

The Undesirability of Programmatic Desensitization on Frontline Correctional Thinking

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Abstract

A correctional officer's performance may be impaired by the programmatic desensitization of their workplace. Inappropriately, public institutions systematically incapacitate the humanistic qualities of their frontline workers by removing emotive stimuli and promoting conformism to bureaucratically rational dogma. Programmatic desensitization may have a serious undesirable outcome on frontline workers' discretionary decision making within the face of work dilemmas. The frontline worker's discretion requires a full contextual and decisional recognition that goes beyond the bureaucratic expectations. The recognition of a decision model with this level of detail offers an inclusion of individualized logic. Contrary to the narrowing view of bureaucratic professionalism, the individualized logic of street-level bureaucrats should contain a vocational metacognition that provides a more human recognition of the socio-cultural totality to ecological evidence. Using a concern for the desensitization of frontline discretion as a point of departure, this paper presents a preliminary decisional framing of intellect that is based upon notions of institutional individualism (form), individual identity (perspective), along with the habituated and contextualized dispositional knowledge (awareness).

Keywords: desensitization, discretion, decision, intellect, institutional individualism, and individual identity.

1. Introduction

The programmatic desensitization of performance is an institutional dilemma facing frontline correctional workers, particularly correctional officers. Programmatic desensitization is an attempt at neutralizing, removing and preventing practitioner's emotive predilections to hazardous proclivities. This 'emotive sterilization' is a measure to ensure appropriate responses. Programmatic desensitization utilizes excessive rules and rigidities of performance to diminish capacities of bureaucratically "irrational" behavior. However, programmatic desensitization also presents a challenge for the everyday correctional frontline workers' individualized logic. Thus, this paper attempts to provide footing for a better "actuality" or practicality in frontline discretionary decision for correctional frontline workers. The proposed decisional archetype in this work allows for a substantive plasticity to public choice and a full integration of intellectual institutional individualism. Intellectual institutional individualism puts together the importance actual practitioner's thinking with organizational practices. It constitutes a cognitive hybridization of institutional mandates, the individualization of professionalism and the usage of context found within the work occurrences. Aptly, this work provides a brief scenario centering on *institutional desensitization and the correctional officer's frontline discretion* as the beginning to this phenomenological exploration. The ensuing discourse also covers other subtopics on *valuing individualized intellectuality over bureaucratic logic, realizing the situated context of individual identity, the gauging the institutional individuality of discretion*. Finally, closing remarks are tendered on the need for an actualized thinking frontline correctional professional.

2. Institutional Desensitization and Correctional Officer's Frontline Discretion

As part of the standards of conduct in many correctional institutions, correctional officers are required to perform their duties without regard to their own socio-psychological and physiological background (i.e. race, creed, religion, nationality, religion, political affiliation, sex, marital status, disability, sexual orientation or age). However, what happens if a correctional facility has in its employ an openly gay Afro-Caribbean American female officer? Added to this depiction, she is highly intelligent and self-confident, but also very opinionated, outspoken and mildly indifferent to institutional idealism. In addition to her race, acumen and 'alternative' lifestyle, this officer is Rastafarian. She is also extremely tall, muscular, and slightly overweight and has a minor visual disability. To finish this rendering, the correctional officer also suffers from a mild case of obsessive compulsive disorder as well as germ phobia. In this instance, would the correctional officer's 'less institutionally acceptable' psycho-social and physiological characteristics impede her appropriate utilization of discretion? Is it even conceivable for correctional officers to forgo or 'turn off' applying certain features of their individualism, such as gender, sex, race, age, culture, fitness or beliefs, to make a critical valuation of appropriate action? Is systematic desensitization of professionalism the most appropriate institutional remedy to nonconformity?

Soundly, institutional mandates that promote the desensitization of frontline professionals are often attempts at ensuring safety, equality and fairness for workers and clientele. More importantly, it provides public organizations protection and deterrence from lower-level illegal infractions due to emotive motives. Harmfully, these policies are cognitively incapacitating in the face of occupational risks and hazards. For the correctional officer, Hagen (2007) identified the customary occupational hazards are demarcated by severities of dominant, defiant and evasive inmates along with the prevailing infractions (e.g., disobedience; violence; unauthorized funds; substance abuse; conducts of assault; threats to the safety, welfare, security of others and pretentiousness to escape). As the first responder, the correctional officer must be able to make expedient assessments utilizing the references of institutional agenda (organization interest), the effect on the inmate population (client interest) as well as personal (self-interest) and the genuine possibilities of occupational hazards.

Poole and Regoli (1980) observed that the correctional officers, because of wide areas of boundary-spanning roles and organizational position, must search for the proper dispositions, indicators or suitable cues (i.e. levels of safety, disruption and threat, temperament and behaviors of peers as well as the inmate population, uniformed shift routines and post orders) to guide their decision-making. Thus, correctional officers' utilization of discretion must rest on a decisional practice that should be inclusive of a full ecological knowledgebase of their work environment. Full ecological inclusivity necessitates not only accurately rationalizing the severity of inmate misconduct, but also being self-cognizant of all organizational dilemmas. However, many writers of bureaucratic institutionalism have held the line against the worth of individualism (Hummel, 1994; White, 2003). They favor psycho-socially & physiological desensitizing professional valuations rather than allowing for the aptitude of a conscious realization of prescribed work conditions. This should be considered as the failure and inattentiveness of the classically rational bureaucratic logic.

3. Valuing Individualized Intellectuality over Bureaucratic Logic

In his groundbreaking work, *The Bureaucratic Experience*, Ralph Hummel (1994) wrote that bureaucratic thinking defines the reality of practitioners' actions from the angle of a public choice and regulated top-down structure. This realism assumed power of choice or preference to be institutionally delimited by upper management and then disseminated throughout 'the ranks' until it 'leaks or trickles' to the bottom. Writers like Hummel have provided academia and public institutions with a fallible justification for institutionally 'hegemonizing' the human exemplification of empowerment, which can be realized in discretionary decisions. Ideas such as institutional hegemony and programmatic desensitizing are quite simply derivative beliefs in the imperfection of the human condition, as divergent to the all-incomparable Weber's 'Bureaucratic machine'. Supportive of such contentions, Douglas North posited, in his paper entitled "what do we mean by rationality?", that "humanly devised constraints" are necessary and exist to reduce the "ubiquitous uncertainty that arises from that interaction" (1993, p. 159).

But, what about public choice? 'In theory', public choice is ultimately a well-structured and institutionally sanctioned reasoning that acquiesces to the situation based upon organization policies and mandates.

Unfortunately, work incidents are so laden with continually changing and elevating ambiguous environmental tensions such as lassitude (self and group), clerical errors, declarative oppositions and risks of redundancy in addition to open displays of negligence.

As organizational mandates cannot keep up or contend with these ‘infallibilities’ and ‘imperfections’, public choice cannot rely solely on institutional guidelines and established deterrents. In turn, scholarly work on bureaucratic rationality has been so overly complacent, inattentive and exclusive of the fluctuations of work-setting illogicality that ultimately, it cannot value organizational infallibilities and imperfections of humanity.

And so, professional decision making becomes a fallacy of bureaucratic logic or an *illusion of intelligence*. Borrowing from Diller et al. (2004), the illusion of intelligence can be described as an organizational activity that provides an appearance of mental acumen rather than actual intelligence. Hence, organizational stakeholders are deceived to trust in a façade of a professional decision that is ascribed with an *institutional intelligence* that is believably free from egoistic and emotive self-interest. Inclusively, this work accepts the existence of ‘human imperfection’ of the institution as well as agree with the need for stabilizing formal arrangements. Academic and administrative studies should not attempt to preclude humanity from the frontline professional discretionary decision archetype. As this practice of problem-solving resides within the overly ‘humanly flawed’ and uncertain dilemmas of daily occupational incidents then any professional introspection must not only be analytical but, also indicative of the circumstantial and personal, as to find situational significance. Realistically, the frontline professional institutional intelligence must be determined as a composition of an individual humanism or a set of dispositional cognitive knowledge that identifies ‘all patterns of thinking’ (Perkins, Tishman, Ritchhart, Donis, & Andrade, 2000, p. 269).

In defense of this argument, a further expansion on White’s ‘Spock and Kirk’ analogy of bureaucratic rationality (2003) is offered. Although, there are many within academia that idealizes the “Spock” persona of bureaucratic logic, there is still an openness and hope for the *innovation and intuition* present in “Captain Kirk’s” irrationality. Moreover, the responding to workplace incidentals require the frontline professional to exhibit other traits exemplified by other cast in the Star Trek series such as the *humanistic pragmatism* of “Bones”, *sensitivity, interpretative propensity and femininity* of “Uhura” or even the *creativity and tenacity* of “Scotty”. Consideration for these individualistic qualities is the synthesis of the ‘outside of the box’ aesthetics lacking in the rationality of institutional action. Inherently, the individual intellect of frontline workers is a crucial source of necessary ‘un-boundness to rationality’ and should not be constricted or overwhelmed by the absoluteness organizational compliance or lobotomized by programmatic desensitization. As a user of professional discretion, the frontline practitioner must be both part of the perfect institution and yet ‘humanly imperfect’. The recognition of this stipulation connotes a *legitimacy* to individuality. Beneficially, even Weber believed that “a single individual and his action as the basic unit, as its ‘atom,’ if a questionable analogy is allowed here” (1981, p. 158).

Furthermore, institutional individualism, as it relates to discretion, grants a ‘breathing room’ for personal familiarity or relevance of the work situations to drive the cloudiness, inflexibility and incapacity of institution expectancy, rationality and conformity. There is a willingness of the frontline professional to circumvent institutionally desensitizing policies in favor of his or her individual intellect. This provides the capacity of the frontline worker to accomplish a given task through a cognitive practicality tessellated with situated contextuality.

4. Realizing the Situated Context of Individual Identity

Within a work incident, it is possible to find not only the customary parametric conditions but also emerging primary environmental peculiarities. These peculiarities are specific to the situation and the participants and in consequence can be considered systemic anomalies. Systemic anomalies are fusions of norms and singularities that resonate nodular environmental context. In its entirety, context is defined as the environmental setting of an event. But context can be considered the descriptive ecological conditions framed as cues, symbols and signals. For the frontline worker, context manifest within psychological, social, physical and metaphysical patterns that provide cognitive familiarity (Kutz, 2008). Cognitive familiarity is a situated awareness that offers psycho-social contrivance of experienced existence, past practices and the outlook of an indeterminate future (Komiak & Benbasat, 2006). This manifestation for the professional provides confidence in trusting personal judgment to provide a sense of complete certainty in making a decision.

From a representational point of individual intellect, this work uses the framework for contextual collectivity in terms of the *individual identity*. The individual identity can be considered as the ‘cognitive CPU chip’ that processes contextual patterns into a substantive knowledgebase. As a multifaceted schema for metacognition, the individual identity delivers all forms of contextual perception and logical spatial reasoning to construct the professional’s standpoint.

The individual identity also affords ascertaining the weight of the professional’s inner self as well as a wider social relation in accordance with an experienced (re-)occurrence (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995, p.256; Stryker & Burke, 2000). There are two significant criteria of individual identity:

- *Inner identity preference* is a compilation of idiosyncratic characteristics, which refers to physical attributes, self-concept, psychological traits, intentions, aspirations, spirituality, memories, knowledge, abilities emotions and personality (Ashforth, 2004; Berzonsky 1994; Terry et al., 1999).
- *Outer identity preference* is conceived from salient group classifications built on age, ethnicity and race, gender, education, family, friends, occupation, income, religion, class, and hierarchies. Relatedly, socio-cultural identity is also rooted in cultural matters formed based on shared beliefs, values, morals, ethics, meanings, religion, roles, perception, spatial relations, and notion of time (Kyarimpa & Garcia-Zamor, 2006, p.32).

Anatomically, the individual identity is formed based on these criteria and sustained by a nucleus of multiple structured self-definitions of compiled characteristics and identities as well as comparisons and reciprocal interactions between several external and internal groups (i.e. family, co-workers, managers, supervisor and clients) (Goffman, 1983; Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). These structured definitions allow persons to acquire tangible social positions and obtain the necessary context to configure useable knowledge (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2008). Both social positions and contextualized knowledge regulate and guide ‘situated’ interactions and decisions. Bourdieu characterized a ‘structured definition’ as a singular habitus of individual identity (Hodkinson, Biesta & James, 2008). Mutch depicted habitus as,

“Systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them. Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in anyway the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor” (2003, p.389).

Importantly, the professional’s habitus structures the disposition of the knowledge. The professional dispositions can be considered as a psycho-social synthesis of reasoning, ‘judgment calls’ and a ‘situational awareness’ within the required institutional discretionary decision process. Mercier & Sperber (2011, p. 57) also deemed the professional disposition, as a conceptual inference, which encompasses new environmental or contextualized knowledge about the situated incident, and accommodates institutionalized substantiations. Essentially, the habituated dispositional knowledge provides with effectual material to prescribe subjective directives toward discretionary decisions. The professionals have some control over their individual identity and consequently the discretionary decision, except in the instances where that identity is overridden by the “shared group persona’ or a *shared identity* of their occupational field (Jenkins, 2000, p.8). Although the shared identity can be considered as a component of the individual identity, if the professional fully acquiesce to its cultivation then it will then overwrite and acclimatize occupational habitus. While there are benefits to group or shared habituation, the individual’s identity may conflict with the overall shared identity. When this occurs within hazardous workplace incidents, the occupational habitus will deviate to confirm with the individual identity. For this reason, the professional habitus must rely on the entire individual identity to acquire and assimilate the necessary situated context.

5. Gauging the Institutional Individuality of Discretion

Scholars within public administration (and related fields) will debate or disapprove the existence or even plausibility of the individual identity. Nonetheless this should not dissuade the realization of this investigative track.

Therefore, five points are put forth as the ‘opportunities’ of exploration as it relates to the significance individual intellect, expressly the individual identity, on the professional bureaucratic discretionary decision-making archetype. These points have been extrapolated from past as well as present-day academic work. Firstly, “discretion is an act of choice” (Hawkins, 1992, p.167). Second, as a core component of individual identity, the habitus provides socio-dispositional framework. Third, “choice is treated as an individual matter, arising out of needs inside the individual or psyche, and made to satisfy individual needs” (Feldman, 1996, p. 43). Fourth, because of individual identity, professionals “will make systematically different choices in the same situation” (Messick, 1999, p.14).

Finally, discretionary decision-making amalgamates cognitive, situational, consequential, emotional, socio-contextual texture – that which is otherwise called “irrational” (Klaczynski et al., 2001, p.226). These points demonstrate the scholarly vacancies that affords for a crucial discussion about the individual intellectualization of bureaucratic discretion. Like-minded writers, such as Varavithya and Esichaikul (2005) described bureaucratic discretion as not only an institutional aim of meeting an objective, but also an undertaking of choice to gain essential knowledge for the intention of making logical decisions. Hawkins put forth that decisions require preferences that are situated within the context of social institution (1992, p.101). Discretion has been identified by Key (2002) “as a pivotal concept in individual decision making as part of an organizations social responsibility” (p.220). Scott (1997, p.37) noted that situational task, psychosocial pathways and context, workload pressures, rules and policies, and external organizational environment usually comprise the salient influential values of a professional decision making criteria. Therefore, integrating ‘personalized’ identification measure into the discretionary decision making architecture permits frontline personnel to implement policies within social norms that may or may not reflect formal law (Kessler & Piehl, 1998, p.257). For better or worse these social contexts serve to justify the labeling of much discretionary judgment as “irrational” (West,1984).

What then are the limits or boundaries of discretion? Davis contended that “to exercise discretion is to exercise free choice, constrained by legal limits” (1969, p.4). Cox (2005) drawing on the perspectives of Arendt (2003) and Weber (1946), specified that discretion is comprised of four elements or activities of choice: “experiencing, thinking, judging, and acting” (2005, p.5). Cox (2005) argued that examining these four interrelated elements would create the potential of the decision architecture as a framework for understanding the act of discretion (discretionary decision making process). Unexplored in Cox’s work is the role of individuality in molding judgment and, therefore, action. To compensate for this scholarly gap, this study proposes understanding of individuality of choice within the discretionary decision archetype. In support of this contention, Douglas asserted, “Choice is treated as an individual matter, arising out of needs inside the individual psyche, and made to satisfy needs” (1996, p. 43). Essentially, the individual identity should be employed as a deciphering cognitive device to recognize the rational & irrational ecological parameters of discretionary choice. In support, Jenkins (2000, p.8) described identification as specifying what things are and the condition of their properties. In addition, identification is necessary to augment the professional’s endurance to the dilemmas of the institutional socio-cultural systems (Garnett, Marlowe & Pandey, 2008). Exercising individual identity within discretionary choice requires allows a personalized identification of ‘nodal’ practical decisions and recommendations that is contingent organizational, social, political and bureaucratic conditions and constraints (Evetts, 2002, p.245).

6. Concluding Remarks

At the beginning of this work, programmatic desensitization was highlighted as an incapacitation of frontline professional functionality. Programmatic desensitization was also recognized as a consequence of correctional institutions pursuit of remedying highly emotive workplace environments. Additionally, the provided correctional officer scenario offered a point for deliberation of the humanistic features of institutional individualism. Hence, this work purports a need for an unencumbered contextual knowledgebase derived from all features of individualism within the actuality of frontline professional thinking. Although not idealistically accepted in terms of bureaucratic discretion, the actuality of frontline decision making offers a leeway for the inclusion of the strengths, weaknesses, quirks and peculiarities found within individual intellectuality as well as the idiosyncrasies of real-time workplace dilemmas (e.g., tensions, catch-22s, disruptions and uncertainties).

While the bureaucratically-inclined academics and administrative regimes may promote unquestioning compliance to training, protocol and procedures, the frontline discretionary decision must be firmly rooted in the development of the professional's institutional individualization. Only then can the frontline practitioner be able to appropriately grapple with the actual 'tight spots' and complications of the workplace. The speed and acuity of acquiring vital details or context within a situation demands personally intellectual and situated attentiveness. When institutional mandates are unclear and impractical, most practitioners, like the correctional officer, will 'go with his/her gut' or the acceptance of personal understanding to work environmental details in making choices. Good or bad, the features of individual humanism are what the frontline practitioner relies on when all else fails. Lastly, this writing is a conceptual beginning with full acknowledgement of its empirical limitations and outward criticism of programmatic desensitization as well as the classical notions bureaucratically rational logic. Although further studies are needed for a full-bodied prescriptive and quantifiable erudition, this academic forage should be considered as a beacon for a more 'actual realistic' outlook of the discretionary decision making process.

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