances oriented toward an audience, possibly with a strategic goal (Fineman, 2008). This distinction allows policy scholars to explore the impact of human emotions at both the micro and macro levels in seeking to analyze the interaction between collective emotion and the processes of policy making.

To illustrate the value of this conceptual framing, this article uses an extreme case—Whitehall's response to the dramatic Brexit vote. Using first-person insights from senior bureaucrats in the Brexit Witness Archive (BWA), it identifies a range of emotional states, individually and collectively, that these actors experienced, and shows how these emotional states shaped their work in delivering Brexit in practice. The article concludes by putting forth the lens of *institutional pathos* to better understand collective emotional processes and outcomes in public administration.

The article is structured as follows. First, it highlights the limited way in which policy and administration scholars use emotions in their analyses. Second, it turns to organizational studies to offer a conceptual framework through which to better understand the emotional lifeworld of government. Third, it introduces the Brexit case and the archive on which the exploratory analysis builds. Then, it uses insights from the Brexit case to illustrate the value of the framework, demonstrating what an analytical emphasis on emotions can reveal that typical institutionalist approaches cannot: *institutional pathos*. Finally, the conclusion sets out a research agenda for the study of emotions in public administration.

The emotional hole at the heart of government

Traditional theories of government and administration tend to rest on implicit assumptions about cognition. The dominant story—one told in textbooks of policy and administration and by actors within these organizations themselves—owes much to the Weberian model of techno-rational logic (du Gay, 2000). It represents the inner workings of government as those of a machine, by necessity impartial and impassive in the face of political whims.

Contemporary policy and administration scholarship recognizes the limitations of the "machine" conceptual model. There is growing appreciation, for instance, of the increasingly political, public-facing role played by senior bureaucrats (Grube, 2019). Yet, most approaches to analysis remain tightly focused on rules and procedures. People, insofar as they have been prominent features of orthodox theories, have tended to be seen as tightly bounded by logics of consequences or appropriateness. The new institutionalist perspectives that dominate the contemporary study of policy and administration call attention to norms, ideas, even agency (see Lowndes & Roberts, 2013; Schmidt, 2010). Yet, these theories continue to foreground the detached and dispassionate rather than the expressive and passionate: to explain what shapes the work of government, they center "standard operating procedures," "enforcement mechanisms," "rules of appropriateness," or "ideational paradigms," not individual and collective fears, ambitions, desires, and frustrations.

The policy and administration literature comes closest to understanding the impact of emotions within bureaucracies in the growing body of literature examining what "motivates" and "engages" public servants (Ding & Wang, 2023; Kernaghan, 2011; Levitats & Vigoda-Gadot, 2020; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021). The headline is that civil servants who are motivated by a belief in the ethos of public service are happier and more productive employees. This scholarship foregrounds the concerns of human resource management and productivity. While important, these concerns leave less room for understanding the impact of emotions as often unpredictable and changeable states.

The "affective turn" in the social sciences more broadly would seem well placed to offer a corrective to this oversight (see Hoggett and Thompson, 2012). In public administration, the challenge to offer "service with a smile" and promote caring among citizen-facing government workers has been highlighted (Mastracci et al., 2006; Newman et al., 2009). The skill to perform such emotional labor becomes particularly essential during crises (Guy et al., 2013). Yet, thus far, existing threads of scholarship in policy and administration that center emotions implicitly reinforce the image that emotions are experienced and require regulation by citizen-facing government workers on the peripheries (e.g., social workers, emergency responders, correctional officers), but not by those at the heart of government.

Two recent developments provide useful footholds for a further consideration of human emotion at the center of bureaucratic life. The first has been the urgent need to explain rising populist and antipolitical sentiment in advanced liberal democracies (Cramer, 2016; Davies, 2018). Public opinion scholars, for instance, now talk routinely about the importance of government

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responding to the "thermostat" of public feeling (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2021), or write extensively about the emotional implications of policies for the citizens that are directly impacted (e.g., Lerman & Weaver, 2020). Though acknowledging that emotions matter, this scholarship locates emotions as a variable exogenous to the workings of government itself.

The second development has been within critical policy scholarship, which has drawn attention to the emotional impact on citizens when policy making fails to adequately account for the end user. Focusing attention on the politics of emot*ive* issues such as end-of-life care (Durnová, 2019), sex work (Majic, 2015), and welfare conditionality (Soss et al., 2011), these scholars have richly illustrated the emotional suffering caused by inhumane procedures and decisions.

In foregrounding the emotions of everyday citizens as voters and service users, however, these programs of research risk reinforcing public administration folklore, further embedding tropes about the administrative state as a remote, artificial, techno-rational machine. Meanwhile, more fleeting glimpses into the everyday world of public servants reveal that this folklore is far from accurate. Emerging interpretive research on the "court politics" of government hints at a volatile emotional backdrop (Boswell et al., 2021; Rhodes & Salomonsen, 2021). From occasional leaks and gossip in the media, to the snapshots provided in ethnographies and memoirs of civil servants (e.g., Rhodes, 2011), it becomes clear that work in the heart of government is conducted by sentient people, with all the standard foibles apparent in society at large. Individually, civil servants confess to feelings of pride, frustration, and anxiety. Collectively, public agencies perform probity, wariness, contrition. The study of policy and administration needs better analytical tools to discern and understand this emotional lifeworld, and its impacts on institutions, practices, and policies.

Institutions and emotions: Understanding institutional ethos and emotional competence

Perspectives outside of public administration research (mainly in organization studies and management) have developed a useful arsenal of analytical tools to discern and understand the emotional lifeworld of institutional actors (Farny et al., 2019; Voronov & Weber, 2016; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018). There is significant value in their application to the study of policy and administration.

First, emotions in this literature are defined following a sociological approach (e.g., Fineman, 2008, p. 1) as "produced through interpersonal work that is conditioned by cultural imperatives: the social rules that sanction what is appropriate to feel and express." Thus, while recognizing that emotions are individual experiences that may be "intimately connected to the body" (Turner and Stets, 2005, p. 3), institutionalists focus on how these experiences of emotions and their expression "are conditioned by the norms, beliefs, values, and conventions…that are dictated by their institutional affiliations" (Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018, p. 429).

Second, this literature distinguishes between the experience and expression of emotion to consider that people can regulate their felt emotions, sometimes strategically, to perform their role and fit into the norms of their context (Farny et al., 2019; Hochschild, 1983). In this view, the experiences of emotions are foundational to how people perceive institutions as "real and personally meaningful" and are essential in ensuring people feel they hold a personal stake in an institution (Voronov & Weber, 2016, p. 456). Expressions of emotions, conversely, are foundational to people acting and coming across as competent institutional actors who can appropriately interpret and perform their own role within an institutional order (Voronov & Weber, 2016, p. 456).

Within the study of experience and expression of emotion in institutions, Voronov and Weber (2016) offer a useful framework to take as an analytical starting point. The framework has two key components: institutional ethos and emotional competence of the institutional actor. Institutional ethos refers to "the idealized representation of what it means to be a participant in a particular institutional order, and it prescribes particular kinds of aspirations, ideals, values, and moral judgments" (Voronov and Weber, 2016, p. 461). In a follow-up commentary, Voronov and Weber (2017) clarify that ethos "gives meaning to institutions in the form of moral worth that infuses practices and values with worth beyond tradition or convention" (p. 558), thus capturing "the quasi-sacred social imaginary behind emotional investment in institutional order" (p. 559). In relation to the well-known concept of institutional logics—which prescribe norms and beliefs—ethos prescribes the ideals for why these norms and beliefs are desirable.

Emotional competence refers to the ability to "experience and display emotions that are deemed appropriate for an actor role in light of the institutional ethos" (Voronov & Weber, 2016, p. 462). To both feel competent and be perceived as a competent administrator by others, the actor must be able to self-regulate their private emotional experience as well as manage their public display of emotion—in light of the institutional ethos. The idea of institutional actors displaying emotional competence draws on two related concepts: emotional labor and emotional intelligence. Emotional labor (Hochschild 1983, p. 7) is "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" with the intent to influence others' experiences. Emotional labor is performed as part of a social exchange that requires that workers suppress their private feelings to show the "desirable" work-related emotion (Mastracci et al., 2006). The key distinguishing feature of the concept of emotional labor is precisely that

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it is labor—the emotional performance can be bought and sold, and is often officially required (and remunerated) in certain jobs (e.g., flight attendants). In other jobs, including many citizen-facing government jobs, it is required but often unrecognized and unremunerated (Mastracci et al., 2006).

No unified definition of emotional intelligence exists (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2000), however, it is often viewed and measured as a set of competencies related to knowing and managing one's own and others' emotions (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2000). While emotional labor takes into account a specific job context, emotional intelligence is often discussed as a general set of competencies (not contextual). Building on these two concepts, emotional competence of institutional actors captures the competence to perform emotions (i.e., skilled emotional labor) in a specific *institutional* (rather than a job or organizational) context.

In particular, the idea that administrators require emotional competence is useful as it delineates specific criteria that actors will use to assess whether an emotional experience and/or display is appropriate within an institutional ethos. Voronov and Weber (2016) suggest naturalness (what is "natural" for the institutional actor to experience and express) and authenticity (what is "fake" or "sincere" for the institutional actor to experience and express) as two general criteria. In sum, their framework highlights four processes of emotional competence that institutional actors engage in (see Table 1): acquiescence, devotion, proficiency, and personification.

Acquiescence refers to regulating one's private emotional experiences to suit what is deemed natural for a specific institutional actor role. Devotion refers to regulating one's private emotions in light of an internalized institutional ethos so as to be authentic to the self. Proficiency refers to deliberately performing for others so as to meet social expectations in terms of the naturalness of the publicly displayed emotions. Personification refers to genuinely believing in one's performance so as to meet social expectations in terms of the authenticity of the publicly displayed emotions. A skilled administrator will engage in a mix of all four processes.

These analytical categories can conceptualize how civil servants perform emotional competence in government. Acquiescence, in the context of the professional civil service, entails suppressing private emotions to suit the idealized ethos of detachment. Devotion means a sincere internal commitment to famed traditions of impartiality, continuity, anonymity, and discretion. Proficiency is about *being seen to* remain emotionally detached, impartial and discreet, whereas personification is about sincerely enacting these traditions of civil service in public.

TABLE 1 Processes of emotional competence (EC) of institutional actors. Locus of EC performance. Criteria of EC appraisal.

	Private experience: self-regulation	**Public display: other-authorization**
Naturalness	Acquiescence	Proficiency
Authenticity	Devotion	Personification

(Source: Voronov and Weber 2016, 465)

The concrete example of the experience of Brexit in Whitehall can clarify how the concepts in this framework might be operationalized (anticipating also the more fine-grained analysis to follow). A simple application of Weber and Voronov's framework would operationalize: *acquiescence* by documenting how UK civil servants bracket their own feelings about Brexit substantively; *devotion* by documenting pride, or satisfaction derived from this deeper commitment to the Whitehall ethos; *proficiency* by observing how UK civil servants uphold traditions of impartiality, loyalty, and continuity when performing Brexit; and *personification* by observing how well these public performances affirm their self-image as a "Rolls Royce" civil service.

Government, civil service and emotions: Toward an appreciation of *institutional pathos*

Such analysis offers a solid conceptual starting point, but—as even surface-level discussion of the Brexit example shows—only goes so far. Table 1 above captures the normal equilibrium for the everyday enactment of emotional competence in institutions. But, what if—as with Brexit in Whitehall—that equilibrium is disturbed by moments of crisis that test the "normal" parameters? Is it acceptable to feel something less or more than "devotion" or perform something less or more than "personification" under severe public scrutiny? Can the expression of doubt and tough questioning still be regarded as acceptable demonstrations of emotional competence under crisis conditions? Key here are two facets that define the emotional lifeworld of government in contemporary liberal democracies.

The first is to acknowledge that governments operate with a unique set of audiences that other organizations do not, and within a unique set of traditions. Democratic accountability, responsiveness, and impartiality bring an immensely complex, and occasionally contradictory, set of imperatives. The second is to recognize that many governments are operating in a state of flux more often than they have in the past, and in ways that private organizations do not. The lifeworld of government has become one of seemingly constant turbulence (see Ansell et al., 2023). The consequence is that a state of normal equilibrium in which individuals can demonstrate emotional competence in settled ways has become abnormal.

The missing ingredient here to make sense of this turmoil is an appreciation of *institutional pathos*. *Institutional pathos* means the degree of tolerance for deviation from

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TABLE 2 How *institutional pathos* can give space for different processes of emotional competence *Locus of EC performance.* Criteria of EC appraisal.

	Private experience: self-regulation	Public display: other-authorization
Naturalness	Questioning of institutional traditions	Inhabiting a range of acceptable institutional roles
Authenticity	Selecting from a range of emotional interpretations of those traditions	Enacting institutional ethos through a range of acceptable displays

established criteria of naturalness and authenticity (what is "natural" for the institutional actor to experience and express; what is "fake" or "sincere" for the institutional actor to experience and express)—the range or limit of what it is appropriate to feel in government. If *institutional ethos* describes the sacred ideal inscribed in the folklore of an organization against which individual and collective emotional competence is measured, then *institutional pathos* captures the profane reality of how emotional deviation is tolerated behind closed doors (see Colebatch, 2006). While *ethos* prescribes aspirations, ideals, values and moral judgments found in mission statements and formalized inductions, *pathos* prescribes particular kinds of feelings and displays of emotion in language and body captured in testy meetings and corridor gossip (Gagliardi, 2007).

The term pathos denotes a particular "way of feeling reality" or a central pattern of sensibility in an organization (Gagliardi, 2006), rather than the narrower definition from Aristotle's rhetoric as an "appeal to emotions" (often pity and sadness). The closest public administration scholarship currently comes to acknowledging *pathos* is in the aforementioned literature on "emotional labor" or, more prosaically, "coping" among street-level bureaucrats. Centered on the relationship between clients and professionals on the frontlines of implementation and service delivery (see additionally e.g., Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2022; Zacka, 2018), this research details stories of sympathy and care, friendliness and pettiness, frustration and hostility as frontline professionals manage everyday interactions. This literature glimpses behind the façade of *institutional ethos* to a shadow *institutional pathos* that can help actors to cope better (or worse) with the challenges they face.

Yet insights from the dedicated literature on emotional labor and coping among street-level bureaucrats only scratch the surface of what a sharpened focus on *institutional pathos* can offer. Firstly, the challenges of coping in public administration are not limited to the frontline; they are endemic in a context of constant disruption. Policy-facing public servants can, as O'Leary (2014) illustrates, run interference against policies of which they disapprove. Secondly, the challenges of coping are not limited to individuals navigating interactions; they are experienced collectively within institutional settings. *Institutional pathos*, therefore, provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding the extent to which actors can express doubts and misgivings, question norms, and develop new practices of coping in response to the upheavals around them.

This appreciation of *institutional pathos* offers a modified framework, set out in Table 2, capturing what needs to occur within government organizations in response to upheaval. *Acquiescence* is not just the reflexive suppression of emotions, but might permit also reflective questioning and doubt. *Devotion* is not just convergence around narrowly defined traditions, but might entail accommodating a spectrum of acceptable interpretations, from zealousness to lukewarm adherence. *Proficiency* is not just performing singularly as "a civil servant," but admits of a more nuanced range of roles (e.g., loyal servant, honest broker, boundary spanner) deemed appropriate in different contexts. *Personification* turns not just on the consistency of public performances, but on the sincere enactment of *institutional ethos* in and for context.

This adapted framework can help to make new sense of the emotional experience of government, especially amid disruptive periods like that heralded by the Brexit vote. It provides a conceptual apparatus through which to better understand how and why disruption makes it difficult for actors in government to perform emotional competence. A better understanding of how actors in government manage their emotions in such moments—how they struggle to remain emotionally competent, and the *institutional pathos* that gives them scope to do so—can help to enrich understandings of patterns of continuity and change.

METHODS: STUDYING EMOTIONS IN POLICY PRACTICE

The article turns now to demonstrate this potential pay off through a case study focused on the efforts of leading officials in Whitehall to perform emotional competence amidst the disruption wrought by Brexit. The analysis seeks to understand how these actors "processed" Brexit—how they dealt with the emotional side of their work as this protracted crisis dragged out, and what this says about the nature of *institutional pathos* in a government setting.

Why Whitehall

Whitehall represents the archetype of public administration as an avowedly emotion-free zone. The traditional public service ethos in the British civil service is described well by Horton (2006, p. 33); it includes ideals such as "honesty, integrity, impartiality, and objectivity; loyalty to

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TABLE 3 What a focus on *institutional pathos* can reveal about emotional competence in Whitehall.

	What an emphasis on 'institutional ethos' asks (ie Weber and Voronov's framework)	What an emphasis on 'institutional pathos' asks (ie an adapted framework)
Acquiescence	Do UK civil servants reflexively subscribe to traditions of impartiality, continuity, loyalty and discretion?	Do UK civil servants have space to reflectively question traditions of impartiality, continuity, loyalty and discretion?
Devotion	Do UK civil servants converge around a shared emotional interpretation of these norms?	Are UK civil servants permitted a range of acceptable emotional interpretations of these norms?
Proficiency	Do UK civil servants perform a uniform, clearly-ascribed role across settings?	Can UK civil servants inhabit subtly different roles across settings?
Personification	Do UK civil servants convey sincere commitment to institutional ethos through consistent public performances?	Can UK civil servants convey sincere commitment to institutional ethos through a range of displays fit for context?

the organisation and its goals; a commitment to public service; and accountability through and to political authorities." Yet, since Thatcher's government, the British civil service has experienced multiple challenges to this ethos, including civil servants being called upon to be overtly political, adopt private-sector management ideas in public service, as well as their anonymity increasingly being removed by appearances in the media and the sharing of secrets in memoirs after retirement (Horton, 2006; see also Aucoin, 2012). Latterly, these pressures have accelerated under a more voracious 24/7 media cycle, the intrusion of social media, and growing governing complexity (see Rhodes, 2011). The formal Civil Service Code, which enscribes famed Whitehall traditions, is now accompanied by an informal shadow code (civilservant.org.uk) that receives far more visits and reads every year—a warts-and-all account of "speaking Mandarin," curated by a former senior civil servant, that digs beneath sacred conventions to reveal profane practices (Stanley, 2016).

An awareness of *institutional pathos* trains attention on the struggle for emotional competence in challenging, dynamic conditions. The analysis explores the extent to which UK civil servants were allowed the space to express doubts about traditional norms, and have competing interpretations of these norms accommodated, as well as the extent to which they could perform different roles in different settings in order to sincerely manage their reputation and self-image. Table 3 below sketches how this adapted framework sheds light on the Brexit case.

Why Brexit

Brexit, of course, is one of the most exhaustively researched events in recent political history. For the most part, scholars of British and European politics have set about trying to diagnose how and why the Brexit vote came about (e.g., Norris & Inglehart, 2019), and what its implications are for the European project (e.g., Leruth et al., 2019). Public administration scholars have focused more on the challenges of disengaging from the EU, including the pathologies that inhibited an effective policy response (see Dunlop et al., 2020) and the longer-term implications for capacity and competence in British Government (see McConnell and Tormey, 2021). It appeals as an extreme case through which to understand *how government feels*—"processing Brexit" in this sense, entails dealing with a highly disruptive series of events that challenged the emotional competence of civil servants in Whitehall.

The analysis relies on a unique resource still largely untapped by scholars of British and European Government—the BWA. Undertaken as part of the UK in a Changing Europe programme, the BWA offers a public record with testimony from 66 of the key actors involved in designing and delivering Brexit (especially on the British side of the equation).[1] The BWA prizes personal reflections from political elites rather than the defenses of record that typify cross-examinations in formal hearings or media appearances. The BWA, therefore, offers a unique resource through which to explore and understand the emotional experience and impact of Brexit on the civil service. Above all, the value lies in what participation in interviews meant for most of its participants—an opportunity for catharsis, to make sense of, and process their work through, a highly disruptive period.

The analysis uses the BWA data to illustrate the adapted theoretical framework. It draws on vivid insights from this rich resource to show how senior figures in British Government struggled to perform emotional competence, in the process bringing a theoretical account of *institutional pathos* to life.

ANALYSIS: PROCESSING BREXIT

For some senior civil servants at the heart of Westminster, the turmoil of anticipating a potential Leave vote and all the disruption that might entail took hold even before the vote. Simon McDonald, former Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, explained: "It was clearly going wrong from the Government's point of view in the couple of weeks before referendum day. Lots of people from in the centre were exuding a pheromone of, 'Oh, my God'. There was no paperwork saying this, but the atmosphere was fraught."

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The struggle for acquiescence

Most notable in the reflections on the immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote was the challenge that the bitter and divided campaign had posed to the natural role of civil servant as impartial and detached professional. Indeed, many had instinctive, strong passions that were at least initially difficult to suppress.

Perhaps the most striking example was in the Home Office, which was one of the few departments where divisions in society were reflected among the staff. Mark Sedwill, as Permanent Secretary at the time, explained on entering the office the morning after: "… there were as many people figuratively popping the champagne corks – not literally – as there were people in shock and tearful. That was very striking: that there were as many smiles as upset. That was, I think, unusual around Whitehall."

Elsewhere, the initial mood was less fractious, more morose. Most reflections describe how civil servants were "dazed," "in shock," or "angry" in the days following the referendum. Indeed, for some, the emotional toll went beyond anxiety about workflow, professional relationships, or priorities. In the EU, officials worried about the implications for the lives of British staff who had careers and lives rooted in Europe in a very literal sense: "… nobody took anything for granted, and British staff were very, very, worried as time went by. I also saw myself as having a sort of pastoral role for the Brits. […] With British staff in the institution, we had mass meetings […] to talk about what was happening and what was going on" (Jonathan Faull, former British official in the European Commission).

Also common was a concern about how to regroup in the aftermath of the shock. Indeed, exactly what that could and should look like in practice was a matter of some contention and discussion within the upper echelons of different departments. Clare Moriarty, then Permanent Secretary for the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, explained in defense of her handling of internal communications:

> One senior colleague challenged 'it's OK to feel what you feel', saying 'What we need to do is to tell people that they have to be very professional'. My response was 'actually, you don't have to tell civil servants to be professional. We've got a much higher risk of people being so professional that they bottle everything up, and then it will come out in other ways'.

Overall, then, it is clear that the reaction of many was at odds with the "natural" detached disposition of the Whitehall elite. Acquiescence to this accepted norm was a struggle that would take significant time to process.

The struggle for devotion

Brexit, for some, was a personal affront that made them question whether they could genuinely continue in their civil servant role. A good example comes from the most rank-and-file witness in the archive, Matthew O'Toole, who, as a press officer in No. 10 and an Irish national, felt the challenge acutely:

> In quite a personal sense, for someone from my background with my mix of political and personal and familial influences, the UK leaving the European Union would entail such a fundamental change in the UK state that it would have been hard for me to be a civil servant in Number 10. […] I did feel very, literally, personally affronted, in the sense that it made me reassess my capacity to work there in that context.

Andrew McCormick, as a senior leader within the Northern Ireland executive, argued that the crisis was so existential that it warranted a new way of processing emotions in the civil service: "Some of the early things we had to do, as leaders in the Civil Service, was start communicating with people, quite honestly, about what we did not know, acknowledging people's own uncertainties, and in some cases, this whole range of emotions, from, no doubt, jubilation and optimism, to real anxiety and depression."

For most, though, rallying around the Whitehall ethos was more instinctive than reflective; it did not need to even be said. Sedwill suggested that such devotion came especially naturally to the Home Office, both as a means of healing divisions within the department and as an engrained response to crisis:

> The Home Office was so used to crises it rocked back on its heels and thought, 'Crikey, didn't see that coming'. Then you just felt the whole institution come back forwards again, almost by lunchtime….It was like, 'Okay, come on, boss. What's the plan?' They just wanted to know. Very, very striking when the rest of Whitehall was essentially just still in shock.

Here, then, the self-soothing value of the Whitehall ethos helps civil servants to process their emotions, but also some differentiation emerges in how parts of Whitehall performed devotion to this ethos. For some, it involved a reflective approach to processing emotions before collectively recommitting to detachment, impartiality, and continuity (or, in fact, rejecting their civil servant role), whereas for others faith in these old staples was an instinctive and unspoken source of strength. The

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Discussion section will tease out some of the implications of this distinction.

The struggle for proficiency

In a context where many were internally feeling anxious and conflicted, the question became: how would they publicly perform the part of an impartial, detached civil servant? For some, the whole experience was so discombobulating that it emboldened them to challenge established norms publicly. O'Toole, for instance, had requested that he be allowed to defy the apolitical conventions of the civil service and campaign for "Remain" (the anti-Brexit side of the debate):

> I can remember specifically asking, slightly naively – almost to get an on-the-record 'no' – if it would be completely beyond the realms of propriety for me to go out and do some Remain canvassing in the final weeks of the Referendum. I knew the answer, but I wanted to say that I had asked the question, because I felt so strongly.

Once reconciled to the initial shock, "getting Brexit done" would prove to drag on for months and then years. The ordeal encompassed two general elections and two new prime ministers, machinery of government changes, multiple ministerial reshuffles, and a high-profile, drawn-out, complex, and highly controversial set of negotiations with the EU. New challenges to emotional competence came to the fore during this tumultuous period in British political history. In particular, there was a struggle for proficiency—for civil servants to display and perform emotions in keeping with "natural" detachment and impartiality externally. For those engaged at the coalface of working through complexities, the strain was considerable, as Moriarty explained: "There was a huge amount of strain as we went through the Brexit work, partly because it was technically difficult. And the constant uncertainty was hard for people."

One important component here entailed keeping a lid on frustrations with perceived political mishandling of the process of disengaging. The best example relates to Westminster's relationships with the devolved administrations, in which Brexit developments were a frequent source of interjurisdictional conflict. Of the constituent nations in the United Kingdom, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales all had their own devolved governments that would be impacted by national decisions around Brexit. The friction was particularly noticeable for the two nations—Scotland and Northern Ireland—that had voted to stay in the EU, only to find themselves overborne by the majority leave vote in England and Wales. This made intergovernmental work even more challenging. As Philip Rycroft from the Department for Exiting the European Union explains, civil servants engaged in this work resented having to share responsibility for ministerial hubris: "It was almost impossible to persuade Number 10, in particular, to treat them as though they were grown-up governments with their own democratic legitimacy. 'What, you want to share the papers for a meeting with them, like more than two hours before the meeting?' 'Yes, it would be quite helpful'. 'You can't'. 'For God's sake'."

A common coping strategy in the face of these challenges was to compartmentalize—to engage externally only on what could be controlled in a manner befitting the natural detachment of the civil service. For example, Julian King (former British Ambassador to France and European Commissioner for the Security Union), spoke about maintaining relationships and working through key issues with counterparts in Europe outside of the formal Brexit negotiations:

> Fortunately, everybody was content to recognize that there was a portfolio job to do […] and we managed to build a corpus of work that got some buy-in. So that was the day job. Then, occasionally, if you were on a visit somewhere, you'd do that work, and then over a meal perhaps somebody would say to you, 'Brexit – so how's that all working out?', and you would have a separate discussion. But it was largely compartmentalised…

What participants describe, overall, is a struggle to perform reassurance. The volatile context tested their capacity to live up to 'natural' expectations of showing detachment from politics and dispassionate professionalism.

The struggle for personification

By the time Brexit was "done," most participants were able to look back with pride at what the civil service had achieved. Jonathan Jones (head of the government legal department) summed up the mood this way:

> I think the Civil Service has actually survived this remarkably well. Obviously, I'm particularly proud of my bit of it. But, in the end, we took everything that was thrown at us, and we did what the politicians asked, whatever our personal views, in the best traditions of the Civil Service. So Brexit was done, in the end, to the timetable, according to the wishes of the politicians.

What these expressions of pride gloss over, however, was the challenge along the way in maintaining Whitehall's reputation. Indeed, the reputational risk haunted

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many senior civil servants. As McDonald explained, there was a collective weight in bearing the standards for a famously "Rolls Royce" civil service abroad amidst the chaos at home:

> The external high opinion of the British system turned out to be a pretty resilient thing. I know that there are some very lippy, very articulate people who say, 'The Brits have completely blown it and they'll never be the same'. But I think, actually, that though people were puzzled, they just thought that this would sort itself out because it's the United Kingdom.

The domestic political wrangling was also wearing for the most high-profile targets in "the Blob."[2] Sedwill, referring to his time under media fire after ascending to the role of Cabinet Secretary, recalled glumly:

> In a sense, my skin was pretty thick. I got a lot of it and woke up every Sunday morning, thinking, 'Okay, what's in the papers about me today?' I think the three Perm Secs who suddenly found themselves in the crosshairs—I forget which newspaper article, but clearly briefed out—because it hadn't happened to them before, it came as a bit of a shock to them. There was almost an expectation it went with the territory of being Cabinet Secretary.

Nevertheless, according to participants in the BWA, these struggles just served to redouble Whitehall's reputation. Indeed, many reflected that the ordeal of Brexit prepared the civil service emotionally for the challenges just around the corner posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Sedwill, for instance, concluded: "I think it's a tribute to the stamina of people in government…A lot of the no deal planning and the really detailed contingency planning stood us in pretty good stead for the operational elements of switching people onto Covid."

The upshot, then, has been a doubling down on the stoic 'stiff upper lip' image that threatens to elide the strains and struggles experienced in trying to perform emotional competence.

DISCUSSION: APPRECIATING *INSTITUTIONAL PATHOS*

Looking back on the Brexit saga, Simon McDonald confirmed later in an interview with the BBC:

> People were in tears. People were in shock. On this occasion, this solitary occasion, I decided to tell my colleagues and, therefore, let ministers know that I voted to remain in the European Union…I was trying to maintain credibility and trying to convey a message to a group of people, most of whom I felt had voted to remain in the EU, that their personal feelings were beside the professional point.

In "normal" times, it would be unheard of for a senior civil servant to express their voting choice on an issue in this way. The crisis of Brexit pushed civil servants to question their own emotional response, to experience "self-doubt," testing the emotional boundaries. Ironically, though, by breaking from convention specifically to help others process their emotional response to Brexit, McDonald's revelation prompted intense media criticism. Many took it as evidence that he (among others) had undermined civil service professionalism.

McDonald's experience is instructive. As the analysis of the UK Government and civil service's processing of Brexit has revealed, this crisis challenged the core of a particular *institutional ethos*. Brexit disrupted the British Government and threatened the civil service's idealized representation of itself as a Rolls Royce characterized by efficiency, professionalism, and neutral detachment. While elements of Voronov and Weber's (2016) emotional competence framework have proved useful in shedding light on the heart of the government, their approach has not been sufficient to make sense of the *deviations* in the performance of emotional competence observed in the BWA. The emphasis on *institutional pathos*, not just *ethos*, helps to better understand this struggle for emotional competence and its implications for government.

In a nutshell, the travails of Brexit speak to a limited tolerance for emotional deviation at the heart of governments: an overbearing *institutional ethos* has not been shadowed by scope for *institutional pathos*. Civil servants in many advanced liberal democracies find themselves in the midst of a poly-crisis (climate change, inflation, populism, multiple military conflicts, and refugees) but are often expected to acquiesce and re-devote themselves to their mission(s) without sufficient opportunity to process their emotions. They are expected to demonstrate proficiency and personify the idealized Weberian imaginary of detached professionalism without sufficient time and space to work out how to cope. The testimony in the BWA reveals how coping responses to this pressure can fall into two camps. Some government actors use crises as the opportunity to break with convention—they feel doubt, express misgivings, or question norms—both internally as well as publicly (for example, by revealing their voting or policy preferences). However, such responses invite outside scrutiny and redouble political pressure. The alternative strategy is to suppress the doubts, misgivings, and questions—to roll the sleeves up and ask "what's the plan?" But this stoical attitude can prove equally unhelpful, giving way to an overzealousness that risks alienating and silencing both citizens and colleagues at a disruptive time.

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Overall, then, the analysis helps to better understand some of the complex dynamics of governing during crises. Focusing on actors' struggle for emotional competence brings new insight into how coping responses have contributed to the challenges along the way. Crisis conditions can eat away at the *institutional ethos*, leading to antagonized relationships with politicians and press, without leaving room for an *institutional pathos* that respects the needs of civil servants to process their emotions within institutional settings.

CONCLUSION: AN AGENDA FOR THE EMOTIONAL LIFEWORLD OF GOVERNMENT

This article has developed a stronger set of analytical tools for examining an overlooked but crucial element of public administration—the emotional lifeworld of government, and how actors within it feel. What might a wider agenda based on this analytical framing look like?

Most obviously, more research is needed. This account of the Brexit saga is an exploratory one designed primarily to demonstrate the utility of the framework, but the Brexit saga is a particularly extreme case of disruption. Is there sufficient room for *institutional pathos* in the more "routine" or "felt" turmoil of contemporary government? Do some institutional contexts offer a better balance of institutional *ethos* and *pathos* to enable the performance of emotional competence without the risk of degrading morale or inviting scrutiny and criticism? Do these differences emerge as more salient across particular national, sectoral or temporal lines? Moreover, how does *institutional pathos* interact with other confounding factors, for example, pervasive power dynamics, cultural differences or constellations of personalities and competencies? This type of analysis can inspire policy and administration scholars to operationalize the analytical framework across a wider range of circumstances, using and adapting the range of empirical strategies and methodological tools that the "affective turn" in political science has already unearthed.

As importantly, there are significant practical implications from this exploratory analysis. In particular, a focus on *institutional pathos* aligns with a revival in thinking about public administration as a "craft" (see Rhodes, 2016; van Dorp & 't Hart, 2019). The impetus is to better cater to the humans who constitute the government. In a context of increasing turmoil and political pressure, change is needed to make the job more tolerable. A stronger appreciation of *institutional pathos* might encourage experimentation and adaptation in everyday governing practices and in more formal efforts to recruit, induct, train, and support civil servants.

ENDNOTES

[1] We thank Jill Rutter, Senior Fellow at the UK in a Changing Europe project, for her informal introduction to the background and provenance of the Brexit Witness Archive, and for very useful feedback on the paper.

[2] "The Blob" is a derogatory term for the civil service in Whitehall that gained prominence in parts of the press during the protracted Brexit negotiations. It is an extension of the long-running derision of "faceless" bureaucrats.

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