Operating within a Diverse Organizational Environment: The Paradox of Rules and Authority

Shannon Portillo, PhD

Assistant Professor

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Overview

- The Paradox of Rules within Public Organizations
- Narratives of Two Administrators
- Discussion and Implications

KU SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS & ADMINISTRATION
The University of Kansas

Sources of Authority

- Official status – formal

- Social status – informal

The Paradox of Rules

- Modern bureaucracies are meant to be rule-bound

- Discretion in organizations

- Personal benefits of rule bending
- Potential personal costs of rule bending
- Personal benefits of rule enforcement
- Potential personal costs of rule enforcement

Data

- Semi-structured interviews
- Narratives
- Three phases
- 49 Public officials from 7 jurisdictions
  - 25 police officers, 24 city administrators
  - 30 men, 19 women
  - 10 racial or ethnic minorities, 39 whites
  - 44 middle-aged or older, 5 young
  - 20 high social status, 29 low social status

Narratives

- Hand out

- Discussion Questions:
    - How would you handle these situations?
    - How do we learn to handle challenges to our authority?
    - How do we create organizational cultures that overcome these potential challenges?

Findings

High Social Status and Low Official Status	High Social and Official Status
• Rely on social status (implicit gender and racial/ethnic hierarchies) to mobilize authority. • Focus on social traditions and norms of behavior as well as physical appearance and assertiveness.	• Rely mainly on social status (implicit gender and racial/ethnic hierarchies) to mobilize authority, but view official status – or rules of the organization - as giving them an extra "edge" of authority. • Focus on social traditions and norms of behavior as well as physical appearance and assertiveness, but recognize that rules provide an extra boost to authority.
Low Social and Official Status • Have minimal authority as individuals. Either exert minimal or no authority, or opt out of traditional system and use alternative means of authority (e.g., informal economies), or organize to use group resources to mobilize rules and laws as forms of authority (e.g., Civil Rights suits brought by NAACP-Legal Defense Fund)	**Low Social Status and High Official Status** • Disassociate themselves from their social status and instead assert official status (e.g., I'm not a woman; I'm a police officer). • Focus on title and/or uniform as main source of authority. • Cite rules and laws that provide power to their position, but in a non-threatening deferential way (e.g., through a joke or aside).

Implications

- Social status is a deep structure and even rational legal authority is framed by social status
- Rules are resources
    - Critics view rules as inefficient
    - But, my research shows rules are crucial resources

Thank you!

Questions or Comments?

Please be in touch:

Shannon Portillo, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Undergraduate Program Coordinator
4060T Wescoe Hall
785.864.9098
sportillo@ku.edu