Bureaucratic Red Tape and Formalization: Untangling Conceptual Knots

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Abstract: Advancements in our knowledge of red tape have been handicapped by a serious neglect in the development of red tape as an organizational concept. Progress has also been hindered by the rather haphazard application of this concept in much of the empirical research. In this paper we examine some of the principal factors that have impeded conceptual development, paying particular attention to the relationship between red tape and bureaucratic formalization. We argue that progress in red-tape research and knowledge requires attention to several issues, including the measurement of red tape, origins and sources of red tape, and the need to consider red tape from the perspective of multiple stakeholders.

Introduction

Organization theorists studying “red tape” have given scant attention to the usual requirements for developing researchable conceptualizations of their topic. Kaufman’s Red Tape (1977), which is perhaps the best known work on the topic, provides numerous illustrations of red tape, presents an apologia of sorts, and even identifies causes of red tape—but provides no precise conceptualization. His observation that “(o)ne person’s red tape may be another’s treasured safeguard” (Kaufman, 1977, p. 4) has the same cautionary ring as Waldo’s (1959, p. 369) earlier observation that “one man’s red tape is another man’s system.” But we soon reach a point of diminishing returns in pointing out the ambiguities of a term without presenting a clarification.

It is easy enough to understand why there has been so little progress in developing researchable concepts of red tape. Given the obvious practical concerns with red tape, there is a tendency to put the normative cart before the empirical horse. In the rush to solve practical problems, conceptual problems are shunted aside. In addition, red tape’s strong connotative meanings have inhibited development of denotative and stipulative definitions. It is one of those powerful terms so familiar and yet so fuzzy that disputants are likely to lapse into debates about the “essence” of red tape rather than to provide careful stipulations.

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In contrast to red tape, research on bureaucratic formalization, a closely related topic, is not only more abundant but, in many respects, much better developed. The concept of formalization is used with somewhat more consistency, and researchers have devoted much more attention to developing valid and reliable measures. Progress on formalization has in fact impeded progress on red tape in some ways. Those interested in red tape have borrowed much from formalization and, in many instances, not spent much energy in developing a separate and discrete concept of red tape. The result is a conceptual muddle.

The purpose of our study is to identify some of the problems that have impeded progress in our understanding of red tape. We examine relevant literature and consider obstacles to theory development. We begin with an overview of the various red tape concepts presented in the organization theory and public administration literatures. The next section examines empirical research on red tape and the closely related concept of formalization. The third section of our paper suggests some approaches to attacking conceptual problems, and the concluding section provides suggestions for future research and theory development.

**Concepts of Red Tape in Theory and Research**

The conceptual issue that most sharply divides studies on red tape is whether red tape is viewed as inherently bad (i.e., an organizational pathology) or potentially beneficial, depending upon context and values. While the court of popular opinion assumes a negative conception of red tape, most of the literature can be classified into one of two traditions: “bad red tape” or “good (potentially) red tape.”

**“Bad Red Tape”**

In common usage, red tape is an emotive term connoting the worst of bureaucracy: gargantuan, cynically impersonal, bound up in meaningless paperwork, and beset by excessive, duplicative, and unnecessary procedures (Rai, 1983; Goodsell, 1985). Likewise, much of the literature on red tape treats it as a pathology rather than a neutral organizational attribute.

The origins of the “bad red tape” concept are difficult to trace, but one early part of its lineage is Merton's (1940) classic study of the bureaucratic personality. Merton argues that organizational demands for rule adherence lead to goal displacement among individuals working within bureaucratic organizations. Rules become ends in themselves, and adherence to formalized procedures interferes with adapting these rules to special circumstances. Accordingly, the rules designed to produce efficiency in general instead produce inefficiency in special or exceptional circumstances. Merton further suggests that sustained exposure to entrenched rules creates a tendency toward rigidity among individuals within bureaucracy. This may occur because bureaucratic organizations tend to reward rule-oriented workers more than those who display less of a rule orientation (Edwards, 1984).
Since Merton's path-breaking study, others have followed in the same tradition of identifying red tape as a bureaucratic pathology (e.g., Argyris, 1957; Thompson, 1961; Hummel, 1982). One particularly important theoretical advance was Thompson's (1961) study of "bureaucopathologies." This work is one of the strongest theoretical explanations of red tape and other obsessive bureaucratic behaviors. Thompson views bureaucopathologies as pathological extensions of (neutral) characteristics of Weberian bureaucracy; thus, the often useful bureaucratic attribute of management via formal, written records becomes a bureaucratic pathology if taken to extreme. What distinguishes Thompson's work is that he provides an explanation of such extreme behaviors, alleging that they result from uncertainty about task requirements and goal ambiguity.

More recently, but in the same tradition, Bozeman (1993) views red tape as "good rules gone bad." He examines the evolution of functional rules into dysfunctional red tape; thus, red tape has its origins in rules embodying values the organization promulgates. Over time, values become transformed, or the need for them is diminished, leaving no significant function for them to serve, with red tape as their only legacy. This transformation of values into red tape may be the result of organizational inertia, self-serving management, external control, organizational dependence, or other factors, but when the rules and procedures serve no organizational or social purpose, they become red tape.

Although most work on red tape is conceptual, researchers affiliated with the National Administrative Studies Project (NASP) have examined red tape in a number of empirical studies (Bozeman, Reed, & Scott, 1992; Pandey & Bretschneider, in press; Kingsley & Bozeman, 1992; Lan & Rainey, 1992). These studies have generally assumed that red tape is an organizational problem and measure red tape in terms of delays reported in organizations' core administrative processes. Although the "red-tape-as-delays" concept has much to recommend it—it is conveniently measured, obviously important to any organization, applicable across organizations—this concept presents problems as well. Chief among the problems: When is a delay "appropriate" and when is it dysfunctional? The NASP studies tend to assume that delays are generally undesirable, but the studies do not provide a strong test for that assumption and acknowledge that delays may be less pernicious in some contexts than others.

Some recent studies in the bad red tape tradition suggest that government is often the cause of red tape, whether the effect is manifested in public or private spheres. That is, red tape flows from external governmental influences and particularly governmental regulations (Baldwin, 1990), resulting in conditions of "bureaucratic inflexibility" (Rai, 1983). In the same tradition, Rosenfeld (1984) defines red tape as the sum of government guidelines, procedures, and forms that are perceived as excessive, unwieldy, or pointless in relationship to decision making or decision implementation.

"Good Red Tape"

Although no one actually argues that red tape is inherently good, several researchers point out that it sometimes provides benefits in the form of proce-
dural safeguards that ensure accountability, predictability, and fairness in decisions (Kaufman, 1977; Benveniste, 1983, 1987; Goodsell, 1985; Thompson, 1975). Red tape provides citizens protection against the arbitrary and capricious exercise of bureaucratic power and ensures equity in the treatment of clients. As an accountability mechanism red tape comports with—and even flows from—larger democratic and Constitutional values that emphasize tolerance, diversity, pluralism, and participation in politics. According to this view, the pervasiveness of bureaucratic red tape mirrors our system of governance, a system designed to be redundant and, hence, inefficient in both structure and execution (Kaufman, 1977; Meyer, 1979a).

The idea that red tape is an integral part of our political culture can be seen in intergovernmental relations and third-party governments. Meyer (1979a), for example, suggests that federalism and privatization serve as sources of red tape because of documentation and other administrative requirements designed to ensure accountability to and compliance with federal guidelines.

While some scholars (Downs, 1967; Bennett & Johnson, 1979) suggest that bureaucrats create and use red tape to increase their own perquisites of office, Wintrobe (1982) argues that red tape is beneficial because it serves as necessary check on discretion, which, if unchecked, can lead to the advancement of personal over organizational interests. Red tape helps to control the information costs that accompany the exercise of discretion. In addition, Wintrobe (1982, p. 662) notes that every organization has an optimal level of red tape:

what may appear to both employees and outside observers as red tape and excessive devotion to routine may in fact be an optimizing response on the part of organization managers, given that the costs of co-ordination, monitoring, and control increase directly with the extent to which discretionary authority is delegated to employees [italics added].

Research and Theory on Bureaucratic Formalization: Is This Red Tape by Another Name?

A number of researchers provide definitions (often implicit) of red tape that are virtually identical to those used by researchers examining formalization. Indeed, some (e.g., Buchanan, 1975) have used formalization scales to operationalize red tape. At the same time, in a considerable body of work on formalization, the authors do not relate their work to red tape and present no implications for red tape theory. The somewhat careless intermingling of red tape and bureaucratic formalization has given rise to considerable confusion. In this paper we shall suggest a resolution, but first we provide a succinct overview of some of the more relevant research and theory on formalization. Research on formalization is much more extensive and better developed than research on red tape, and thus even a less-than-comprehensive overview must cover a good deal of terrain.

Hall (1963) defines formalization as a system of rules covering rights and duties of incumbents and a system of procedures for dealing with work situa-
tions. Related concepts of standardization, documentation, and extent of rule usage are also considered in conjunction with formalization and have been examined in numerous studies of organizational structure (Dalton, Todor, Spendolini, Fielding & Porter, 1980; Hall, 1962; Hall, Haas, & Johnson, 1967; Hrebiniaik, 1974; Indik, 1968; James & Jones, 1976; Payne & Mansfield, 1976; Prien & Ronan, 1971; Pugh, Hickson, Hinings, & Turner, 1968).

Although all of the more common formalization and bureaucratization concepts involve organizational control over individual members (Clegg, 1981), there are substantive differences between them. For example, formalization is generally defined as the parameters around which a job is defined, whereas standardization refers more specifically to how one is to do the job (Dalton et al., 1980). Hage and Aiken (1967) make a similar distinction 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 et al. (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.

Of course, we do not necessarily have to measure formalization according to the degree of written rules and procedures because unwritten norms and standards can be just as binding as written ones (Hall, 1991). Further, Walsh and Dewar (1987) note that formalization refers more to what the rules are intended to do—to increase predictability in organizational behavior by decreasing the variance in human performance—rather than their absolute number.

**Correlates of Formalization**

Given the numerous empirical studies that have examined formalization and its relationship to other structural attributes, it is not surprising that mixed, and even contradictory, findings have been generated. For example, while a number of studies (e.g., Donaldson, Child, & Aldrich, 1975; Hinings & Lee, 1971; Inkson, Pugh, & Hickson, 1970; Meyer & Brown, 1977; Pugh et al., 1968) report no linkage between formalization and centralization, Hage and Aiken (1967) found a positive association, and others (e.g., Child, 1972; Grinyer & Yasai-Ardekani, 1980) found a negative relationship. Formalization has also been shown to be positively related to complexity (Donaldson et al., 1975; Pugh et al., 1968), role specialization (Rushing, 1966), era of organizational origin (Meyer & Brown, 1977), organizational age (Glisson & Martin, 1980), and the level of importance attached to external interactions (Hall et al., 1967; Van De Van & Walker, 1984). Still other studies have shown that formalization is positively related to routineness of work (Hage & Aiken, 1969), although the direction of causality is often unclear (e.g., compare Dornbusch & Scott [1975] to Glisson [1978]).

Another important correlate of formalization is professionalism. Although many studies have found an inverse relationship between the two (e.g., Aiken & Hage, 1966; Hage & Aiken, 1967; Hall, 1968; Miller, 1967), more recent research suggests formalization enhances professional personnel. For example, one study found that formalization helps to reduce alienation among profes-
sional workers because it decreases role ambiguity and enhances organizational commitment (Organ & Greene, 1981). Similar findings were obtained by Podsakoff, William’s, and Todor (1986), Snizek and Bullard (1983), and York and Henley (1986).

Other studies have examined the effect formalization has on productivity. In a study of human service organizations, Glisson and Martin (1980) found that formalization increased productivity and efficiency as measured in terms of the number of clients served and the costs in serving them (but see Hage & Dewar, 1973). As procedures become more formalized, workers became less involved in administrative or management decisions and thus are free to devote their time to clients. Mott (1972) and Wretten (1978) found similar findings; however, in studies involving manufacturing workers (Schuler, 1975) and county administrators (Rogers & Molnar, 1976), the linkages between formalization and productivity were, by far, less clear.

Overall, the research suggests that the effects of high levels of formalization depend heavily upon organizational context. High levels of formalization seem to be particularly appropriate where tasks are short and repetitive, performance is easily measured, the task environment is stable (Ruekert, Walker, & Roering, 1985) and the need for coordination is high (Rushing, 1966). In other contexts (e.g., high professionalization), however, formalization can lead to reduced performance (Child, 1973) and foster high levels of alienation (Miller, 1967; Aiken & Hage, 1966). In these instances formalization becomes transformed from a neutral Weberian concept into a bureauapathyology of sorts.

**Origins/Sources of Formalization**

A number of perspectives attempt to explain formalization using an ecological approach. Langton (1984) and others (e.g., Glisson & Martin, 1980; Rizzo, House & Litzman, 1970; Van De Van, Delbecq, & Keonig, Jr., 1976) suggest that organizations selectively retain certain bureaucratic elements as a way to manage environmental complexities and minimize uncertainties. Accordingly, the more complex or uncertain the environment, the more elaborate an organization’s internal administrative structure. This process of elaboration comes about as a direct response to an organization’s resource environment (Meyer, Scott, & Strang, 1987), constituent or political pressures (Warwick, 1975; Rosenfeld, 1984; Stevenson, 1986), or long-term political, economic, and societal forces (Meyer, 1979b; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Duggar, 1985). It is unclear, however, whether such an internal accommodation actually produces a more effective organization (e.g., compare Hull, 1988, to Knoke, 1989).

Quinn and Cameron (1983) suggest that formalization’s emergence is linked to an organization’s life cycle, although formalization does not become a predominant influence until the organization passes from its “entrepreneurial” and “collectivity” stages into its “control” stage, a phase marked by rule elaboration. Formalization increases administrative efficiency and organizational effectiveness early in an organization’s history, because at this stage formalization reduces uncertainty by providing a set of role expectations and facilitating productivity and job satisfaction (Walsh & Dewar, 1987).
Formalization can contribute to organizational decline and ineffectiveness later in its life cycle, however, as decision premises become entrenched, new rules (along with the administrative positions that create and support them) are added to changing circumstances without regard to how they affect existing arrangements, compliance becomes equated with performance, and the ratio of administrative to nonadministrative personnel becomes a resource drain on the organization (Walsh & Dewar, 1987). At this point rules become ends in themselves. As they become the domain of vested interests, organizations feel little incentive to change or reduce them (Walsh & Dewar, 1987). Such trends, if left unchecked, can lead to inefficiency and organizational decay. At this stage organizations must manage formalization effectively if they are to survive.

**Conceptual Issues in Red Tape Research and Theory**

We have taken care to discuss the concept of formalization in detail because of its interconnectiveness with red tape. Much of the research on red tape uses constructs similar, sometimes identical, to formalization research. Although we think research on red tape should be subsumed within a broader formalization research agenda, the careless intermingling of the two concepts continues to impede progress in research on red tape. Moreover, as long as the level of conceptual development remains relatively primitive, it is difficult to say much of anything useful about red tape's causes and effects.

Progress in red tape research and theory also requires serious attention to several other conceptual questions. Some of the more important include:

a. Is red tape good, bad, or neutral?

b. How is red tape different from formalization and other related concepts?

c. Is red tape dependent on one’s perspective, position, or stakes?

d. Is red tape objective or perceptual?

e. What are the best approaches to measuring red tape?

In this section we seek to frame each of the conceptual issues and begin to suggest some approaches to dealing with them.

**Is Red Tape Good, Bad or Neutral? and How Do Red Tape and Formalization Differ?**

We deal with these two conceptual problems at the same time because our “solution” to one is our solution to the other. In our view, two points are clear enough. First, the imprecise use of red tape as pathological, potentially beneficial, contingent, and possibly optimal has contributed to much of the conceptual muddle. Second, the question is not “can we discover the essence of red tape?” but “what is the most useful conceptualization of red tape?” (where “useful” means advancing our understanding of interesting behaviors and events).

In our judgment there are sound reasons on the side of both good and bad red tape. Chief among the arguments for good red tape is the simple fact that there are often benefits from rules, regulations, and procedures, even burdensome ones. Kaufman (1977), Goodsell (1985), and others concerned with ensuring accountability and safeguarding those subject to organizations’ behav-
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tape for one stakeholder but quite useful for another. Sometimes, not always, it is useful to make this distinction in research; thus, we present a second definition of red tape below.

\textit{Red tape:} Organizational rules, regulations, and procedures that serve no appreciable organizational or social function \textit{for a given set of stakeholders with respect to their specified values} but that nonetheless remain in force and that result in frustration and vexation for those stakeholders.

This revised concept will often 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, the more general definition of red tape is likely to serve better as it is simpler and requires no detailed specifications.

\section*{Is Red Tape Objective or Perceptual?}

Just as perplexing as the good red tape- bad red tape issue is whether red tape is objective, perceptual, or both. Little work distinguishes objective from perceptual red tape, and, worse, many previous studies use concepts of red tape recognizing no difference between the two. In our view, both types are extremely important and are likely to be interrelated in interesting and unexpected ways (for example, see Kingsley & Bozeman, 1992). Subjective red tape is, however, in many ways a theoretically richer concept.

Most organization researchers tend to view more favorably measures that get at seemingly objective phenomena. In the case of red tape, we can measure objectively behaviors such as the number of forms to be filled out in connection with an action, the number of signatures required, and the number of delays encountered in authorizing or implementing action. Indeed, each of these objective measures has already been used in empirical studies of red tape (Bozeman & Loveless, 1987; Bozeman et al., 1992; Lan & Rainey, 1992). But as a \textit{measure of red tape} each of these indicators is indirect and inferred. If one defines red tape in the terms we have provided here, this inefficiency and frustration may be inferred from, say, delays, but not deduced as logical necessity.

Accordingly, we argue that the best approach to studying red tape is to employ a combination of so-called objective (or indirect) and subjective measures. The former have limitations because they do not get at the crucial psychological and personal effects of red tape, the latter because the measures usually have limited construct validity and are more difficult to instrument. Each, though, is likely an important element in the causal relations between red tape and managerial action.

\section*{How to Measure Red Tape?}

Red tape has been operationalized in a number of ways. For example, Bozeman and colleagues (1992), as well as Bretschneider (1990), use a summative measure of time required for certain types of internal administrative and core organizational tasks. Buchanan (1975) and Baldwin (1990) use measures that reflect managers' perceptions of the extent to which they feel con-
strained by rules. Payne and Mansfield (1976) use a “Business Organization Climate Index” that contains items relating to rule orientation. Wintrobe (1982) uses a measure of bureaucratization that links formalization to individual discretion. Kingsley and Bozeman (1992) attempt to sort out perceptual from objective red tape using path analytic models. Other current research considers red tape as a “residual” effect upon an organization’s operations (Pandey & Bretschneider, in press).

Notwithstanding the variety of ways in which red tape has been operationalized, we still see significant reliability and validity problems, especially with respect to perceptual measures of red tape. Baldwin (1990), in fact, suggests that studies of red tape can be easily influenced by factors such as respondents’ tolerance for conformity, the need for self-expression, and other factors that speak to the artificial nature of measurement. To such a list we can add other competing, counter-explanations, such as the specific approach adopted (i.e., as survey vis-à-vis institutional approaches) (Walton, 1981) or the types of samples employed (Rai, 1983). But while alternative measurement strategies (e.g., sample surveys that are not limited to managers or professionals; longitudinal studies) will help advance research, we must recognize that red tape research has not yet advanced to the point that measurement problems are as important as conceptual development. Further conceptual spadework is first required; otherwise we run the risk of conforming to Gresham’s law of theory development, where the simple but invalid drive out the complex but realistic.

**Topics for Future Research**

Our chief concern in this paper has been to identify obstacles impeding research and theory building pertaining to red tape. As with other research in organization behavior, the study of red tape has not lived up to the usual standards necessary for adequate theory development (for an overview, see Bacharach, 1989). In this final section we take the opportunity to suggest some potentially promising directions in research and theory. These include: (a.) the origins of red tape and the transformation of rules and regulations into red tape; (b.) internal versus external sources of red tape; (c.) public- versus private-sector red tape; and (d.) multiple effects upon various stakeholders.

**The Origins of Red Tape**

It is difficult to determine the origins of red tape in the absence of a clear and stable concept, but let us assume the concept advanced here—burdensome rules and regulations advancing to legitimate organizational or social value—and consider the question of origins. Empirical studies have examined how red tape affects organization performance and productivity (Bozeman & Crow, 1991), as well as its effects on employee morale, job satisfaction, and commitment (Baldwin, 1990; Buchanan, 1975; Lan & Rainey, 1992). That is, they have examined red tape as an independent variable, focusing more on its effects than its causes. None of the empirical studies, and only a few of the
conceptual studies, however, give much consideration to the cause of red tape or the transformation of rules, regulations, and procedures into red tape. Accordingly, we have several gaps in our knowledge about red tape. First, do rules, regulations, and procedures ever begin as red tape, or do they always begin as functional rules and then transform? In our view, any set of rules or procedures that serves no legitimate organizational or social function should be viewed as red tape, regardless of whether the rules were "born bad"; Therefore, one fruitful line of inquiry is the study of processes that differentiate between rules that are at their time of origin red tape and those that subsequently evolve into red tape. By identifying the forces that lead to the formation of red tape and the processes by which "good rules go bad," it might be possible to generate and test propositions that advance theoretical knowledge and contribute toward the development of valid prescriptive theories.

Internal Versus External Sources of Red Tape

Surprisingly, research has devoted almost no attention to possible differences in red tape based upon whether it originates in the organization or is imposed by an external source. It seems, however, that impacts may vary depending upon red tape's origin. Typically, externally imposed red tape is likely to be associated with attempts to enhance external control or multi-organizational coordination. By contrast, internal red tape may be more limited in its effect, as well as its scope and application. Internal red tape may even be an organization’s strategic response to the avoidance of the external control by other organizations.

External agents of red tape might also have different effects depending upon their institutional origin; thus, in federal government agencies, one might expect that centralized management agencies, such as the Office of Management and Budget, would have different effects in creating red tape than would the Congress. Generally, congressional mandates provide broad guidelines and leave some room for agency compliance maneuvering, while management agency requirements are usually more detailed and specific. A comparison of the nature of these impacts remains largely unexplored.

Public Versus Private Comparisons of Red Tape

Several studies have examined differences between public and private organizations’ red tape and formalization, but we still have significant gaps in our knowledge. In terms of formalization, Pugh, Hickson, Hinings, and Turner (1969) found relatively similar levels of red tape in both public and private organizations, while Buchanan (1975) found that private-sector managers expressed greater adherence and commitment to rules than did their public-sector counterparts. By contrast, other studies (Baldwin, 1990; Kingsley & Bozeman, 1992; Lan & Rainey, 1992; Rainey, 1979, 1983) have shown higher levels of formalization and red tape perceived among public managers, although the findings were generally linked to externally generated sources of formalization (e.g., government-wide oversight agencies). Higher levels of formalization and procedural regularity have also been reported in public educational institutions.
(Chubb & Moe, 1990; Holdaway, Newberry, Hickson, & Heron, 1975) and non-
proprietary (generally governmental) hospitals (Clarkson, 1972).

A commonly cited rationale for presumably higher levels of red tape in the
public sector is that public organizations are subject to greater levels of ac-
countability than private firms and, hence, face greater operating constraints
that are manifested in the form of rules and red tape. In addition, goals in the
public sector are considered more diffuse and vague. Accordingly, public man-
agers rely more extensively upon rule compliance as a means of control and
as a benchmark for effective performance (Buchanan, 1975; Thompson, 1961;
Warwick, 1975). Neither of these frequently advanced rationales receives much
support in the literature. Some of the most careful research (e.g., Allinson,
1986; Lan & Rainey, 1992) has shown that, despite almost everyone’s expecta-
tions, public managers perceive no more ambiguity of goals than do private
managers. Similarly, the other widely alleged source of red tape, accountability
mechanisms, has been widely cited but not frequently examined in research.
The assertion, then, that public organizations are bound up in endless reams
of red tape seems at best a crude stereotype (Foster, 1990). We need further,
and more careful, study.

**Differential Impacts of Red Tape**

Waldo’s (1959, p. 369) observation that “one man’s red tape is another
man’s system” has taken root in many scholars’ conceptualizations of red tape,
but there seems to have been little or no research and theory using that appar-
ently sensible notion. Accordingly, it might be useful to sort out the many differ-
ent effects various employees experience. For example, rules and procedures
might have different implications for, respectively, an organization’s workers
and its clients. While the internal/external dimension of impact is likely one of
the most important, effects may also be distributed internally in a variety of
ways within an organization’s hierarchy (e.g., technostructure versus operat-
ing core versus support staff). Thus the adoption of a stakeholder orientation to
red tape should facilitate analysis of multiple perspectives and ultimately lead
to an improved understanding of not only the effects of red tape but also of the
causal mechanics of administration rules, regulations, and procedures.

Finally, differential impacts may be experienced from the perspective of
one’s immediate work environment. As an example, one may be subject to
highly formalized personnel, resource, or other types of administrative proce-
dures and yet have relative freedom and flexibility in terms of specific work
processes. Accordingly, operationalizations of red tape need to take into ac-
count its multidimensional nature. Some studies (e.g., Pandey & Bretschneider,
in press) have begun to lay some groundwork in this regard, although a next
useful step, perhaps, is to consider red tape according to whether its source is
procedural or substantive in nature (i.e., whether it is related to administrative
processes or to core organizational tasks).

In sum, even if existing knowledge about red tape were entirely reliable
and confidence-inspiring, many gaps would remain. Our brief overview of some
possible future research issues seems to reinforce the major assertion of our
paper: little progress is likely unless much more attention is given to concep-
tual development. We must first dedicate attention to evaluating constructs and variables before we can analyze their relational properties and, hence, before we can advance theory. Without such effort, our knowledge of red tape will continue to remain more descriptive than theoretical.

**Notes**

1Glisson (1978) notes, however, that even when formalization increases productivity, it may hinder overall organizational effectiveness.
2Bozeman and Loveless (1987) give some attention to this question and do, indeed, find notable differences.

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