Adapting Government Structure: Implications for Positive Public Perception

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Abstract

This paper explores two organizational designs: the machine bureaucracy, currently used by most governments, and horizontal structure, currently used in many successful private organizations. Research reveals that the United States government is using the vertical organizational design, also known as the machine bureaucracy. This hierarchical, bureaucratic structure is said to inhibit communication within the organization through its rigid rules, policies, norms, and military-like chain-of-command. On the other hand, research also reveals that many large private organizations are structured horizontally and are successful in innovation, employee engagement and public perception. This paper explores the relationship between structure and employee agency, the ability for employees to satisfy customers by bending or breaking rules, and the implications for public perception. I believe that the public audiences likely have a negative perception of government attributable to structure that could be improved by shifting the structure to one that possibly encourages employee agency like the horizontal structure. I also explore the implication that possibly adapting to the aforementioned structure might improve public perception toward government. The intended audiences for this project are government policy-makers at the legislative level and Executive Directors of agencies, who have the power and authority to develop and approve policies that would support adapting the agency’s organizational structure within their respective organization.

*Key words:* government, organizational design, organizational structure, Giddens’ Structuration Theory, machine bureaucracy, horizontal structure, horizontal design, public perception, communication, bureaucracy, hierarchy
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Today, more than ever, organizational design is essential to how functional an organization is and to what extent it allows employees the ability to communicate in a way that produces successful outcomes. How the organization is designed is usually the result of a formal process undergone internally with external feedback (Autry, 1996). The current and historical preference in the United States, also referred to in this paper as American government, is a form of hierarchical structure, or bureaucracy, in which authoritative positions are located at the top, beginning with one person. For example, most organizations have a chief executive officer (CEO) at the top of the organizational chart and under the CEO are people who report upwards to that person. This structure branches out and downward to those on the lowest branches, also known as the ground level, whom are usually comprised of the people interacting with consumers/customers on a daily basis.

One organization that latched onto the bureaucratic structure is America’s government. The American government adopted the form of bureaucracy known as the machine bureaucracy (Mintzberg, 1981). Since this design seems to draw largely on the military structure needed in centuries past, based on the society structure at those times, it is possible that the machine bureaucracy is outdated for government organizations in today’s society. Additionally, within the hierarchical structure exist rules, policies and procedures that are usually rigid and commonly applied without considering context. This has many consequences such as constricting communication; “exert[ing] control over member behaviors”; and adding more time to the development of messages and delaying responsiveness to the public, which all may affect the construction of messages as information changes or is removed as it moves up-and-down the vertical chain before reaching the intended audience (Autry, 1996, p. 1). Most likely this is a
result of how the information flows through the hierarchical structure, leaving behind what can be too little information or information that is too general. When this happens, I believe it could encourage the idea, to the public, that the organization is not responsive and, therefore, does not provide satisfactory customer service.

The findings of my research demonstrates links between structure and public perception, which might be an effective persuasive strategy for proposing government to adapt its current structure. Furthermore, research findings garnered will contribute to scholarly research by demonstrating the duality of structure in relation to organizational design and the role it plays on interactions and public perception. It may also point to other areas of study for scholars interested in organizational design and its possible role in impacting employee engagement and resistance to change. Another area of study that might intrigue scholars is the element of public perception and how it could shape structure, as defined by Giddens (1984). Lastly, the final outcome of this project will be a thesis.

**Literature Review**

In the following literature review, I will discuss in detail two organizational designs: the machine bureaucracy and horizontal structure. I also discuss Giddens (1984) structuration theory in order to explore the possible connection between duality of structure and public perception. Moreover, I will compare and contrast the two organizational structures with respect to employee agency, meaning the freedom or restrictions to do their job; and I explore the idea that perhaps removing restrictions on employees can positively affect customer interaction and, thereby, public perception meaning the image of government.

**The Machine Bureaucracy**
As stated above, the American government has gravitated toward a preference for the machine bureaucracy. However, having been born out of the needs of the Industrial Revolution, the machine bureaucracy can be thought of as old and outdated. The operational characteristics of the machine bureaucracy are that of a hierarchy with divided and specialized units of labor, inflexibility, rule-bound, and top-down in its communication flow (Mintzberg, 1981). Essentially, the policies, rules and procedures formalize behaviors and dictates actions (Mintzberg, 1981, p. 7). This is important because it is also included in the discussion about structuration theory, which explains these policies, rules and behaviors as patterns of activity meaningful to those involved and can be changed (Poole & McPhee, 2005). Moreover, since government deals with people who are human and not machines, the rigid structure of the machine bureaucracy may prohibit the responsiveness needed in today’s society. Today, organizations may need the flexibility to respond to unique situations that may not already have a procedure established; and, finding a formal, one-size-fits-all resolution is tough, if not impossible.

One of the most pivotal changes from decades past that could be affecting the machine bureaucracy is the development of ubiquitous technological devices and the way it has opened the doors for society to access information; even extending to customer service. Today’s consumers expect to receive quick and accurate services because the world we live in today is highly connected and globalized through the advent of a plethora of digital technologies. This creates a society that is very different from that of the ones 25, 15 and even 10 years ago and has affected everyone personally, economically and politically. Instead of the usual Industrial Age thinking, companies need to recognize that we now live in a consumer-driven “experience economy” and most are doing this (Solis, 2013; Yohn, 2014; Gobe, 2009). However, it seems to
me, based on my work experience in government, that government organizations are still clinging to the rigid, vertical structure of the machine bureaucracy, which seems to discount this change in customer expectations. The effects of not adapting to a changing society may be what is trickling down to the employee’s agency, their ability to perform their job and, by extension, to the customer who decides on their level of satisfaction based on their interaction with staff (Gallup, 2009, p.4). When the results of the interaction are negative, it is possible the public perception and image of the organization suffers through the consumer’s negative communication about the organization to others in-person and/or via digital media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Furthermore, according to Mintzberg and Van der Heyden (1999), traditional hierarchies are “vanishing” (p. 88). The machine bureaucracy emphasizes high productivity and minimizing costs along with a mentality of replication meaning looking to the past for similar situations to resolve current and future issues (Mintzberg, 1981, p. 7). These philosophies and mindsets result in a resistance to change, which may not benefit government. However, assembly lines, such as vehicle production, are more appropriate for this type of organizational design. Since government generally deals with people, I believe it needs a structure more suited to meeting the needs of a living organism that thinks independently and freely; or, a structure that can adapt easily to varying situations.

As such, the machine bureaucracy could be less responsive to the demands of the current society. Additionally, new ideology and expectations of the millennials (born between 1982 and 2002) and Z generations (born in the mid-1990s through the 2010s or from the early 2000s to around 2025) are shaking up the way in which organizations are structured (Fry, 2016; Generations X, Y, Z And the Others). These two generations have grown up in the era of digital
technology and technological advancements and the machine bureaucracy struggles to meet their needs technologically (Fry, 2016; Generations X, Y, Z And the Others). This might be attributed to the rigid structure of a bureaucracy. The machine bureaucracy also does not meet the needs of the changing workforce as it has transitioned from low-wage, low-skilled factory jobs prevalent in the 1950s, to highly educated, knowledge-based service jobs seen now. Society today has high-skill, high-specialized jobs, a result of the Third Wave or technological age (Toffler, 1995). Some recent events have also highlighted inefficiencies of the machine bureaucracy such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Edward Snowden’s unauthorized disclosures (www.biography.com).

So, why does government continue to use the machine bureaucracy as its organizational design? One reason may be the origins as discussed above and the stability it has provided over time; a positive attribute. Not only is it stable, it accommodates the underlying political pressure, which is the external feedback that influences the formation of the current government design (Autry, 1996). Mintzberg (1981) also explains that government agencies function well as a machine bureaucracy because it is subject to many external controls (i.e. politics), “regardless of their other conditions” (p. 8). However, it may be that these constraints negatively affect employee agency and the ability to provide large volumes of positive customer interactions.

For all of these reasons, the machine bureaucracy is not only vanishing, it is no longer “fashionable” (Mintzberg, 1981, p. 8). These characteristics discussed above imply that the current structure impedes communication and employees’ agency. Granted, there are times when employees can do the right thing; however, the bureaucratic structure can severely limit the response, or deny the employee from responding at all. I believe that any instance that denies responsiveness or takes an inordinate amount of time for a response, are possibly what the public remembers the most and could be fodder for an agency to have a negative perception.
Now that I discussed the machine bureaucracy of the American government organizational design, I will compare it to the horizontal organizational design. In so doing, I hope to illuminate differences that might allow communication to flow more freely, which could enable less-impeded employee agency and could increase positive interactions with the public; thereby, affecting public perception.

**Horizontal Structure**

Horizontal structure can be thought of as consisting of the workforce as a cross-functional team, or visually, in a long line or circle with only a handful of senior executives in the traditional support functions such as financial officers and personnel/human resources (Byrne, 1993). These senior executives may form their own circle and stay separate from the main workforce or could be incorporated into the other cross-functional teams; either permanently or on an as-needed basis (Byrne, 1993). A crucial aspect is that this group is not depicted as above or in a higher power position than everyone else in the organization in either a physical manner, such as an organizational chart, or psychological manner, such as through communication. Since strict management levels are removed, employees would most likely have ownership in the decision-making process including management of people, time, resources, and performance evaluation (Byrne, 1993). This might have an unintended result of affecting engagement and morale most likely in a more positive way than in the hierarchical, bureaucratic structure. In the bureaucratic structure, people are given clearly defined tasks with, possibly, little feedback from the employee as to changes that could improve their job (Mintzberg, 1981).

Already, there are large corporations in America that are moving toward the horizontal structure. Companies such as AT&T, DuPont, General Electric, and Motorola are realizing the vertical structure of a bureaucracy are not meeting their efficiency or productivity needs (Byrne,
1993). The horizontal structure seems to allow employees to focus on processes involved with delivering the product instead of worrying about the office politics involved in the hierarchical structure such as requesting permission to move forward with the task, or requesting permission to contact other people in different departments within the organization. The horizontal structure could also promote feelings of comradery (Byrne, 1993). One instrumental change seen in the horizontal design is that of managing across (horizontal) instead of vertically as seen in the machine bureaucracy. Research shows that corporations are beginning to realize that managing across is more conducive than managing up-and-down (vertical) (Byrne, 1993; Mintzberg, 1981).

Within the horizontal mind-set, I believe are implications that communication would flow more freely and employees would have more agency to perform his or her job. This could possibly improve or enhance how the public interacts with and perceives the organization. Rules, policies and norms, which can be considered processes or practices, might be more flexible and fluid in the horizontal structure allowing employees to respond faster to customer’s needs. These rules, policies and norms are the practices, which will be explained later in the section explaining Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory. A quicker response during interactions between employees and customers suggests the customer would be happy as a result of the interaction; and, hopefully, they will talk to their friends about the positive experience who would talk to their network of friends and so on; thereby, influencing the public perception of that company. Again, by public perception, I am referencing the image of that organization.

Furthermore, I believe that public perception might also be influenced by the horizontal design because it might create shared environment instead of someone who is specialized toward one type of job. The specialized type of worker is indicative of the bureaucracy, where staff
operate within silos or boundaries, which may result in a narrow perspective on reaching the company’s goals. In the horizontal design, everyone from all backgrounds would need to be involved in different stages of the product delivery process (Byrne, 1993). Thus, all employees understand the big picture of the company’s vision and product as well as understand all the parts involved in bringing that product to fruition. This perspective might promote a feeling of ownership in the company and might remove physical and psychological barriers to communication, which is prevalent in the bureaucratic structure (Byrne, 1993; Mintzberg, 1981). I think this may positively affect employees in that they may feel more freedom to communicate with each other because egos are less prevalent and no one fears for his or job. Sometimes it seems fear might impede communication to the extent that people do not want to help each other for fear of being out-performed and resulting in job termination (Byrne, 1993).

Overall, the main challenge for bureaucracy to adapt its current design is the collaborative environment and how it works to change the narrow mind-set indicative of the hierarchical, siloed structure where people are only focused on his or her own task (Mintzberg, 1981). Collaboration tends to invite flexibility and a feeling of comradery, which may have an unintended effect of changing engagement in a more positive direction (Byrne, 1993). Finally, technology has changed society. Byrne (1993) writes, “Heightened global competition and the ever increasing speed of technological change have since altered the rules of the game and have forced corporate planners to seek new solutions” (p. 79). This also seems to imply that the bureaucratic, vertical structure is outdated and needs to change with a changing society.

In summary, I contrasted two organizational designs, highlighted the differences in those structures and how structure could change to help meet the needs of the organization and the public. It could be that employee agency and duality of structure, explained in the next section,
are more aligned with the horizontal structure and this might improve public perception by allowing employees the accepted practice of bending or breaking rules to assist customers, who would most likely experience positive interactions as a result of this accepted practice and share those positive experiences with friends. Now, I will discuss Giddens’ (1984) Structuration theory as a way to understand how organizational design comes into fruition through the duality of structure.

Giddens’ Structuration Theory

Giddens (1984) developed the structuration theory in the 1960s when scholars were interested in applying a human behavior perspective of communication to how society is structured (Poole & McPhee, 2005). Most of the studies at the time were focused on social scientific communication and searching for causes of behavior and how it was influenced externally and contextually (Poole & McPhee, 2005). As a result, the role of social structure was often overlooked or its significance was dimmed in favor of focusing on the chain-of-command relationships and communication, indicative of the bureaucracy (Poole & McPhee, 2005; Mintzberg, 1981). Giddens (1984) argued an alternative view built on other notable theorists of the time such as John Dewey, George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman (Poole & McPhee, 2005). These theorists focused on how human practices influenced and structured society. The structuration theory posits that both social structure and human action provide a framework that could explain individual behavior and the development and effects of societal institutions such as the economy, religion and government (Poole & McPhee, 2005). The emphasis of the theory is on the role of processes in society and organizations. It also allows us to conceptualize communication as a process and it supports stability and change (Poole & McPhee, 2005).
One of the most important concepts of the structuration theory is viewing the organization as a system and providing a human aspect to it (Giddens, 1984; Poole & McPhee, 2005). Giddens (1984) theorizes that systems are actually human practices and further defines practices as meaningful patterns of activity. These practices allow us to see the relationships to each other in a ‘big-picture’ way within society and societal institutions such as the organization (Poole & McPhee, 2005). Within the system, there are structures, which are the rules and resources used in order to function or perform practices. Structure would be the rules and means employees use in practices, or resources. For example, a state’s laws would be the structure and it is made up of rules and resources. A rule could be formal like a specific statute and a resource could be a computer system used to research laws in order to respond to a customer. Additionally, a rule could be informal like norms or narratives that guide people’s actions (Poole & McPhee, 2005). For example, if coming in to work late is acceptable only if bringing food or drinks to share with the office, this would be a norm. This example tells a story, or narrative, of what is acceptable behavior in that organization. The overarching idea of structuration theory is that processes are central to the way society and organizations function and that they literally create the structure, such as vertical or horizontal. Processes/practices guide behavior in that they tell us how to act and what is appropriate and not appropriate (Poole & McPhee, 2005).

Structuration theory also posits that in order to keep the system working, it is produced and reproduced by the people (employees) within it; a duality. The structure would be the rules and resources and they are reproduced through using rules and resources as intended. Giddens (1984) call this the duality of structure, a central idea of structuration theory (Poole & McPhee, 2005). Here is where employee agency is important. Duality of structure is the balance of employee agency and structure interacting with each other. Structure changes when employees
use rules and resources in different ways than intended, ignore them or break the rules (Poole & McPhee, 2005). Reproducing a structure happens when people use the rules and resources in the accepted manner within the organization. Therefore, as the system is reproduced, issues may arise that cause something in the system to change or transform. A transformation is merely the system evolving in a new way. The system itself, meaning organizational design, is the product of what employees do as they work through a duality of structures that are both the conduit and result of actions (Poole & McPhee, 2005).

Duality of structures implies that organizations develop through ongoing practices. Every time an employee engages in a practice, the organization’s system is reproduced. Another implication from Giddens’ (1984) theory is that organizations can change through this duality. It may need to be done in small changes, and over time, but knowing that rules, procedures, norms, policies, etc., comprise structure, I believe that through changing practices organizations can change (Poole & McPhee, 2005). Structuration theory seems to be useful for explaining how organizations can change. It focuses attention on the relationship between structure and employee agency and points out that structures are maintained and adapted through the exercise of agency.

This concludes the literature review section of this paper, which indicates that government predominantly uses the machine bureaucracy. However, what seems to be lacking is research indicating how this is perceived by the public and generally how people view their interactions with the government. Based on the research provided in the literature review, I argue that it won't be perceived positively unless the structure is more horizontal where employees have more agency and the ability to make decisions and solve problems. I believe this will impact the interactions with the public, which will result in positive perceptions of government.
Now, I will introduce two research questions that I believe will illuminate my argument.

RQ1: How does the public perceive government organizations?

RQ2: Are these perceptions related to the current structure of government? If so, how?

Method

This study will consist of a textual analysis of comments from consumers on a public forum in order to explore the potential implications of government structure in customer satisfaction and, thereby, public perception of the organization. The study will focus on 75-100 comments known as reports, collected from a public forum. All comments collected relate to government interactions and will serve the purpose of answering both research questions.

According to McKee (2003), the "textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world...to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and how they fit into the world..." (p. 224). The textual analysis is an effective way of assessing, comparing and understanding media texts (McKee, 2003, p. 224). A textual analysis allows the researcher to explore relationships between concepts, which will answer the research questions.

Procedure and Sample

Procedure. To conduct my research, I looked online for public forums related to government. I was not able to find ones specific to government, but I found websites that provided a public space for general complaints. I chose the website Ripoff Report (www.ripoffreport.com), which is an open forum for people to report scams and fraud, or review a company, individual, service or product, or complain, vent or let others know that a business is being unethical such as whistleblowing. The staff for the website claim they do not hide reports, even if a complaint is “satisfied”, but keep all comments, known as reports, open and available.
on the site indefinitely. The owner of the website says the comments are intact in order to preserve the history of the company or individual named in the report (www.ripoffreport.com).

The website allows searches by keyword terms and I used the search capabilities to search for the terms “government” and the abbreviations for the Department of Motor Vehicles - “DMV”. The “government” search term yielded 286 comments for the year-long time period, but the comments were too varied to allow a focused analysis on structure. For example, topics included wastewater treatment, securities disbursement, student loans, companies misrepresenting themselves as government entities, and other instances of fraud. Searching “DMV” seemed to yield 66 comments more precise to government interaction and analysis of the connection between interaction, structure and public perception.

**Sample.** The reports I collected spanned between June 2016 and June 2015. I collected daily reports in their entirety, including attachments when provided, and comments or rebuttals if they occurred. Additionally, I assigned each comment a number (1-66) and then highlighted the comments that seemed to reflect interactions where employees made decisions based on structure i.e. rules, procedures or policies. By doing this, I was able to easily identify the comments in relation to the respective research questions.

Of the reports collected, the mathematical word average was 235 with the least being 26 and the most being 1,339. Twelve reports included comments and of those with comments two included rebuttals and four reports included at least one attachment. The comments averaged 100 words with the least being 19 and the most being 542. Interestingly, 28 reports, which is 42 percent of the reports analyzed, were in reference to companies or individuals with no stated or logical connection to a state’s DMV.

**Data Analysis**
In examining the comments, I looked for themes in words, phrases and meanings conveyed in order to discover relationships between structure and perception and answer my research questions. To define the thematic relationships, I used Owen’s research on thematic interpretation (1984, pp. 274-287). According to Owen (1984), a theme is present when there are three criterion present: 1) recurrence, 2) repetition, and 3) forcefulness (p. 275). Recurrence is when at least two parts of communication have “the same meaning” even if different words are used (Owen, 1984, p. 275). For example, reports included such phrases and words as “information is not clear”, or expressed confusion or the “seemingly endless hoops to jump through”, which all convey a similar underlying meaning even though different words are used. The underlying meaning seems to indicate confusion and lack of understanding how the DMV, and in effect government, works. Repetition is just what it sounds like, the repeating of “certain words, phrases and sentences”, which can be thought of as explicit language regardless of meaning (Owen, 1984, p. 275). For example, the word “scam” is repeated 48 times, “shock” five times, “confused” three times and “misleading” six times. Forcefulness refers to the tone of voice, volume or dramatic pauses including enlarged text, highlighted words or other markings indicating a wish to emphasize the communication (Owen, 1984). For example, the most commonly used markings in this data set were all capitalized letters and exclamation points. Basically, Owen (1984) posits that themes help us make sense of relationships and help illuminate implications for elusive underlying themes that might be present during interactions.

In order to determine the themes in the data set, I first read each report along with the comments, rebuttals and attachments to understand the context of each report. Then, I highlighted comments related to structure such as references to policies or doing things a certain way and crossed out comments that did not apply to a DMV. Lastly, I documented recurrence,
repetition and forcefulness. When I reviewed the findings, I determined there are three distinct themes: feelings of frustration, feelings that the DMV was enacting a scam and a lack of understanding the situations or actions that fall under the DMV’s purview. In the next section, I discuss my findings in more detail.

Findings and Interpretation

This study consisted of a textual analysis using Owen’s (1984) thematic interpretation techniques. I collected 66 comments from a public website called Ripoff Report (www.ripoffreport.com). The analysis used the sample and methodology previously described. The themes that occurred the most, in order of most recurring, were frustration, a perception that the DMV is running a scam or out to make money off of people and a lack of understanding what the DMV controls in order to resolve issues.

Theme #1: Frustration

First, the most common theme was frustration. I believe it will be easier to understand the connection between frustration and structure by further categorizing frustration into the following subcategories: frustration with communication, frustration with people being constrained by structure and frustration with people being enabled by structure.

Frustration with communication.

When I analyzed the data, this theme quickly presented itself. I identified it as times when customers of the DMV were frustrated by lack of communication, felt they were misled by information about their issue or the issue was not resolved to their satisfaction due to the rules, policies and procedures, or structure of government. For example, the author of report #1 uses 1,339 words, all capitalization five times and exclamation points four times in order to add forcefulness to express her frustration. The author of this report went so far as to perform her
own research to understand the state’s process to rectify a driving under the influence citation. She expressed frustration that there was no one person to explain the process and when she followed the rules, as she understood them, she experienced two driver license suspensions for failing to meet certain requirements. But, she says she was not made aware of those requirements. If she had been aware of those expectations, she says she would have met them.

She also expressed frustration in describing the removal of the interlock device, which was required in order to verify that she was not driving under the influence whenever the vehicle was in use. She says she called to verify that her device could be removed and to understand the steps involved because she was going out of town during the time that documentation was due. She was assured that everything was in order and she could have the device removed before she left on her trip. During the trip, a relative died, which extended her stay, and when she finally returned home, there was a corrective action letter from the DMV stating the removal of the interlock device was a violation of her court order. Here is an example of some of her statements indicating a frustrating interaction with communication:

[The information] is vague, misleading, and very easy to misstep, as no-one tells you what is coming next or who to call when something isn’t quite clear … I explained to her I was only doing what I was told by the other employee of the MVD…. [she] agreed that her coworker [said] that I needed to just FAX it…she apologized but stated that [I] should have come into the Motor Vehicle offices to make sure all requirements were met.

After explaining everything that she had done to prevent any issues with removing her interlock device, she was required to reinstall it and her license was suspended for the second time, which impacted her ability to work because she needed to drive to get to her place of
employment. It is also important to note that the interlock device installation, removal and appointments were overseen by a third party.

Another example of frustration with communication is seen in report #3, which I also identified as an example of frustration with constraints by structure. The constraints impacted the resolution of the issue to the customer’s satisfaction, usually negatively. In this report, the author renewed their driver license online, but failed to deposit the correct amount for the fees and the transaction failed. After rectifying their account issue, the author of the report re-ran the transaction and when he or she checked their bank account, found duplicate charges. Upon calling the DMV, the author was told there was nothing the DMV could do because the renewal transactions were handled by a third party vendor. When the customer asked for the vendor’s number, they were denied their request. The author said:

If the DMV has their system set to automatically try to withdraw the money again after it has been declined, this needs to be clearly communicated to me. I did not receive anything from the DMV about the failed charge and the customer service representative did absolutely nothing to try and help my situation. She just dismissed me outright…

As a customer, this interaction would anger me and, to me, the author’s feelings are understandable. This unsatisfactory interaction is a result of unclear communication and the author is frustrated with the communication, or lack of it.

In one more example, report #50, the author describes receiving a letter regarding delinquent parking citations. However, the citations did not indicate a location. After calling the California DMV, the employee was unable to provide a street location for the citation, just the county. The employee said a new notice would be sent and when it was received by the
customer, it said that the location was unknown. After the customer followed up again, to find the location, he was told that he had two red light violations and when he asked for the locations, he was again told they were unknown. The author is quite upset as can be seen by his statement in all capitalized letters, “SKREW THESE ********!! I NEVER RECEIVED ANYTHING IN THE MAIL SAYING I HAD A RED LIGHT TICKET… FURTHER, DMV refuses to issue my CDL, which means I cannot drive.” In instances like this, the customer is confused because the DMV should be able to provide the locations of violations. The locations should be documented on the ticket or citation issued when the violation occurred, according to my knowledge working for a state DMV. Since the DMV is unable to provide the locations, this particular author is frustrated with the communication because it lacks crucial data that should be able to be produced by the DMV.

The result of all of these interactions were negative for the consumers and could be a result of the many constraints on communication as a result of the machine bureaucracy (Mintzberg, 1981; Byrne, 1993). One consequence can be that the needs of the customers are not adequately addressed because of the difficulties getting approvals for what exactly can be communicated to customers. Also, the accepted policy of hiring vendors, or third parties, to conduct government business might be causing communication lapses as those vendors may not always be trained on government policies or given updates in a timely fashion. This is something I have experienced working in state government. Overall, it seems clear the public who used the Ripoff Report website were frustrated with the DMV, which could be a result of the communication strains a horizontal hierarchy has on clear communication to consumers, as stated above. Next, I will analyze frustration from constraints of structure.

Frustration with people being constrained by structure.
In defining this theme, I found people frustrated with their interactions with DMV employees. Their frustration seemed to be related to constraints on those employee's abilities to make decisions based on doing what is right, but rather what was dictated per structure – the rules, policies and procedures laid out by law. For example, report #3, described in more detail above, was dissatisfied with the refund of a duplicate transaction. The author of this report says he or she did not transfer enough money into the account used to charge the transaction and it was subsequently denied. After they rectified their mistake, they processed the transaction again and found the fees were duplicated. He or she called the DMV for a refund and reports the DMV employee stated that because it was two separate transactions, there was nothing the employee could do about it. Furthermore, when the author asked for the third party’s customer service contact information, the vendor who processed the transactions, the DMV employee denied the request. The author stated that this response was "unacceptable."

In yet another report, #6, the author describes having their license suspended due to a charge of driving while under the influence (DWI), which was dismissed, and they were still required to install an interlock device in their car. This device requires you to blow a breath into it before allowing the vehicle to start and at other times while using the vehicle. The decisions made by the government employees, in these cases, were a direct result of the constraints placed upon them by rules and policies or procedures. Not being able to refund a transaction because of the involvement of a third party and the requirement of the interlock device being triggered due to the DWI charge, even though the charges were dismissed, are a direct result of the flaw in the organization’s structure. A structure by which the employees have no choice but to abide.

Another person, report #25, complained about an issue with their car insurance. In their situation, the insurance lapsed and the Maryland DMV required them to show proof of insurance
or pay a $2,000 fee. The car being referenced in the letter was owned by the author 14 years previously and the DMV said one month of car insurance lapsed. The author asked for proof to the lapse in insurance to which the DMV provided a screen shot and asked again for verification of insurance. The author reports:

This has to be a d**n scam to generate revenue. Because seriously who is going to have records from 12-20 years ago to prove anything. This is insane that there is no statute of limitation when it comes to the MVA.

These reports described above demonstrate the frustration that can result when employees who are constrained by structure are going about their jobs as instructed and following rules and policies put in place by a hierarchical organizational structure (Mintzberg, 1981). Here we see examples of DMV employees not able, because of the structural issues such as policy or rules, to help consumers with their complaints leaving them with little recourse. These examples demonstrate these DMV employees are constrained by the structure of a hierarchical system that does not allow them to satisfy the public’s concerns because they are allowed no flexibility with the rules, polices and/or procedures (Mintzberg, 1981). I want to note that report #25 is also referenced under the scam category. Many reports in the data sample can cross into other theme categories as almost all of them are interrelated.

**Frustration with people being enabled by structure.**

As the name of this sub-theme suggests, some DMV employees seem to be enabled to make decisions because of the hierarchical and rigid organizational structure. This means the rules, policies and/or procedures seemed to give power or authority to the employee to make a decision that was often frustrating to the customer. For example, the author of report #2 is clearly frustrated with the DMV for not allowing him to obtain a title for collector’s vehicles without
paying a registration fee. This author believes that the registration fee must be paid because a vehicle is driven on the road. Even though, he says his vehicles will not be driven on the road and he feels he should not have to pay the registration fees. However, the DMV has no way to guarantee he will not drive those vehicles on the road. The laws of each state DMV dictate the situations where registration fees must be paid, thereby enabling the DMV employees to enact structure. But, this is very frustrating to this individual and he says he believes he has:

[the] constitutional right to document that these vehicles belong to me, but

ADOT/MVD would not transfer the titles into my name without paying for a one-year registration. Obviously, they feel that nobody is entitled to own a vehicle kept in a garage without registering it for use on public roads.

The frustration here is from the structure, meaning the rules for titling and registration, are dictated by law, enabled the employee to respond in this manner (effectively not helping the customer) resulting in the customer being frustrated with the outcome. When these structures are drawn on by employees, as in this case, they enable employees to do the minimal possible and the system can be blamed, effectively shifting the blame from the individual employee to the “rules” and “laws” (i.e. structures).

In another example, report #4, the author is a member of the military and experienced a serious issue when he tried to renew his Georgia driver license. When he tried to renew, he was informed that it was cancelled by the North Carolina DMV. However, he never lived in North Carolina. He called the North Carolina DMV to rectify the situation and was told he applied and was issued a license on a specific date and at a specific address. This is what he says about this interaction, “Since mindless robot computers and mindless computer programmers appear to have taken over the world it seems that logic and proof have become secondary to this new
world.” He feels like this because he was able to provide proof, his military orders, documenting that he was at Aviation Officers Candidate School in Pensacola, Fla., at the time the N.C. DMV claims he was living in Charlotte. After providing the documentation, the DMV responded:

The Division has thoroughly reviewed the documentation you recently provided concerning a possible match for you in our driver history file...the Division is unable to determine with any certainty that you are not one and the same as the customer listed above… no previous history of a North Carolina driver’s license or identification card being issued, no image has been captured and the record does not reflect a Social Security number, the Division is unable to make further comparisons.

The response by the DMV seems to be a clear reflection of imperfections in their structure. Their inability to accept a possible identity theft issue and take action to investigate is a clear indication that the employees were enabled by structure, which lead to an unpleasant interaction with a customer who reported that the DMV employees are “mindless robots.”

Finally, in report #44, which also reflects feelings of a scam, the author describes an experience with a pending suspension in one state and receiving a ticket for no insurance in another state. In the process of clearing the ticket for no insurance, he or she is told that the documentation requested is only applicable when the person who received the ticket owns the vehicle. The author of the report does not own the vehicle and called to tell this to the DMV to which he or she was told, “I am just telling you our [NY DMV] rules.”

This mentality of “this is the way we’ve always done it” is indicative of a hierarchical bureaucratic structure that relies heavily on what has worked well in the past to form rules and policies and structures when drawn on in this way by employees may only serve to reinforce a structure that does not seem to be working for the customer (Poole & McPhee, 2005). When
employees are constrained in this manner, it enables them the ultimate authority in denying or approving transactions such as the one stated in report #44. It could be that these frustrations add to a misunderstanding that the DMV is running a scam, which I found to be the second-most common theme and is described next.

**Theme #2: Scam**

The second most common theme was the perception that the DMV was running a scam or out to make money off of people. Within the reports above are indications that the consumers believed a scam was in place. It could be that the structural issues stated above add to feelings of dishonesty, which the consumer might interpret as a scam. For example, the author of report #4 also wrote, “Time to get the Attorney General of the State of Georgia involved…The "Division" needs to be exposed for what it is - a legalized shake-down scam. It seems that I am not the only one.” In another report, the author expresses that the DMV is a “money pit” because they had been “trying for one year to get [their] CDL test”. He or she says it is “nonsense.” Moreover, in report #10, the author discusses paying online for their license plate and complains about all of the fees. He or she says, “[the] convenience fee, service, fee, agency fee [it is a] scam.” It seems clear that these authors believe the government is running scams or dishonest schemes in order to further generate revenue.

In report #44, the author describes an experience with a pending suspension in one state and receiving a ticket for no insurance in another state. The author paid the ticket for no insurance, yet the state with the pending suspension, N.Y., wants original documents from the other state showing the ticket was paid. That state, V.A., refused to provide the documentation. The author describes the fees as an “extortion fee of $600.” Also, the author was told to provide a form that shows future financial responsibility, but when he or she contacted their insurance
company for the documentation, they were informed that the requested form only applies when a
person owns a vehicle. The author of this report does not own the vehicle and reports that the
form (an SR 22) is a scam.

In these instances, it could be that communication and structure led to employees’
inability to accurately convey their intentions to the customer. When communication is not clear,
or organizations do not want to admit an inefficiency, but offer assistance, the customer often
feels the intent is not honest. As such, it feels like a scam to the customer. Another factor is
misunderstanding what the DMV oversees, therefore, what the DMV can resolve. Actually, 42%
of the comments were not related to DMV or were issues that the DMV could not resolve
because they are not the correct agency for the issue at-hand. This misunderstanding is explored
in following theme uncovered in this analysis.

**Theme #3: Understanding the DMV**

As I analyzed the data, I found people complaining about issues for which the DMV does
not provide oversight. As a DMV employee myself, I can attest that these issues do not fall under
the purview of most DMV’s. For example, authors report misrepresentation of vehicles sold
(reports #14, #15, #26, #28, #33, and #43) or dissatisfaction with mechanics (reports #30, #51,
and #60) and one was upset with the driving of a semi-truck driver (report #31). There may be
some action the DMV can take as far as with the dealer’s license where the vehicles were
misrepresented, but to receive monetary damages, local law enforcement needs to be involved. It
is clear these citizens did not know these issues were not something the DMV could adequately
address or resolve. This indicates there might be misunderstanding of what this government body
does and what they can and cannot do related to motor vehicles.
The data also illuminated a possible issue with contracting services through a third party. By having third party involvement, the doors are opened for illegitimate businesses to fool the public into thinking they can assist with DMV services. For example, five reports discuss making payments to a third party for license plates, registrations or titles; however, they did not receive the items. In one instance, the customer received the forms for the items they thought they were ordering. Those forms were available as a free download on the DMV website. Third party vendors also limit the DMV’s ability to satisfy customers, i.e. refunding transactions. I know at the DMV in the state in which I currently work and at the Department of Transportation in the same state, where I also worked, use third party vendors to provide some services in order to cut costs. I have experienced the issues this kind of practice brings about, not only to the customer, but to the employees as well.

It could be vendors are hired without fully understanding how their system works and the DMV did not know about issues with their systems. It could also be that miscommunication occurred between the DMV employees who found and approved the vendor and the employees dealing with the customers directly. Communication in a hierarchy is top-down and only chosen information is communicated (Mintzberg, 1981). Sometimes, the person or people making those decisions have not worked in the jobs of the other people and make incorrect assumptions about what those people need to know. All of these factors could be complicating the communication between the customer and the employee, leaving the customer with feelings of frustration and/or dishonesty because the employee may not be allowed to say certain things to the customer due to the rules, polices and/or procedures. Now, I will explain the connection between the findings and interpretations and my research questions.

Discussion and Implications
The goal of this study was to illuminate public perception of the government and determine if this perception was influenced by structure issues (Owen, 1984; Giddens, 1984; Poole & McPhee, 2005). In an effort to answer RQ1 (how does the public perceive government organizations) and RQ2 (Are these perceptions related to the current structure of government? If so, how?), I found generally the public is angry, frustrated and confused with the DMV and this can be attributed to structural issues associated with a vertical hierarchy or the machine bureaucracy (Mintzberg, 1981; Byrne, 1993).

Thematic analysis revealed three main themes: frustration, which was further defined in reference to communication, constraints of structure and enablement by structure; perception that government is running a scam; and, misunderstanding the purview of each government agency. These themes demonstrate a frustration with the working of the DMV that can be attributed to structural issues such as rigid rules, lack of information sharing and confusion as to what change the agency can actually affect.

These findings could also be true for other government agencies. In the examples referenced above, we can see members of the public angry, confused and jaded about their experiences with structural elements that could be adjusted or changed to enhance public perception. The research also showed employees of a government agency drawing on rules and policies that served to strengthen these same structures that consumers find so frustrating. Giddens (1984) would suggest every time these unproductive structures are used they get stronger and stronger. The conclusions obtained could have implications for government to adapt its structure to one that better fits the needs of the organization and its customer, the public.

Next, I will discuss both theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

**Theoretical Implications**
Since the data shows an overall overtone of frustration from the public, it can be affecting the perception of the organization in a negative way. While there are many factors that influence interactions since as nonverbal cues and the environment, one factor that plays a crucial and immediate role in the interaction is the employees' ability to satisfy the customer and clearly structure (rules and resources) affects this element.

Most of the employee’s inability to satisfy customers are the constraints placed on them by a bureaucratic structure (Mintzberg, 1981). The main challenge for bureaucracy is the lack of a supportive collaborative environment and how changing to a structure such as a horizontal one, would shift the focus from specialized employees to a more organic structure that allows rules to be bent and broken in order to satisfy the customer (Mintzberg, 1981; Byrne, 1993). According to Byrne (1993), collaboration tends to invite flexibility and a feeling of comradery, which may have an unintended effect of changing engagement in a more positive direction. When a workforce is fully engaged, it seems like production, satisfaction and the company’s image would be positively affected. Furthermore, the bureaucracy involved in the current government structure can prohibit productive information sharing and communication from taking place (Mintzberg, 1981).

**Practical Implications**

The themes reveal a perception that the DMV workers are “morons”, “horrible”, do not know what they are doing, have too many rules and policies and the fees and lack of information lead people to feel frustrated and scammed. While the exact context of the interactions tends to be one-sided, that of the complainant, the outcome of each interaction is obvious, as explained in the above findings. One theme that is most concerning to me as a government employee, and might be the easiest to address through messaging to the public, is that some of the complainants
think the fees are a scam. This indicates that the government is not clear to the public about how it operates and what services the individual agencies can provide. For example, as a government agency, it cannot make money, or a profit (Tax Policy Center). However, it cannot offer services for free because there are staff that have to be paid and supplies that have to be bought. Therefore, there are fees associated with certain processes such as producing a driver license, identification card, vehicle title, etc.

Additionally, some reports reflect comments from the DMV employees that indicate an unwillingness to recognize the issue at hand and that the accepted convention of basing current decisions on the way it has been handled in the past may not be relevant now; i.e. a statement that says “this is the way we do it here.” This is clearly a response based on current rules and policies and is an opportunity for the DMV employee to impact the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984) by changing the rules and policies that impede their ability to satisfy the customer. However, the DMV employee is unable to do so in the current bureaucratic structure of government, which does not support breaking the rules (Mintzberg, 1981).

Moving to a more organic or horizontal structure could have positive implications for the public’s perception of government agencies such as the DMV (Byrne, 1993). Managing across may allow free-flow communication and the flexibility for employees to do what is right when helping customers (Byrne, 1993) because duality of structure (Giddens, 1984) would potentially produce favorable interactions and would be embraced in a horizontal organizational design. This is because duality of structure is the ability to change rules, policies and procedures and by doing so, they are reproduced (Giddens, 1984). Assuming the changes produce positive interactions with the customers, then the potential for positive public perception is increased.

Conclusion
This textual analysis of public comments related to government and their perceptions of it added to academic literature that explores the role of duality of structure and organizational design and the impact on interactions and public perception. A review of organizational design and structuration academic literature reveals that this has been a topic of interest for researchers for at least a century. As society continues to change, so will the need for continued research around organizational design and public perception. The research findings and discussion open the doors for more research into the relationship between interaction and public perception.

Project Benefits

The research illuminates a connection between public perception of the government and the influence by structure issues (Owen, 1984; Giddens, 1984; Poole & McPhee, 2005). Additionally, research findings garnered contribute to scholarly academia by demonstrating the duality of structure in relation to organizational design and the role it plays on interactions and public perception. It may also point to other areas of study for scholars interested in employee engagement and resistance to change, which might be affected by organizational design. Another area of study that might intrigue scholars is the element of public perception and how it could shape structure, as defined by Giddens (1984). The data also illuminated the need for further research into the duality of structure and impact in interactions and public perception of organizations.

Limitations

This study is purposefully limited in scope, as the goal is to thoroughly analyze multiple comments that provided a glimpse into a larger trend. However, the scope of the study may also prove to be a limitation, because the data was very specific and the website used to collect the data is potentially biased. In addition, this study is subject to researcher bias. Being involved in
the inner workings of multiple state agencies predisposes this researcher to focus on
organizational design and negative thematic interpretations of the data. Some interpretations and
language can also be interpreted subjectively at times. This study potentially assumes that
organizational design could be a resolution to a negative image problem that government has
based on the researcher’s involvement (employment) with multiple government organizations.
Other limitations include a lack of demographic data for the authors of each comment analyzed
and a lack of knowledge about the editorial process for the website; even though staff wrote on
the website that the comments are preserved as submitted by the author of the report/comment.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

I recommend further research into the duality of structure, interactions and the impact on
public perception for government. This study illuminated that the public perceives government
organizations in a negative way and that these perceptions could be related to the current
structure of government. The current machine bureaucracy seems to create frustration and
confusion by constraining communication and interactions with customers via strict rules,
policies and procedures (Mintzberg, 1981). Government should want to take action to increase
its public perception and relationship with its publics since the government works for the citizens
of the state and/or country. When people come to the government organization seeking services
with a positive attitude, it seems that the interaction would be positive for the both the customer
and the employee. When employees like their jobs, it seems they will most likely stay longer
(retention) and accept change easier and with full cooperation.

Since this study was based purely on comments submitted in a public forum with little
demographic data or varied opinions, scholars may be interested in an ethnographical study as
well as interviews with front line employees, middle and upper management, executive directors
and communication directors. Research into the aforementioned relationships also have implications for employee engagement and approaching change within an organization. Both are challenges for organizations to successfully maneuver. Further research could illuminate the theoretical and practical applications for duality of structure and, if applied to organizational design, could add to that field of research with the goal of vilifying government organizational structure to change to one that is horizontal.

References


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