

28 Collegiality in Public Management

The concept of collegiality

Public administration has long been associated with the bureaucratic form of organization and its rational-legal legitimacy (Weber, 1920). Weberian bureaucracy, rooted in his anti-patrimonialism, emphasizes among its main characteristics routine tasks for mass production, impersonality of work relationships, and rational-legal draft, i.e., social order based on a “constitution of labor”. The contemporary theory of organization revisits this framework by contrasting the dominant bureaucratic form with another ideal-type of organization: collegiality characterized by innovative/creative collective tasks carried out among peers, deliberation for collective agreements reached in specific power relationships surrounding committee systems, and personalization of work relationships to accelerate and end such deliberations (Lazega, 2020). Collegial bodies such as councils, where peers share authority and exercise joint leadership, are found in all societies, and characterize both public and private organizations, because they are an effective way to deal with a range of complex policy issues requiring imagination and creativity for solving new problems (Duran and Lazega, 2015), even in an already bureaucratized society.

Building on Weber, Waters’ (1989) approach to collegial organizations argues that to understand cooperation among peers or formally equal members as an issue of interest to organizations in general, one needs to define the characteristics of an ideal-typical collegial organization, as distinguished from bureaucracy. Waters (1989: 956) defines collegial organizations as usually bringing together professional peers whose careers are differentiated in at least two stages (apprentice and practitioner), who value formal equality because it helps them avoid open evaluations and comparisons of performance. For non-routine and innovative tasks, quality of work is a matter of peer evaluation. Among peers, with shifting patterns of leadership, power has a “now you see it, now you don’t” character. Peers make

or ratify decisions in collective forums in which deliberation attempts to reach agreements. The committee is the prototypical collegial decision-making body (generalist, or specialist, or ad hoc committee) and committee systems are usually dominated by the committee of the whole.

Waters’ synthesis remains formal but it succeeds in shaking off the idea of a single and exclusively bureaucratic model for the State and for businesses, for public and private authorities. But how does such a collegial system actually work? Lazega (2001) argues that this neo-Weberian description of a collegial form is useful but not sufficient in itself to explain collective action among peers, because it is based almost exclusively on the idea of voluntary contracts, formal structure, and formal consensus. Such an approach is limited because there are many social tensions and obvious conflicts between the individual and the collective interest in the collegium. What is missing in this approach is a deeper understanding of the social and relational processes that help collegial organizations manage their cooperation dilemmas. In particular, in collegial settings peers use personal relationships with selected others to build and maintain relational infrastructures, i.e. stable patterns of relationships that help them create local forms of social discipline and collective responsibility. These relationships are used to negotiate agreements, in particular end deliberation and reach decisions – even temporarily. Decisions in committees are prepared by members ahead of time (the meeting before the meeting), in informal and crucial coordination efforts that are not only substantive discussions but situations in which they show each other whether or not they value their personalized relationships, and that these relationships might be jeopardized if decisions do not go in the “right” direction. Only relational infrastructures can help often rival peers reach agreements (with or without real adhesion).

The nature of the tasks (routine vs. innovative) is therefore a key criterion, and the theory of collegiality (not to be confused with congeniality) is not a theory of idealized and virtuous informality, quite the opposite. Weber saw collegiality as a limit put on the risk of wrong or unethical individual decisions and actions. The collegial form, based on non-standardized, creative and innovative work, as well as on the coordination of collective action through the use of personalized and flexible peer relationships,

relies on a set of formal characteristics, but also on the creation of these in particular relational infrastructure, collective responsibility and social discipline. In particular, it is based on the management of these personalized relationships, which is the only way to adapt collegiality to both bureaucracy and the intensive race to innovate in a turbulent environment. The relatively stable relational infrastructures that peers construct (for example, heterogeneous and often inconsistent forms of social status, a system of social niches that shapes a concrete division of work) and mobilize help them navigate the generic processes that, in turn, enable them to manage the dilemmas specific to their collective actions: solidarity and exclusion, learning and socialization, social control and conflict resolution, regulation and institutionalization (Lazega, 2001). The empirical fields that initially allowed sociologists to develop this theory of collegiality as an ideal type of organizational form orthogonal to bureaucracy were the fields of sociology of professions and expertise (e.g., lawyers, judges, scientists) that protect them from extreme routinization or seek to innovate. But once the model was understood, its influence in all organizations, public or private, became clearer.

In collegial settings, personal relationships give members access to production-related resources such as goodwill, advice, or even to resources that are not directly related to production but rather to the process of its regulation, such as role distance, emotional support, and the ability to privately prepare for meetings “before the meetings”. Indeed, bureaucratic meetings are different from collegial meetings among peers. In bureaucratic meetings, participants report to a common superior when required, respond to his/her questions, leave without wasting time with their instructions, even if the *rappports de force* between workers and management take place in other venues (Crozier, 1963). In collegial meetings, turn taking is managed in theory so that everyone among peers is entitled and expected to express their opinions, positions, and conclusions before a possible vote; but where they also express their (dis)approval and emotions such as anger, admiration or contempt, and make personal comments, joke, praise allies, criticize, undermine and make fun of rivals.

Social network analyses of collegial settings show that peers use personal relationships that

are partly private to ensure bounded solidarity in social niches; in turn, personal relationships are used to balance the powers of different social niches coexisting in the organization. Peers participate in social control using lateral pressures to bring back their other peers to “good order”, thus reducing costs of control for the collective. They create forms of epistemic status and authority by identifying peers who are more central (and become increasingly so) in advice networks, thus trying to shape collective learning to help adapt to changing contingencies. They combine different, often inconsistent forms of status and a specific rhetoric to regulate by promoting new norms with internal legitimacy (Lazega, 2001).

These personalized relationships can be used to manage tensions and favor either short term efficiency or long term effectiveness, to allow more or less inclusiveness in decision making, to rely on the internal legitimacy of members or on external legitimacy and expectations when selecting which efforts to mobilize and decisions to make (Provan and Kenis, 2008). Managing collegial organizations or pockets involves organizing workflow by balancing powers and preventing some social niches from growing too influential (or even leaving); cultivating and mitigating status competition, but also using, neutralizing or phasing out high status peers; favoring personalization but preventing open ad hominem criticism; spreading or sharing of credit more or less generously; trying to euphemize peer review and quality control procedures; managing a lateral control regime monitoring and sanctioning deviance; and many other decisions (see Lazega, 2001, for a case in point). It is an exercise in herding cats.

Thus, the relational infrastructures show how the relational cultures of collegiality entangle different types of relationships (“multiplexity”) in ways socially and culturally acceptable among peers. These relational infrastructures are used to help peers manage bounded solidarity and exclusion, cultivation and mitigation of status competition, regimes of lateral control and conflict resolution, collective learning and socialization, and, most importantly, regulatory and institutionalization processes. For example, the institutionalization of new rules often mobilizes members with heterogeneous and inconsistent dimensions of status, using conflicts of interest and rhetorics of sacrifice to manage the losers of the process. Relational

and cultural skills thus become crucial to acting among peers and participating in this specific form of coordination.

Collegiality in public administration

Concrete organizations are both bureaucratic and collegial. After summarizing the concept and reality of collegiality, a second step looks at how, in already bureaucratized societies, collegiality and bureaucracy coexist and combine in concrete organizations, and in public administration in particular (for example in institutions of justice, education, research, healthcare, etc.). All organizations and institutions actually mix routine and non-routine tasks carried out collectively, with the uncertainties that come attached. Indeed, public administration has always performed (but rarely been credited for) innovative activities that cannot be routinized but that are part of design, implementation and evaluation of public policy. As an example, we can follow Maclean's (2011) striking observations of the role of civil servants and "interpersonal network of relationships" in the British legislative process of making law, an inextricably administrative and political, collegial and bureaucratic process emblematic of collectively creative work.

The civil service can be regarded as innovative and relying on social networks of its civil servants as sets of actors who exchange resources and manage their interdependencies partly privately. In particular, the literature emphasizes the importance of resources such as information and advice. The collegial work carried out by civil servants relies on exchange of both codified and tacit knowledge in personalized advice seeking among themselves and others. Social processes such as collective learning, whether or not in educational settings (e.g. brainstorming activities), depend on such exposure to a wide range of ideas and opinions offered by peer networks. Such exchanges are important for broadening individual learning experiences, exposing them to facts, ideas, approaches and opinions different from their own (Siciliano, 2017). Knowledge sharing among peers promotes organizational learning that is of vital importance, for example, in contexts of decentralization programs.

The issue here is not to mix routine and creative work at the level of individuals (since everyone does both) but to recognize that they do not easily mix collectively. This is why a

stratigraphic approach revisits the verticality of organizations by looking at how they superpose levels of collective agency that are predominantly either bureaucratic or collegial. Different kinds of "collegial pockets" at different strata of largely bureaucratic organizations struggle and coexist today: the executive suite and the boardroom, the professional departments, and the unionized workgroups of more or less (de)skilled workers who try to defend their regulatory interests by participating in internal politics and management. In such multilevel contexts of "managerialized" collegialities, actors simultaneously present and active at different levels of the organization, so-called "vertical linchpins", are emblematic of this complex verticality and punch above their weight in terms of capacity of coordination and institutional entrepreneurship (Lazega, 2020).

A stratigraphic and multilevel approach to organizations is thus needed to understand how collegiality survives in heavily bureaucratized contexts. Multilevel organizational dynamics (Lazega, 2020) can promote more or less innovative forces. "Bottom-up collegiality" arises as "collegial pockets", with oppositional solidarity within wider bureaucracies, challenge a status quo as a result of a shared new common projects and dense personalized relationships used for collective agency. "Top-down collegiality" helps the monocrat with the creation of an incumbent "collegial oligarchy" and allows management to co-opt lower level coalitions via vertical linchpins. "Inside-out collegiality" helps management and collegial oligarchies to exercise surveillance, monitor – and often neutralize – lower level bottom up collegial pockets using digitalized control technologies provided by Big Relational Tech giant platforms (currently known, in the Western world, as the GAFAM). Identifying and differentiating these dynamics encapsulates the new approach to the verticality of organizations, whether public or private, when collegial pockets and their relational infrastructures become transparent to management that controls these digital technologies, and is able to track, stabilize innovative forces, or defeat any oppositional solidarity in (and innovation coming from) these bottom up collegial pockets. Universities, for example, are organizational settings where such dynamics increasingly take place (Musselin, 1990; Benamouzig and Besançon, 2005; Burnes et al., 2014; Marini and Reale, 2016; Spillane et al., 2016; Dill, 2020). Deployment of these various

forms of collegiality in bureaucracies is always problematic for all actors, including managers of public service organizations.

This attention to collegial networks in public administration leads to the rich literature on the “network organization” in public administration. However, “network organization” as a concept covers many realities. One of them, for example, refers to bureaucratic silos that seek to create inter-organizational links for limited coordination purposes for temporary projects based on contractualization. Such silos usually do not decentralize to the point of allowing their members to create new collegial organizational forms. In such a framework, civil servants’ dual membership (in their parent organization and of the networked operations) creates an inter-organizational network reflecting an “entrepreneurial” movement of public action that has been witnessed over decades. This is why a neo-structural approach is useful, starting with the tasks performed by members of these inter-organizational projects and the interdependencies between them. Much remains to be observed and theorized by bringing together the so-called “network organization” (Provan and Kennis, 2008) and knowledge of the dynamics of collegial innovation in bureaucratized organizations. This means finding new ways of assessing the relational infrastructures that network analyses identify to manage tensions between the need for administrative efficiency and inclusive decision making, for internal and external legitimacy, for flexibility and stability (Provan and Kennis, 2008).

Conclusion

This requires from managers the increased ability to identify the relational dimension of roles and social niches, as well as of various forms of endogenous status and centrality, i.e. to become network analysts themselves so as to evaluate how to nurture or modify the forms of collegiality that are already at work, and to give innovation a chance when balanced against bureaucratic routines (that may be valuable as well). Deploying joint collective action between different categories of actors, with variable interactional and relational infrastructures, with different interests and projects, also takes place in different temporalities. Collegiality presupposes personalized relationships, and the development and preservation of such relationships and relational infrastructures, which are

necessary for oppositional solidarity and social change, requires more time to develop than the bureaucratic levels of collective action that rely on impersonal (increasingly online) interactions. Rebalancing the long-term temporality of personalized relationships of incumbents with the short-term temporality of more impersonal interactions with challengers is a highly social and political skill.

This new reading of organizations raises questions associated with ethics, in particular the strengthening of safeguards of impartiality, transparency and accountability when personal relationships matter so much in public administration without necessarily being acknowledged; but also with the valorization of impersonality that relies on invisibilization of relational infrastructures within collegial pockets and across strata. Acknowledging collegiality in public administration stresses changes that need to be brought into bureaucratic settings when members develop the relational culture and skills (in terms of perception and manipulation of relations) that help them hold their own in the company of peers. Public managers know about collegiality individually when they assess innovations. Making it a collective issue to promote and deploy change will lead to increasing network literacy and rethinking public service modernization. This remains a deep political challenge, especially under time pressure in our transitional era.

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See also

Interagency Collaboration, Professionalism in Public Management, Public Management – Education and Training

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