Rules and Red Tape

A Prism for Public Administration Theory and Research

Barry Bozeman and Mary K. Feeney

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Situating Red Tape Research and Theory

Nearly every English speaker knows the term "red tape."[1] However, a shared term does not always equate to a shared meaning. When someone complains about red tape, it is difficult to know whether the person is bemoaning the amount of paperwork in an organization, tangled rules and regulations, capricious bureaucratic behavior, lethargic bureaucratic behavior, or the sad plight of having socially desirable, effective rules enforced to one's personal disadvantage. Popular usage of the term "red tape" requires no precision.

To illustrate the multiple popular meanings of "red tape," let us consider one government's attempt to obtain citizens' help in identifying problems in state government and possible solutions. In 2008, the state of Virginia set up a website to solicit and log citizens' concerns. The website, called "Virginia Ideas Website" (www.aitr.virginia.gov/ideas), was still functioning and popular as late as the first half of 2010. As one might expect, many of the entries complained about red tape. We provide one such entry below, posted in September 2008:

> **Reduce government red tape.** "There appears to be several hundred different agencies listed at the official Virginia government website. Many of them contain similar words in their agency titles. How much repetitive work is being performed by more than one agency? Why not consolidate agencies that do similar work, or eliminate some of them altogether? We could probably save thousands of dollars by downsizing the quantity of Virginia agencies."

This particular notion of red tape focuses on duplication and overlap, which is perhaps the single issue most commonly identified by government reformers as an administrative problem. Indeed, duplication and overlap was a central concern of the Hoover commissions on reform in the late 1940s (Arnold 1976); but are duplication and overlap really red tape?

Let us consider some other citizens' complaints about government behavior that might be considered red tape.

The *New York Times*[2] ran a story on the Mexican government's attempt (much like Virginia's) to solicit citizens' help in government reform, even offering a prize for the most egregious case of "useless red tape." The winning entry was a woman's explanation of the monthly bureaucratic odyssey required to obtain her son's life-sustaining medication. The published story generated a raft of emails posted on the newspaper's blog by *Times* readers.

Consider this posting from France:

> I am an American living in France, which by far tops the U.S. in terms of bureaucracy (hence the origin of the word). Get this: in order to effectuate any legal doings in France, one must always furnish certified . . . and officially translated birth and death certificates that are less than three months old—as if the information on these changes! A previous translation of the same birth certificate will not be accepted.

And this posting from Arizona:

> My driver's license had expired while I was living in New York City. When I returned to Tucson I went to the DMV to renew my license and told them what had happened. The clerk asked me to turn over my New York license and I told her I never had one. She said I would have to write to Albany for clearance because "somebody had to be driving." I pointed out (again) that I had been living in the city and used public transportation. She didn't buy it.

Are these instances of red tape? In the French case, the problem seems to be related to rules and procedures. The Arizona case seems less clear inasmuch as the rules, whatever they may be, are not enforced consistently. Is this red tape?

In a sweeping reform initiative called the National Performance Review, the Clinton administration sought to address a wide range of bureaucratic pathologies, but it is instructive that the compendium listing problems and reforms was titled *From Red Tape to Results: Creating a Government That Works Better and Costs Less*. Why would a government reform effort treating problems ranging from lack of employee empowerment to risk aversion to

purchasing procedures choose to label them all "red tape"? One answer, of course, is the attractiveness of alliteration. However, the point remains—the term "red tape" often is a catchall.

According to Goodsell (1994, 63), red tape is a "classic 'condensation' symbol in that it incorporates a vast array of subjectively held feelings and expresses them succinctly." To put it another way, red tape has come to connote the worst of bureaucracy: gargantuan, cynically impersonal, bound up in meaningless paperwork, and beset by excessive, duplicative, and unnecessary procedures (Goodsell 1994; Rai 1983).

If red tape means nothing more than "bad bureaucracy," then the concept has value only for venting frustrations, not for scholarship, analysis, or serious managerial application. However, during the past several decades, scholars in public administration have sought to develop red tape as a legitimate and relatively unambiguous concept suitable for serious research. This book asks whether that effort has succeeded and what remains to be done.

Red Tape as a Focus of Scholarly Inquiry

While most people are comfortable with red tape as an epithet, many are surprised to learn that there is a scholarly field concerned with systematic learning about red tape. In fact, the past two decades have witnessed the emergence of a cottage industry of red tape research. In a relatively short time, red tape has gone from a topic ignored by researchers (though bemoaned routinely by public administration practitioners and the general public) to a research field occupied by at least thirty or so researchers, chiefly in the United States but also by a few from other parts of the world. As a result of these scholars' labors, we have seen books, several dissertations, and dozens of research articles, many of them published in the most influential scholarly journals in the field of public administration. Many of these scholars use a common definition of red tape as "rules, regulations and procedures that require compliance but do not meet the organization's functional objective for the rule" (Bozeman 2000).[3]

Since we are among those who have for years contributed to the red tape literature, we would like to think that something has been learned from the time and resources that so many scholars have invested. But to speak of research *activity* is not necessarily to speak of *knowledge*. What has been learned from this flurry of activity? Do we know more about red tape and related organizational phenomena than we knew in, say, 1980? Certainly researchers have developed propositions and causal claims, but how much veracity flows from the arguments and evidence provided by red tape researchers?

We have two central objectives for this book, both pertaining to the state of

the art in red tape research. The first objective is to provide a critical summing up of red tape research and its findings. Our first core question is this: "As a result of the dozens of published studies about red tape, what do we now know about the phenomenon of red tape, its causes, and its organizational and social impacts?" The second objective is more ambitious—to use red tape research and theory to explain empirically based theory development in public administration. Our second core question therefore is this: "What does the experience with red tape research and theory reveal about knowledge development in public administration?" The second objective, using red tape research as a lens to understand scholarly public administration, is potentially relevant for the 99 percent of public administration scholars who invest their time in topics other than red tape.

We cannot hope to answer either of our core questions without a thoroughgoing review of red tape research and theory. Our book presents a detailed review, aiming to cover literally every published paper dealing with red tape. Thus, aside from possible insights into research and theory building, the book should prove of interest to those who wish to learn about the content, findings, and contentions of red tape research. Some of our readers may be scholars who focus on red tape, bureaucracy, and organizations, and these readers need little or no introduction to red tape research. But for those more interested in the critical and epistemological aspects of our book than the particular content of our case in point, we provide the brief introduction below.

Situating Red Tape Scholarship: Three Knowledge Domains

We think of red tape knowledge as operating in three domains, each overlapping at least to some degree with the others. We refer to these domains as "ordinary knowledge," "formal knowledge" (or scholarship), and "application knowledge" about red tape.

Ordinary Knowledge and Formal Knowledge of Red Tape

Popular usage of the term "red tape" is based on ordinary knowledge (Kennedy 1983; Lindblom and Cohen 1979). Ordinary knowledge of red tape, or for that matter any topic, comes from day-to-day experience and communication and is part of being an active member of society. People obtain ordinary knowledge not through formal study or investigation but in social encounters and exposure to mass media. Most well-educated individuals have a prodigious amount of ordinary knowledge and a relatively small amount of formal knowledge. For example, a university-trained engineer may have a significant amount of formal knowledge about the tensile strength of metals

and might be able to apply that knowledge to the problem of structural flaws in bridge design. However, no matter how much such formal knowledge this engineer might have, she almost certainly has much more ordinary knowledge about a dizzying array of topics, such as the efficacy of over-the-counter cough medicines, the best and worst online travel websites, the peccadilloes of particular celebrities, and, perhaps, the rules, regulations, and red tape affecting civil engineers' government contracting relations.

Ordinary knowledge sometimes provides powerful, highly beneficial insights, but, just as often, it can be rife with ambiguity, and be misleading, counterproductive, or demonstrably wrong. People often make mistakes on topics such as the efficacy of over-the-counter medicines and they may have misperceptions about red tape in contracting. But whether ordinary knowledge is right or wrong, or in dispute, it plays a role in almost any decision context and any social issue. Most significantly for present purposes, ordinary knowledge comes into play in connection with formal knowledge, challenging it, complementing it, extending it, or competing with it. For example, the clash between ordinary knowledge and formal knowledge about biological evolution is as lively today as it was during the Scopes trial, when William Jennings Bryan pitted ordinary knowledge, folk wisdom, and deeply held religious beliefs against Clarence Darrow's expert witnesses' interpretations of formal knowledge.

In some areas of the natural and physical sciences, there is little or no competition between ordinary knowledge and formal knowledge, generally because of the lack of any ordinary knowledge. Presently, there seems to be no ordinary knowledge about chiral quarks, phage vectors, genome-wide insertional mutagenesis, or multiplicative ergodic theorems. This is not to make light of the *potential* for such ordinary knowledge. When the natural sciences begin to have obvious implications for near-term impact on human beings, ordinary knowledge develops quickly. Think of the case of climatology. Until recently, about the only ordinary knowledge pertaining to climatology was the *Farmers' Almanac*. But the mass media coverage and the political warfare surrounding climate change and its environmental impact have quickly changed climatology from the esoteric preoccupation of a few thousand scientists to a topic also including expansive ordinary knowledge.

The competition between ordinary knowledge and scholarly knowledge generally is greatest in the social sciences, not only because social science topics tend to be more easily understood than in the natural sciences, but also because nonspecialists more often have relevant experience. With respect to red tape, ordinary knowledge clearly is dominant in informing judgments and actions. Indeed, it could hardly be otherwise since very few people outside of a small community of university-based researchers are even aware of red tape scholarship.[4]

We have several reasons for emphasizing the role of ordinary knowledge about red tape. First, as we have already noted, it is important to understand the limited extent to which red tape research is recognized by most nonspecialists and the limited degree to which knowledge produced by red tape researchers has diffused beyond the confines of academic journals and books. Red tape research differs little from most academic enterprises in the degree to which it is separate from the "real world" of real problems, technologies, and solutions. One would, likewise, be hard-pressed to find much real-world penetration of research on, say, neo-institutional sociology, organizational networks, or postmodern interpretations of work and occupations, despite the existence of a sizable formal literature on these topics.

Second, we stress the prevalence of ordinary knowledge about red tape in recognition of the fact that it has directly influenced scholarly work. Until relatively recently there was no formal research on red tape. The work undertaken has been motivated to some extent by the very concerns prevalent in ordinary knowledge—vexation with malfunctioning bureaucracy. However, there is also a countertrend, also influencing the academic response to red tape—a concern about "bureaucracy bashing." The complex interplay between these concerns is explored later in this book. The point for the present is simple: red tape research has not been walled away. Even as a research construct, red tape has never been a hermetically sealed academic fancy.

A third point, important and not so obvious, is that ordinary knowledge about red tape provides not only motivation for developing formal knowledge but also research cues. Many research specialists see their task as improving on ordinary knowledge, and that attitude often seems well justified. When ordinary knowledge gives us mustard plasters and formal knowledge gives us germ theory, then we can with some confidence point to improved results. But in many of the social sciences, including red tape research, the relationship between ordinary knowledge and formal knowledge is less one of inferior and superior knowledge than different sorts of knowledge with different types of utility. This is a complex point that we shall explore throughout the book, but for the present let us simply say that ordinary knowledge about red tape tends to offer the benefits of context, emotive and expressive content, and narrative. By contrast, formal knowledge can provide the benefits of precision, generalization beyond context, and visibility of assumption, method, and inference.

Application Knowledge and Red Tape

With respect to any topic, including red tape, problem-solving activity uses knowledge and, at the same time, creates knowledge (Bozeman and Rogers

2002). The knowledge used in problem-solving activity may be trial and error (in situ), ordinary knowledge, or formal knowledge. The results of application and problem-solving activity generally create a new knowledge, often called craft knowledge (Delamont and Atkinson 2001), though we use the more general term here, "application knowledge." Application knowledge is the sort that practitioners tend to acquire and use. In the case of red tape, managers seeking to solve problems related to perceived red tape can proceed by inventing context-based approaches, or they can draw from ordinary knowledge, from formal knowledge, or all three at the same time.

Reynaud's (2005) study of rules and routines in the Paris Metro Electronic Equipment Maintenance Workshop offers a good example of how problem-solving activities (routines) help to interpret rules into appropriate usage. Routines-based analysis enables researchers to focus on the strategies that workers adopt in order to implement or follow rules and thus achieve organizational goals. Reynaud argues that rules are abstract and general because they are designed for different, specific cases, whereas routines are the means by which individuals interpret and implement rules. Reynaud concludes that the "first difference between rules and routines is that the former are *arrangements awaiting interpretation*, while the latter are *rules already interpreted*" (866). Thus the interpretation and implementation of rules is, essentially, application knowledge.

Let us consider a directly relevant instance of the development of application of red tape knowledge (Bozeman et al. 2008). In August 2007, the University System Office (USO) of the University System of Georgia (USG)[5] contracted with faculty of the University of Georgia's Department of Public Administration and Policy for a year-long study to assess "the quality of administrative procedures and the possible existence and severity of 'red tape' in the USO, primarily in the Office of Information and Instructional Technology." The research was explicitly premised on the previous work of this project's senior investigator (Bozeman 2000). As indicated in this project's scope of work, the study was explicitly designed to

> follow the methods set out in Bozeman's book, *Bureaucracy and Red Tape*, for assessing, managing and reducing red tape. The methods shall involve identifying rules that no longer attain the goals for which they were created and rules that, while perhaps still functional, entail an administrative and compliance burden that is excessive compared to their values in promoting the rules' and procedures' objectives.

The study focused on the Office of Information and Instructional Technology (OIIT). This choice was due to the willingness of the OIIT to participate and

to serve as a test site for developing approaches and procedures for studying rules and regulations and assessing possible red tape. OIIT cooperated with the investigators by providing access to both employees and stakeholders. The research resulted in a report giving the results of the data analysis, identifying sources of red tape, and suggesting strategies for reducing red tape and improving services.

In some respects, the experience with the USG study was quite atypical. In the first place, it is very rare for clients to contact a researcher on any topic because they happen to have read a book or article produced by the researcher. Second, the demand for consulting work addressing red tape is much smaller than one might expect, given the pervasiveness of the problem. The reason? Soliciting research on red tape implies that it exists and that it might be a problem. With respect to red tape, denial and buck-passing are much more common strategies than head-on confrontation, especially when outsiders are involved. But except for these two important distinctions, the research in other respects perfectly exemplifies application knowledge. The researchers used many of the same measures and hypotheses found in the formal literature, but applied them intensely to the particular context and needs of the USG. One of the hallmarks of application knowledge is that it tends to be context-specific, focusing on the unique needs of particular organizations or institutions.

Knowledge Competition: Which to Use?

If ordinary knowledge sometimes competes with formal knowledge of red tape, application knowledge provides an even more formidable competition. In many cases application knowledge has the advantage of practitioners' deep experience with phenomena, close learning, and context-specific learning, and it is often more precise and less ambiguous than ordinary knowledge. Almost by definition, it is more utilitarian in its focus than is formal knowledge. Indeed, the question arises why we even need a formal knowledge of red tape when we have application knowledge.

The problem with that question is that it has exactly the same status as the question why we need a formal knowledge of public administration (in general) when we have application knowledge. This is a deep challenge for any practitioner-related field, one drawing data from practice. The most optimistic answer is that there is no reason why one type of knowledge should preempt the other. But the challenge goes farther and, thus, we might also say that while we recognize the value of application knowledge, formal knowledge can provide benefits not easily rendered by application knowledge. Formal knowledge is better codified, it is typically more precise, and it is more often aimed at generalization. Formal knowledge generally employs a wider set