ABSTRACT

Despite the general recognition of the importance of "red tape" on organizations' behaviors and impacts, theory remains poorly developed. The purpose of this article is to develop a theory of the origins of red tape and then to apply the theory to the question "Why do government organizations have more red tape?" The perspective presented assumes that red tape is best viewed as pathological, whereas that formalization concepts are best viewed as neutral attributes of organizations. The term "rule density" is introduced to describe the extensiveness of rules and regulations as related to total organization resources. The theory makes a distinction between rules that are at their origin dysfunctional (rule-inception red tape) and rules that initially served a useful function but transformed into red tape (rule-evolved red tape). Specific causes of each type red tape are identified. A distinction is made regarding the internal vs. external production and impact of red tape and a typology is developed which is used in hypotheses about red tape. Finally, the question of government red tape is considered. A model of the relationship between external control and red tape is presented. The model implies that most factors leading to red tape are not an inherent function of government. However, two inherent factors of government are cited, each of which gives rise to red tape.

Government organizations seem to have more "red tape" these days—but why? Most explanations go no further than to suggest government organizations' red tape is a result of the emphasis on accountability in government (the apologists' explanation) or from the absence of a bottom line (the critics' explanation). There may be something to each of these broad explanations, but neither goes very far in meeting the requirements for theory development—namely, sharp conceptualization, interrelated propositions, and attention to causal mechanics.
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

One objective of this article is to explain why government organizations often have more red tape than do private organizations. But two even more fundamental questions require attention before delving into the relationship between government ownership and red tape. First, what is red tape? While most of us have some notion of the nature of red tape, concepts employed in research and theory have been inconsistent and ambiguous. Second, what causes red tape? While there is much unsystematic speculation about the causes of red tape, most research and theory has treated it as an independent variable, examining its impact on organization performance and productivity (Bozeman and Crow 1991; Bozeman and Loveless 1987), or on employee morale, job satisfaction, and commitment (Lan and Rainey 1992; Buchanan 1975; Baldwin 1990; Snizek and Bullard 1983). (Studies of the causes of formalization, a conceptual cousin to red tape, are much more common [e.g. Langton 1984; Meyer, Scott, and Strang 1987; Van de Ven, Delbecq, and Koenig 1976; Duggar 1985; Organ and Greene 1981]).

In order is to provide a more detailed and fully developed conceptualization of red tape, this article will focus on its origins and causation. Most studies of the effects of red tape do not provide a theory of origins. After examining the etiology of red tape and introducing a number of conceptual tools to facilitate red tape theory development, the article will provide explanations for differences in public and private organizations' red tape.

RED TAPE AND "WHITE TAPE": THE SEARCH FOR A USEFUL CONCEPTUALIZATION

Despite inconsistency in usage, there are some common elements to definitions of red tape. Red tape usually implies excessive or meaningless paperwork (Bennett and Johnson 1979); a high degree of formalization and constraint (Hall 1968); unnecessary rules, procedures and regulations; inefficiency; unjustifiable delays; and as a result from all this, frustration and vexation. (See Bozeman and Scott 1992 for an overview of various conceptualizations.)

Herbert Kaufman's Red Tape: Its Origins, Uses and Abuses (1977) is still the best known work on red tape and remains the only book devoted entirely to the topic. Kaufman never provides an explicit definition of red tape but does note (pp. 4-5) that "(w)hen people rail against red tape, they mean that they are subjected to too many constraints, that many of the constraints seem pointless, and that agencies seem to take

274/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

forever to act." Thus he includes several elements of common use--vexation, constraint, delay.

Kaufman's book illustrates a dominant theme in the public administration literature (e.g., Goodsell 1985)—that red tape may be frustrating, but it sometimes provides social benefits. Kaufman explains that red tape does not spring up because of the malevolence or incompetence of bureaucrats but because of two compelling and interrelated reasons--to ensure that government processes are representative and accountable and to meet the demands, often fragmented, of citizens and interest groups. The one line of reasoning might be described as an administrative "tragedy of the commons":

Every restraint and requirement originates in somebody's demand for it. Of course, each person does not will them all; on the contrary, even the most broadly based interest groups are concerned with only a relatively small band of the full spectrum of government activities . . . . But there are so many of us, and such a diversity of interests among us, that modest individual demands result in great stacks of official paper and bewildering procedural mazes (p.29).

Thus, part of the reason for red tape is the sheer number of specialized demands for government action. But process protection also give rise to red tape. Kaufman (p. 58-59) notes "(h)ad we more trust in . . . our public officers, we would feel less impelled to limit discretion by means of minutely detailed directions and prescriptions." Kaufman points out that much red tape could be avoided were we willing to reduce the checks and safeguards now imposed on government employees. But he does not advocate doing away with the extensive rule-based safeguards, noting that were we to do away with red tape "we would be appalled by the resurgence of the evils and follies it currently prevents."

In common usage, red tape has a strongly negative tenor and most laymen would, in all likelihood, be unable to make much sense of the notion of beneficial red tape. In popular parlance, red tape has come to be an umbrella term covering almost all imagined ills of bureaucracy. As Goodsell (1987, 63) notes, red tape is not only one of the "most enduring and universal rejection symbols in the English language," but it is a "classic 'condensation' symbol in that it incorporates a vast array of subjectively held feelings and expresses them succinctly."

275/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

Despite the widespread use of the term "red tape" as an epithet, many observers have noted that red tape (or, at least, the rules and procedures that some perceive as red tape) can confer important benefits. Landau (1969) suggests an important rationale for rules and procedures that may seem, on the surface, excessive. According to Landau, duplication and overlap in some cases provide important benefits. Landau (1991, 12) observes that "the deliberate removal of redundancies grinds an organization down to subsistence level, so restricting its repertoire of responses as to render it incapable of effective performance." While this is not a defense of red tape, one might, with a modest inferential leap, assume that similar reasoning might apply to organizational rules and procedures. As with other parts of the organization, rules and procedures are fallible and error prone and some redundancy arguably might be beneficial.

The empirical question then is Under what circumstances are extensive rules and procedures red tape and under what circumstances are they actually "white tape"—providing benefits along with the delays and frustrations? (Wintrobe 1982). In this article, the approach (elaborated in subsequent sections) is to view red tape as an organizational pathology, hopefully avoiding the confusion inherent in most discussions of beneficial red tape. While accepting the point that extensive rules and procedures can confer benefits (white tape), it is argued that concepts such as formalization better capture the notion of extensive but potentially beneficial rules and procedures.

The empirical research on red tape has tended to view it as an organizational pathology. Red tape is described by Buchanan (1975) primarily in terms of excessive constraints that are largely structural in nature (e.g., procedural regulations). Baldwin (1990) distinguishes between formal and informal red tape. Formal red tape pertains to burdensome personnel procedures, whereas informal red tape concerns constraints created by such external sources as the media, public opinion, and political parties. Perhaps the closest to popular usage is Rosenfeld's (1984) definition of red tape as the sum of government guidelines, procedures, and forms that as are perceived as excessive, unwieldy, or pointless in relation to official decisions and policy.

Searching for a behaviorally anchored measure of red tape, researchers (e.g. Kingsley and Bozeman 1992; Bozeman, Reed, and Scott 1992; Pandey and Bretschneider 1992; Lan and Rainey 1992; Bozeman and Crow 1991) associated with the National Administrative Procedures research project have operationalized red tape in terms of delays in the execution of

276/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

organizations' core activities. This approach, which is guided in large measure by operational convenience, makes no essential distinction between red tape and white tape since there is no assessment of the reasons for delays or whether the delays are justified.

GOVERNMENT OWNERSHIP AND RED TAPE

Several empirical studies have sought to determine the relationship of red tape to government ownership. The results have been mixed, due in part no doubt to the diversity of measures employed. In one of the earliest empirical studies of red tape, Buchanan's (1975) findings confounded usual expectations about greater red tape in government. Buchanan's results indicated that private sector managers expressed greater adherence and commitment to rules than did their public sector counterparts. By contrast, other studies (Rainey 1979 and 1983; Baldwin 1990; Lan and Rainey 1992; Kingsley and Bozeman 1992) have shown higher levels of formalization and perceived red tape among public managers, although the findings were generally linked to external constraints (such as government-wide oversight agencies). Higher levels of formalization and procedural regularity also have been reported in public educational institutions (Holdaway et al. 1975; Chubb and Moe 1990).

Using delays as a partial measure of red tape, Bozeman and colleagues (1992) found that government ownership is associated with red tape, and private organizations with stronger ties to government (in terms of resource dependence and communications) exhibited more red tape. The study suggests that it is not government ownership that is the chief causal agent; it is the exercise of external political authority.

Consistent with Kaufman's (1977) assertion that red tape is integral to our political culture, Meyer (1979a, 230) states:

"The quantum shift in the scope of federal activities when superimposed upon a decentralized system of state and local government created a host of intergovernmental ties where none had existed previously, and it gave rise to formal procedures governing these relationships."

Meyer (1979a) also suggests that attempts to privatize public sector goods and services are another source of red tape. As with the red tape that flows from intergovernmental relationships, this form of red tape stems from the documenta-
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

tion and other administrative requirements that are attached to federal funds as a means to ensure compliance with federal guidelines.

In sum, red tape may well be inextricably related to the character of the political system, particularly the distribution of authority. The fragmentation and dispersion of authority created by the U.S. Constitution may well have ensured extensive rules and procedures (white tape) and may in some instances give rise to red tape as well.

TOWARD A THEORY OF RED TAPE: CONCEPTS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Given the current level of theoretical knowledge of red tape, an articulation of useful concepts is a most important task (James and Jones 1976). Before presenting a theory of its origins, two concepts of red tape and the assumptions attending those concepts are presented here.

A Rules-Based Concept of Red Tape

It is assumed here that red tape pertains to formal rules, regulations, and procedures generated by organizational members acting in their official capacities. While some (e.g., Baldwin 1990) speak of "informal red tape," the concept employed here begins with the assumption that red tape cannot be based on informal actions or products. Further, not all organizational activities and products qualify, by the present concept, as red tape. In popular usage, several forms of perceived incompetence, maladministration, and delay qualify as red tape (Caiden 1991). By the more restricted view taken here, red tape originates only in formal rules, regulations, and procedures. The argument for this more restrictive definition is that it simply is not useful to use the term "red tape" for every organizational malady; doing so dilutes the meaning of the concept to such a degree that it would not warrant organization theorists' attention.

Red Tape as a Bureaucratic Pathology

As discussed in the previous section, one of the major points of confusion in the formal literature on red tape is whether it is bad, neutral, or, at least in some instances, good. Since red tape is not a natural phenomenon but a social construction, the issue is not what is its essence but what is its most useful conception.

278/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

The concept employed in the present theory assumes that red tape is a "pathology." There are several reasons to take this view. In the first place, it is clearly consonant with popular usage. Citizens and organizational members discussing red tape rarely assume that it is positive. Popular usage is not a sufficient criterion for development of a scientific concept (e.g., Hall 1963), but flaunting popular usage at least requires a good reason. One possible good reason, suggested by Kaufman's (1977) work is that many procedures and controls that seem vexing actually serve legitimate and important social and organizational purposes. That is a good reason to not view all procedures and controls, even extensive ones, as red tape; it is not a good reason to view red tape as beneficial.

A second good reason to view red tape as negative is that there is already a set of organizational concepts that deals adequately with certain empirical aspects of rules and procedures. The extensive literature on formalization concerns itself with rules and procedures, without in most instances assuming any negative implications or impacts of rules and procedures (exceptions include Michaels et al. 1988; Podsakoff et al. 1986 who show harmful effects of formalization). Moreover, it seems useful to view formalization as part of the "physiology" of the organization and red tape as a pathological aspect of that physiology (see Bozeman and Scott 1992 for an elaboration of the argument).

Another argument that might be advanced against a negative or pathological concept of red tape relates to the social construction of reality. According to Waldo, "one man's red tape is another man's system." Kaufman stated much the same view: "One man's red tape is another's treasured procedural safeguard." This point, while certainly valid, is not a strong argument against red-tape-as-pathology. Rather, it is a good reason to note that red tape is best viewed as subject dependent and that rules and procedures have multiple impacts.

BUREAUCRATIC PHYSIOLOGY: FORMALIZATION AND OTHER RULES CONCEPTS

One major flaw in most concepts of red tape is that the concept is too encompassing. Some authors make no distinction between formalization and red tape. Some take the view that most red tape is simply extensive rules and regulations. Such a concept of red tape leads us inexorably to unsatisfactory and ultimately ambiguous notions such as "good" red tape. By distinguishing carefully between formalization and red tape, research on each is facilitated. There have been few
studies of red tape, but studies of formalization are abundant. One early work on formalization (Hage and Aiken 1967) takes a rules-based approach to formalization and thus is especially useful for current purposes. Hage and Aiken distinguish between formalization and rule observation. The former refers to the proportion of jobs that are codified, while the latter involves the range of variation tolerated with respect to the rules that define each job. In a similar way, Pugh and his colleagues (1968) define formalization as the extent to which rules, procedures, instructions, and communications are written, while standardization refers to the extent to which rules cover all circumstances. Walsh and Dewar (1987) note that formalization refers more to what the rules are intended to do—increase predictability in organizational behavior by decreasing the variance in human performance—than to their absolute number.

Not all studies of formalization are grounded in analysis of rules and procedures, but such a rules-based concept of formalization is useful here because it is the closest relative of red tape. By distinguishing clearly between red tape and a closely related concept, red tape comes more sharply into focus. The definition presented below captures the rudimentary meaning of formalization as reflected in rules-based formalization literature.

Formalization: "the extent to which rules, procedures, instructions and communications are written." (Pugh et al. 1968, 75).

This familiar definition of formalization suffices for present purposes, but it is important to note that it is not only the extent of written rules and procedures but also their number that is important. Thus let us consider the enabling concept presented below.

Rule sum: the total number of written rules, procedures, and regulations in force for an organization.

This is perhaps even closer to usual meanings of red tape. Note that the definition is for rules in force. Within an organization, there often are rules and procedures that no one obeys because no one is aware of them.

280/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

It is often not the number of rules, regulations, and procedures that causes problems. The impact of rules cannot be determined adequately without knowing something about the resources and energy required to comply with the rule (Foster and Jones 1978; Foster 1990).

Thus:

**Compliance requirement:** total resources (time, people, money) required formally to comply with a rule (regulation, procedure).

**Compliance burden:** total resources (time, people, money) actually expended in complying with a rule.

"Rule density" relates to the compliance burden associated with a set of rules. The definition provided below is not easily operationalized, but as an analytic distinction it is helpful in setting boundaries for the conceptualization of red tape.

**Rule density:** total resources devoted by the organization to complying (i.e., compliance burden) with all its rules, regulations, and procedures (i.e., its rule sum) as a percentage of total resources expended by the organization.

Using rule density and compliance burden concepts helps in thinking about the implications of red tape for management theory. Exhibit 1 depicts the relationships among total organizational resources and total compliance burden with differing rule densities calculated from a line dividing the X axis (total resources) and Y axis (total compliance burden). If one takes total resources as a reflection of the volume and energy of organizational activities, one can consider the implications of combinations of total resources (energy level) and total compliance burden (bureaucratization level). The legend under Exhibit 1 presents implicit hypotheses that high energy/low bureaucratization organizations are likely undercontrolled and low energy/high bureaucratization organizations are over-controlled.
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

Exhibit 1. Rule Density Typology

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Resources</th>
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</table>

1 = High Energy/Low Bureaucratic
2 = High Energy/High Bureaucratic
3 = Low Energy/Low Bureaucratic
4 = Low Energy/High Bureaucratic
5 = Medium Energy/Medium Bureaucratic

The number and types of persons affected by a rule is a final consideration. Important issues are the amount of a tax and exactly who it affects. Rule incidence is a similar concept.

Rule incidence: the number and types of persons affected by a rule, regulation, or procedure.

Regardless of the potential importance of propositions about under- and over-control, as reflected in rule density, or characteristics of persons affected, as reflected in rule incidence, these issues are not issues of red tape. As conceived below, red tape pertains to the efficacy of rules and not to their number or compliance burden.

BUREAUCRATIC PATHOLOGY: RED TAPE CONCEPTS

The above concepts help set boundaries; the two concepts below are necessary precursors for a useful conceptualization of red tape. One concept pertains to the purpose for which a rule is apparently created, the other to its effects.

282/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

Functional object (of a rule): the organizationally sanctioned purpose for which a rule is created, the problem it seeks to solve, the opportunity it exploits.

Rule efficacy: the extent to which a given rule addresses effectively the functional object for which it was designed.

Red Tape Defined: "No Redeeming Social Value"

The theory developed here is based on two definitions of red tape; one is a simplifying definition and the other takes into account the subject-relevant nature of red tape.

Organizational red tape: rules, regulations, and procedures that remain in force and entail a compliance burden for the organization but have no efficacy for the rules' functional object.

This definition seems to be a good starting point for building a theory of red tape. It is close enough to most popular usages to avoid adding much to the considerable confusion already surrounding the term "red tape". The concept has the important advantage of not viewing the number of rules, procedures, and regulations as identical to red tape. But there is one apparent problem with the concept that merits some attention. As most public administration scholars (Kaufman 1977; Goodsell 1985) studying red tape have argued, red tape, at least by one conception, can be quite beneficial. If we view red tape as the sheer number and scope of rules, regulations, and procedures, that same red tape can be beneficial in those cases where it leads to greater accountability and protection of the public interest or, in general, acts as a constraint on government's power over private citizens. While this point is well taken, it is, from the standpoint of theory building, the best argument for taking a view of red tape as something more than the sheer number of rules, regulations, and procedures. Otherwise, there is no value added for the red tape concept. Moreover, most treatments of red tape, and certainly most popular usages, imply frustration and vexation, usually over attendant inefficiency. Thus, the notion of good red tape, while certainly defensible, seems to confuse more than to edify.

Clearly, most people view red tape as an organizational pathology. Still, there is a need to recognize that organizational administrative rules, regulations, and procedures are not--in either number or content--inherently good or bad, but only good or bad from the perspective of values posited and the
extent to which they seem to serve or thwart those values. It seems sensible, then, to use one concept to denote the physiology of rules, regulations, and procedures and another to denote their pathology.

Red Tape Defined Again: As Subject-Dependent

For most purposes the simple definition of red tape provided above is adequate. However, it omits an important element of red tape, one captured in Kaufman's (1977, 4) notion that "[o]ne person's red tape may be another's treasured safeguard" and Waldo's (1946, 399) statement that "[o]ne man's red tape is another man's system." Any given rule or requirement may be red tape (i.e., dysfunctional) in some respects, regarding some values but not others. Similarly, a rule may be red tape for one stakeholder but quite useful for another. Thus a second definition of red tape is presented below:

**Stakeholder red tape:** organizational rules, regulations, and procedures that remain in force and entail a compliance burden, but serve no object valued by a given stakeholder group.

For purposes of clarification, we may call the first red tape definition "organizational red tape" and the second "stakeholder red tape." Stakeholder red tape often will be useful when analyzing organizations in terms of coalitions of interests or when the individual, rather than the organization, is the unit of analysis. In other cases, however, organizational red tape is likely to serve better because it is simpler and requires no detailed specifications.

In some respects, stakeholder red tape is a richer conceptualization than organizational red tape. However, stakeholder red tape presents enormous operational problems, the chief of which is the potential number of stakeholders. In a government organization, one might expect at least the following stakeholder types:

- Parent agency
- Political superiors (e.g., Congress)
- Central management agencies (e.g., Office of Management and Budget)
- Interorganizational partners (both public and private sector)
- Clients and clientele groups
- Intraorganizational coalitions

284/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

A rule that is red tape for one group may not be red tape for another group, even for one in the same category. Thus the category "intraorganizational coalitions" may include such diverse sets as the psychologists in the personnel department, the cohort of younger middle managers, and employees interested in innovation and change. Each coalition may have unique sets of values and different functional objects to be served (or not served) by the organization's rules and procedures. What this means, from the standpoint of researching red tape, is that comprehensive and valid measurement of a stakeholder concept of red tape is inevitably a prodigious task, so much so that organizational red tape may well be the better hope for developing researchable constructs.

In the next section of this article, the concepts developed above are used as a starting point for understanding the origins, evolution, and effects of red tape. The central question, then, is what are the causes of pathological rules, regulations, and procedure? The first task in the development of a theory of red tape requires attention to its origins, thus an etiological theory. After the presentation of a theory of origins, later sections of this article will address internal vs. external red tape and the differences between red tape in government and in private organizations.

THE ETIOLOGY OF RED TAPE: "RULES BORN BAD" VS. "GOOD RULES GONE BAD"

None of the empirical studies of red tape, and only a few of the conceptual studies, gives much consideration to its origins or to the transformation of functional rules, regulations, and procedures into red tape.

Rule-Inception Red Tape: "Rules Born Bad"

It seems clear that some rules are ineffective at their inception. It is assumed here that some rules are red tape at their inception because they meet the requirements specified earlier—having a compliance burden while not addressing a functional object. The term "rule-inception red tape" is used for rules that are dysfunctional at their origin. The question, though, is why would anyone promulgate a rule that never serves a useful purpose? There are several reasons.

285/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

Sources of rule-inception red tape include:

1. Inadequate comprehension
2. Self-aggrandizement and illegitimate functions
3. Negative sum compromise
4. Overcontrol
5. Negative sum process (e.g., "you can never have too much democracy")

Inadequate comprehension. Many dysfunctional rules have their origins in the misunderstanding of the relation between means and ends. In a great many instances, the reason for the inefficacy of rules is simple—persons designing the rules have insufficient understanding of the problem at hand, the relationship of the rule to the perceived problem, or others' likely application or response to the rule. The problem of inadequate comprehension is certainly understandable. Implicit in the promulgation of every rule is a causal theory. For some rules the pattern of causation may be relatively simple, such as "if we change work hours for some employees, there will be less traffic congestion." But in many instances the implicit causality in a rule is extremely complicated and in many cases rules have spill-over effects and unanticipated consequences that go well beyond the functional object. Since every rule promulgation involves essentially a forecast of the effects of the rule on behavior, it should come as no surprise that the problem of inadequate comprehension should so often rear its ugly head; social forecasting is, after all, highly inexact.

Self-aggrandizement and illegitimate functions. The concept of red tape employed here assumes that rules should serve a legitimate, organizationally sanctioned functional object, either for the focal organization or for a legitimate external controller (such as a parent agency) of the organization. Thus a rule that is efficacious for an individual or group but which serves an illegitimate function, such as self-aggrandizement, qualifies as red tape, even if the rule is very effective for the illegitimate function. The reason is that there is a compliance burden produced that is not redeemed in terms of a legitimate functional object. Thus, if an employee in the accounting division sets a rule requiring additional reporting on travel reimbursement forms for the unsanctioned purpose of expanding his or her knowledge base and organizational power, the result is by definition red tape.

Negative sum compromise. As is the case for most organizational decisions, decisions about rules often reflect compromise. In some instances a rule may be established that serves so many diverse functional objectives that the net result
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

is to produce a compliance burden but not enhance any of the functional objects it is designed to serve. This is related to the problem of inadequate comprehension. It may well be the case that each rule-making party has an understanding of the rule needed to advance particular functional objects but not of the impact of a compromise rule. Often rule makers seek to do too much and end up doing nothing.

Overcontrol. Next to inadequate comprehension, over-control is, in all likelihood, the most common reason that rules are "born bad." Managerial control is an important organizational value and usually a legitimate one. However, it is also a value especially likely to be overemphasized. Clearly, rules cannot cover every contingency; thus, the informal organization is inevitably important. The informal organization, under some circumstances, can even "preserve the organization from the self-destruction that would result from literal obedience to the formal policies, rules, regulations and procedures" (Dubin 1951, 68). But one of the most common responses to uncertainty and ambiguity is to seek control through formalization. This overcontrol is often a source of red tape.

Negative sum process. In many organizations, there is such an unmitigated faith in participation that organizational democracy becomes a source of red tape. Not only is there an attempt to make sure that all relevant parties participate, but those who have nothing to add and who wish to be "disenfranchised" are required, through formal rules and procedures, to participate. Thus, rules which enhance process, including but not limited to participation processes, can begin by enhancing a value but can take the value to such an extreme that it serves no purpose.

Rule-Evolved Red Tape: "Good Rules Gone Bad"

The question of why functional rules transmute into dysfunctional red tape is important not only for the understanding of bureaucratic pathology but also for the understanding of organizational-environment relations and organizational life cycles. Several factors may lead to the evolution of rules into red tape, including:

(1) Rule drift
(2) Rule entropy
(3) Change in implementation
(4) Change in the functional object
(5) Change in the rule's efficacy
(6) Rule strain
(7) Accretion
(8) Misapplication

287/J-PART, July 1993
Rule drift. Rule drift occurs when the meaning and spirit of the rule get lost in organizational antiquity or when individuals inadvertently change the rule or its meaning. Sometimes individuals enforce rules or comply with them without having any idea why they are in place or what function they serve. Perhaps the need for the rule no longer exists. Rules may be observed ritualistically and even may be venerated without anyone knowing what function they serve other than ritual. Rule drift is not always a matter of the length of time that has passed since a rule's origins. Other factors that may be related to rule drift include personnel turnover (in the case of internal rules), changes in client composition (for external rules), and the reorganization of organizations and programs.

Rule entropy. Rule entropy is a special case of rule drift; rule entropy occurs as rules get passed from one organization to the next and one person to the next. The more organizations, organizational levels, and jurisdictions involved in rule promulgation and application, the more likely the meaning will be lost through entropy and the more likely red tape will result.

Change in implementation. Change in implementation occurs if the rule itself stays essentially the same but individuals begin to implement it in a different manner. For example, a rule may be applied with less discretion than in the past or it may be interpreted more or less stringently than in the past.

Change in the functional object. Sometimes the functional object of the rule changes in ways that render the rule obsolete or otherwise useless. Thus a rule requiring an annual report of hiring needs is dysfunctional if there is a multiyear hiring freeze.

Change in the rule's efficacy. Even if the functional object does not change, circumstances which mitigate the rule's usefulness can occur. For example, a rule requiring carbon copies of memoranda makes little sense if almost all communication is via electronic mail on a computer-based local area network. This example illustrates not a change in the functional object itself but a change in the rule's efficiency for the functional object.

Rule strain. Organizations with too high a rule density level create strain and inefficient use of resources. Rules that are good but are too abundant can have a net negative effect. Five good rules may be within those capabilities; ten good

288/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

rules may cause the organization or individual to interpret and apply rules less effectively, simply because of limited compliance capability.

Accretion. Rules build one on top of another. If they are inconsistent or at cross purposes their net effect may be damaging (even if particular rules remain effective with respect to their functional objects). Accretion means that the rules have an impact that is more than the sum of their parts. Rationality added to rationality may sum to irrationality. This is not a matter of the volume or density of rules (as in rule strain) but of the compatibility of rules.

Misapplication. Misapplication of rules can occur for any of a variety of reasons. Sometimes rules may be difficult to interpret or apply because they have been written poorly and thus quickly evolve into red tape. Sometimes the purpose of a rule (perhaps a legitimate purpose and perhaps for an efficacious rule) has never been clearly communicated to the person charged with its enforcement. Sometimes the persons expected to comply with the rule do not understand it or its purposes.

SOURCES OF RULES: INTERNAL VS. EXTERNAL RED TAPE

In determining both the cause and effect of red tape, one of the most significant issues is the source of the rules that have become red tape. Surprisingly, this issue has received little attention, expect indirectly through concerns about external control and accountability.

The internal-external distinction is important for a variety of reasons. From a managerial standpoint, each suggests different red tape implications. The key to coping with internally originating red tape may be simply to change the rules. That option may or may not be open for externally imposed red tape. Similarly, internal impacts are likely to lead most directly to ineffectiveness and loss of morale. External impacts are likely to lead to customer defection and client dissatisfaction (with no direct and necessary internal impact).

Exhibit 2 depicts the interaction of the source of rules and its impact as red tape. It is important to note that externally imposed rules may become internally imposed red tape. That is, the original source of rules is not necessarily the original source of red tape.

289/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

For present purposes, however, the chief concern is with the source of red tape and its impact. Exhibit 2 provides a grid relating source of (organizational) red tape and its impact. Note that the perspective is that of the focal organization rather than of the stakeholder, the superior organization, or the client; a different perspective would require a different model.

Exhibit 2. Typology Relating Origin and Impact of Red Tape

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[Origin]</th>
<th>[Impact]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I,I)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interorganizational Red Tape</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E,I)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Control Red Tape</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I,E)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary Red Tape</td>
<td>(E,E)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass-through Red Tape</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each quadrant of the grid relates a different combination of red tape source and impact; a term is given for each type. Red tape that originates inside the organization and has external impact on clients or other organizations is called ordinary red tape. This term is used because it is the type of red tape that is most familiar and receives the most attention in both the literature and in popular discussion. Red tape that originates inside the organization and has impacts inside the organization is referred to as intraorganizational red tape. This type red tape is familiar in the workplace. Rules, regulations, and administrative procedures are developed inside the organization with some functional object pertaining to the internal...
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

management of the organization. Those rules that have a compliance burden but no efficacy for any functional object of the organization become intraorganizational red tape.

Red tape that originates externally but has internal organizational impacts (from the standpoint of a given focal organization) is also quite familiar. Usually it originates in a governmentally superior agency or in a parent firm's attempt to maintain control of a subordinate entity. The term external control red tape is used here.

Pass-through red tape is less obvious and probably less common. It occurs when red tape originates from the outside (e.g., the parent organization) and has its chief impact on the client or customer of the focal organization, with the focal organization not contributing to the red tape but simply passing it along as it implements the red tape.

The relevance of the internal-external distinction is revisited below in consideration of the differences between red tape in government and in private organizations.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE DIFFERENCES IN RED TAPE

Why do government organizations have more red tape than do other organizations? Having introduced a rough theory of the origins of red tape and having developed some additional conceptual tools, we now apply these tools to the question of government organizations' red tape.

A basic premise is that government organizations are not inexorably destined to have more red tape than other organizations. There are only a few inherent attributes of government organizations that cause red tape; there are many attributes that cause red tape and are correlated to government ownership.

Correlated Causes of Government Red Tape

The primary correlated attributes that lead to more red tape are: (1) external control; (2) homogeneity and number of stakeholders. Another way to say this is that government organizations and private organizations with the same levels of external control and the same volume and diversity of stakeholders would have the same level of red tape flowing from those causes. But of course government organizations generally possess these attributes to a greater extent than do private organizations (i.e., government ownership is correlated with these attributes).

291/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

Exhibit 3 presents an external control model of red tape, one as applicable to private as it is to government organizations. The model takes the organization as its focus and indicates facilitators (+) and inhibitors (-) of red tape. The reasoning behind the model is as follows:

Proposition position 1.0: Organizational red tape increases with number of organizational entities promulgating rules to be implemented by the focal organization increases . . . ;

Proposition 1.1: . . . And with the number of organizational layers and jurisdictional units promulgating rules;

Proposition 1.2: . . . Because, there is (a) increased opportunity for use of discretion in rule application (and increased opportunity for misapplication); (2) increased opportunity for "entropy" in the communication of rules and their results; (3) decreased "ownership" of the rules by the organizational unit in charge of implementation.

Proposition 2.0: Organizational red tape decreases as a function of the number, quality, and use of feedback mechanisms by which those affected by rules communicate with those promulgating and implementing the rules.

Exhibit 3. External Control and Generation of Red Tape.

292/J-PART, July 1993
"A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

The model in Exhibit 3 and the propositions above are as applicable to private as to government organizations. But there are inherent attributes of government organization that exacerbate the (generally) high degrees of external control that tend to be found in government organizations.

Inherent Causes of Government Red Tape

Among the inherent attributes of government, two are particularly worthy of attention in connection with red tape--(1) sovereign political authority, (2) breadth of policy mission and, relatedly, the nature of linkages among organizations pursuing transcendent policy missions. While political authority affects private organizations and even can be exercised by private organizations acting in proxy, sovereignty inheres in government. This is indeed the only ineradicable difference between government organizations and private organizations with high degrees of publicness (Bozeman 1987). In the United States and in other democratic governments, sovereignty carries with it legitimate coercive power of such force that citizens inevitably demand sharp constraints on officialdom and safeguards, usually procedural, against abuse. This is a chief point in Kaufman's (1977) analysis of red tape, and he is quite correct in noting that these procedural safeguards create a great many rules, regulations, and procedures--his concept of red tape.

Using a red tape-as-pathology concept, a set of rules protecting citizens from official abuse is not red tape. However, a set of rules devised to protect citizens from official abuse, but not meeting that purpose or any other legitimate purpose, is indeed red tape. One of the reasons government has more red tape is that it has voluminous rules designed to protect citizens from the illegitimate uses of the legitimate powers of government. Sometimes the rules simply do not work. Using the concepts developed to explain the etiology of red tape, we can say that there are certain causes of red tape that are particularly likely to arise in the case of procedural safeguards. First, there is a strong likelihood of accretion because procedural safeguards almost invariably involve cross-cutting goals—they affect the same officials and the same missions as do policy goals and produce a natural tug-of-war. When officials find ways to reduce the efficacy of the procedural safeguards (but not to shunt aside the rules and compliance burden associated with the safeguards), the residue is red tape. Inadequate comprehension is often a problem because those interpreting or applying procedural safeguards easily can lose sight of the purposes of the rule, focusing instead on mindless compliance. Perhaps most important, however, is rule strain. In many

293/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

instances the sheer number of procedural safeguards, many of which are quite specific and detailed, produce an extensive compliance burden and, for organizations with limited resources, a high rule density.

Another inherent attribute of government that leads to increased red tape is the nature of the policy mission. Generally, interorganization linkage is associated with red tape (as indicated above), but when the linkage is not just for the mutual competitive advantage of essentially autonomous organizations but to serve a broader policy mission that transcends all linked government organizations, the linkage is qualitatively different. This qualitative difference means that linkage mechanisms require a different sort of interorganizational "glue" that can easily turn out to serve as the adhesive to red tape. In a competitive market, the success of one firm at the expense of another in the same industry is not only expected and tolerated but is often seen as beneficial to the industry and the economy as a whole. The competition between firms leads presumably to better products and stronger firms. However, if the goal-attainment success of one government organization comes at the expense of another government organization working in the same "policy industry," there is no presumption that a higher good is served; instead, the presumption is that those organizations are working counterproductively. Why would this inherent difference in government organizations lead to red tape? The answer is simple—working at cross-purposes is the presumed norm in competitive private firms, but it is the very definition of red tape in government organizations: compliance burden without social benefit.

Hypotheses about Government Red Tape

We can now consider the propositions about the causality of external control (correlated red tape) and the inherent features of red tape in connection with the theory presented above. Table 1 provides hypotheses about the implications of government ownership for various types of red tape. Table 2 provides hypotheses about the implications of government ownership to the imputed causes of red tape.

It is hypothesized that government ownership is positively related to ordinary red tape, external control red tape, and pass-through red tape and is not related significantly to intraorganization red tape. Let us first consider nonrelated red tape. There is no particular reason to believe that intraorganizational red tape is related to government ownership since there is no necessary or even likely difference in the number of rules (rules sum), rule density, compliance burden, or number of

294/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

actors and organizations promulgating rules. Similarly, there is no reason to expect differences in feedback mechanisms for intraorganizational red tape—employees of government organizations are probably no more or less likely than employees of private organizations to express their views about their organizations’ rules and red tape.

Table 1
Summary of Hypotheses About Relationship Of Government Ownership To Types Of Red Tape

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Red Tape</th>
<th>Government Ownership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary red tape</td>
<td>(+) due to less feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intraorganization red tape</td>
<td>(n.r.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External control red tape</td>
<td>(+) due to greater number of external controllers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass-through red tape</td>
<td>(+) due to less feedback and greater number of external controllers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^n.r. = not related

Ordinary red tape seems more likely in government organizations because there is less direct and meaningful feedback. This is one instance when the often-cited absence of a bottom line or a clear market signal has a significant effect. If private organizations, especially private firms with a broad customer base, require their customers to suffer red tape, it is likely that the compliance burden will be reflected in reduced sales and market share. In government, feedback is more likely to be anecdotal and episodic, and thus ordinary red tape is more easily sustained.

There is every reason to believe that government organizations will in general be likely to promulgate external control red tape. Typically, they have a large number of external controllers exerting legitimate influence and providing rules. If we make the above assumptions about the effects of numerous, diverse external controllers, then government organizations can be expected to have more external control red tape and more pass-through red tape.

295/J-PART, July 1993
Table 2 provides an extensive set of hypothesized relationships between red tape and government ownership. Each relationship is potentially amenable to test in research comparing public and private organizations.

Table 2
Summary Of Hypotheses About Relationship Of Government Ownership To Causes Of Red Tape

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of Red Tape</th>
<th>Government Ownership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate comprehension</td>
<td>(n.r.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegitimate</td>
<td>(+) due to political uses of red tape and &quot;side payments&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative sum compromise</td>
<td>(+) because authority more diffuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcontrol</td>
<td>(+) due to limited managerial task specificity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative sum process</td>
<td>(n.r.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule drift</td>
<td>(+) due to greater turnover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule entropy</td>
<td>(+) due to greater number of organizational levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change of implementation</td>
<td>(n.r.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change functional object</td>
<td>(n.r.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change rule efficacy</td>
<td>(n.r.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule strain</td>
<td>(n.r.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accretion</td>
<td>(+) due to cross-cutting policy goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misapplication</td>
<td>(+) due to greater instance of external control</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is worth noting that for many putative causes of red tape there is no expectation of a relationship with government ownership. For example, there is no reason to believe that government organizations would ceteris paribus have more of an incomprehension problem. Similarly, change in the functional object of the rule is no more likely to lead to red tape in government than in business. In other cases, however, there is an...
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

expectation that government ownership will be related directly to causes of red tape. For example, self-aggrandizement and illegitimate functions might be expected to be often a cause of red tape in government organizations. If there is any truth to economists' notion that "side payments" (Demsetz 1967; Niskanen 1971) play a greater role in government due to the absence of a profit motive, one might expect that this focus on nonproductive, unsanctioned outputs would be associated with red tape. In addition to the issue of side payments and the absence of a profit focus, it is also possible that some government red tape occurs because of unsanctioned political strategies that may or may not enhance organizational goals. Moreover, government employees' use of red tape as a political and strategic tool can inhibit narrow technical efficiency but in some cases can be politically rational. For example, if an agency is experiencing a series of anticipated personnel cutbacks, officials may be able to use paperwork and procedural delay to fight the cutbacks, perhaps with the hope that positions will be restored. Similarly, the very slowness of procurement and billing sometimes provides government managers with additional discretion in the deployment of resources. And they can "get away with it" because there is an expectation of delays.

Perhaps accretion is the most important relationship of government ownership to a cause of red tape. Since government organizations are almost always linked by policy missions in a way that private organizations are not, the possibility for cross-cutting policy goals, with attendant red tape from resultant dysfunctional rules and procedures, is inevitably greater with government organizations. Thus this inherent quality of government, one of the few characteristics that provides a qualitative and necessary difference between government and private organizations, also entails red tape potential.

CONCLUSIONS

To a drowning victim, any flotsam or jetsam within grasp is more precious than knowledge of Archimedes' principle of buoyancy. Extending and compounding the metaphor, one who is "drowning" in red tape understandably has little patience with theorizing. However, the neglect of systematic theoretical thinking about red tape has contributed in large measure to the ambiguity that surrounds the topic.

In many instances, managerial prescription and managerial theory complement one another. But when organizational concepts are poorly developed and organizational problems

297/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

are acute, prescription often drives out explanation (Bozeman 1993). This seems to be exactly what has happened in the case of red tape. Questions of cause are rarely even posed, much less answered.

This article attempted to step back from the everyday annoyance of rules, procedures, and regulations to present some thoughts about the nature and causes of red tape. The next steps should entail further conceptualization and, just as important, additional empirical research on red tape. After providing a summary of the chief points of the article, this concluding section considers briefly some research questions that seem to flow from the theory presented. (Implications of the theory for management and organization design are not examined here but are discussed elsewhere [Jones and Bozeman forthcoming].)

Summary

A major point argued here is that it is useful to distinguish between extensive rules and procedures, on the one hand, and red tape, on the other. Those who have given the most attention to problems of red tape (e.g., Kaufman 1977) point out that red tape often confers benefits. The concept "rule density" is presented here to describe the extensiveness of rules and procedures, without regard to their merit. The term "red tape" is reserved for rules and procedures serving no useful organizational or social-political function. Several concepts were introduced--rule sum, compliance burden, rule incidence, functional object of a rule--each of which was designed to distinguish between the extensiveness of rules and their impacts.

Another central objective of this article was to develop some propositions as to how red tape emerges. If red tape is defined, as it is here, as rules that serve no legitimate social or organizational function, the reasons for its occurrence are not so obvious. A distinction was made between "rule inception" red tape (rules dysfunctional at their very beginning) and "rule-evolved" red tape (rules which originally served a useful function but became dysfunctional). Several possible causes of rule inception and rule-evolved red tape were presented between internal and external red tape.

It is important to distinguish between internal and external origins of red tape, and a model was presented attempting to determine the causes and interrelations of each. The model provided red tape categories, ordinary, intraorganizational, and "pass-through."

298/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

Any theory of government red tape is implicitly a theory of public-private differences. Government is viewed widely as having more red tape--but why? While there might well be many factors spuriously related to government organizations' higher levels of red tape, the two factors which seem inherent pertain to sovereign political authority and government's broad, interconnected missions. A series of hypotheses about government red tape was presented.

Research Implications

The hypotheses presented in this article were not fully explicit, but it would not appear difficult to develop testable hypotheses from the sets of concepts and propositions presented here.

Much of the needed empirical work on red tape pertains to boundary setting and verification of classifications and taxonomies. For example, empirical researchers interested in enhancing our understanding of red tape might wish to examine the boundaries between formalization and red tape. Are there organizations with high formalization and high rule density but with modest degrees of dysfunctional rules (red tape)? Similarly, are there organizations with low rule density but with a high proportion of red tape?

An even more daunting research undertaking is verification of the causal mechanics of red tape, especially rule-evolved red tape. Studies of rule-evolved red tape necessarily require longitudinal designs, preferably with multiple cases. Since the time spans required for evolution of functional rules into red tape are in all likelihood often quite lengthy, this might be a fruitful realm for historiography or historically informed research.

Previous empirical research on red tape has tended to use survey research and aggregate data (e.g., Barrett 1993; Baldwin 1990; Bozeman et al. 1992), but much could be learned from intensive case study analysis of single (broad impact) rules or sets of rules. Particularly welcome would be an ethnomethodological study of a rule or set of rules that focus in detail on the rules' origins and diverse impacts on various stakeholders. From such a study it might be possible to learn a great deal about the evolution of rules and the factors affecting that evolution.

299/J-PART, July 1993
A Theory of Government "Red Tape"

A particularly useful aggregate data analysis of rules and red tape would entail a focus on the composition of various organizations’ reservoirs of rules. Kerwin and Furlong (1992) have charted the way in a highly informative study of rules generated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. However, many questions remain unanswered. How do organizations differ with respect to the functional objects of rules? What types of organizations tend to have higher compliance burdens for their rules? What determines the specificity and standardization of organizations’ rules? How does organizational rule making relate to organizational control? How do rules contribute to organizational and managerial goals?

A particularly thorny problem for researchers is the sorting out of differences between objective (i.e., behaviorally anchored) red tape and perceived red tape. Clearly each is important, and in all likelihood there are reciprocal effects between the two. But perceptions of red tape are almost certainly bound up in such psychological complexities related to job satisfaction, individual views about authority and its legitimacy, and perhaps even alienation. It is always difficult to sort out the perceptual from the objective and to gauge their respective impacts, but it is especially problematic for red tape. However, knowledge of the interplay between perceptions of red tape and objective indicators would be extremely useful in theory development.

These few ideas are far from exhaustive; they do, rather, illustrate some of the topics that might be part of a red tape research agenda. Much conceptual work remains, and the difficult task of developing useful measures for red tape is sufficient to occupy a sizable number of empirical researchers. There are few if any organization studies topics that hold more promise. Red tape is not the only remaining frontier for organization researchers, but it is certainly among those most worthy of exploration. If systematic, empirical knowledge of red tape begins to emerge, confidence-inspiring prescriptive theory will likely follow closely.

300/J-PART, July 1993
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302/J-PART, July 1993
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