



Beyond 'bad apples' and 'weak leaders'

Toward a neo-institutional explanation of organizational deviance

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Abstract

This article examines two starkly different cases—the abuse of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison and the falsification of architectural internship reports—in developing a neo-institutional analysis of deviance within organizations. We argue that the organization's role extends beyond a failure to act (e.g. monitor, prevent, punish) to include implementing formal structures—decoupling—that make individual deviance both predictable and a predicate of organizational 'success'. We identify environmental conditions associated with decoupling, strategies to achieve it and organizational responses of deflection. By linking macro-level rule environments, organizational structure and participant behavior, we offer a theoretical framework that elides the long-standing definitional struggles in white-collar crime research through the simultaneous consideration of the organization as environment and the environment of the organization.

Key Words

decoupling • neo-institutionalism • normal deviance • occupational deviance • organizational deviance • torture

Deviance within organizations is often framed as a product of individual choices or behaviors, especially in mainstream discourse and in the popular press. For example, in the case of the Abu Ghraib prison abuses, three

primary explanatory models have competed for ascendancy: (1) rogue individuals from the US Military Police unit engaged in bad behavior (i.e. the 'bad apple' explanation); (2) somewhere up the chain of command individual officers gave orders that ultimately led to the abuse of Iraqi prisoners (i.e. the 'following orders' explanation); or (3) abuses were the product of failed leadership by specific persons who did not clearly communicate norms or adequately monitor and supervise underlings (i.e. the 'failed leadership' explanation).

The first explanation ('bad apples') is exemplified in the military's court martial proceedings for soldiers who directly interacted with Iraqi prisoners, as well as in the Bush Administration's claim—from the moment the allegations of abuse first came forward—that the abusive behavior was atypical of the military and simply bad behavior on the part of a few out-of-control soldiers (see Graham, 2004; Higham and Stevens, 2004; White and Higham, 2004). The second explanation ('following orders') is exemplified by the defense in the court martial proceedings who have tried to identify specific persons (e.g. Military Intelligence personnel, civilian contractors, Pentagon officials) up the chain of command who ordered the Military Police officers to use abusive techniques to 'soften up' Iraqi prisoners in order to elicit information from them (see Cha and McCarthy, 2004; Cha and Merle, 2004; Higham et al., 2004; Vedantam, 2004; White and Allen, 2004). The third explanation ('failed leadership') is exemplified by accusations that mid- to high-ranking military officials (e.g. US Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski) failed to adequately train, monitor or supervise troops on the ground, and failed to respond to early warning signs of problems within the prison (see Graham and Ricks, 2004; Smith, 2004; Taguba, 2004; White and Higham, 2004). Each of these explanations focuses on the personal failures of individuals within the military (albeit at ascending hierarchical levels) to act in legal, ethical or moral ways. Each of these explanations also deflects attention from both the organizational environment and the environment of the organization within which abuses occurred.¹

In contrast, criminological accounts of corporate and occupational deviance have identified a variety of ways in which deviant behavior by individuals is shaped by organizational context and processes. Some researchers have focused on power relationships in organizations and how those relationships can generate deviance (see Vandivier, 1972), others on how cognitive processes that emerge in organizational settings may produce deviant behavior (see Kelman and Hamilton, 1989; Gioia, 1992), and yet others have examined how socialization processes in organizations and society can lead to the normalization of deviance (Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993; Hochstetler and Copes, 2001; Crelinsten, 2003). In addition, Vaughan (1982) has examined how the sheer structural complexity of organizations may facilitate deviance in organizations, while Jackall (1988) and Pearce (2001) focused on the relationship between formal control systems in organizations and organizational deviance.

Although criminologists recognize the importance of formal organizations as structures and sites of action, historically based distinctions between occupational deviance and corporate (or, more broadly, organizational) deviance continue to obscure the interconnections between these phenomena. Studies of occupational crime consider the organization as a context for deviant behavior to explain the decision making and actions of those within organizations, frequently lower- and mid-level actors. In so doing, however, they often fail to account for the embedded context of the organization itself (or at least limit the factors considered, e.g. to economic conditions) or the possibility that such 'crime' may directly or indirectly enhance organizational effectiveness. Studies of corporate deviance, on the other hand, begin with the legal fiction of the corporation as 'individual' and seek to explain the organization's deviant actions. This line of work, however, runs the risk of anthropomorphizing the organization, treating it as if it had human motivations and capacity to act (Cressey, 1988). Organizational structure is the product of decisions made by those with the authority to establish such structure. When viewed in this way, the creation of structure is as much the product of human agency as is the occupational crime of lower-level participants. In addition, as Glasberg and Skidmore have noted, studies of organizational deviance have tended to imply 'a focus on the internal structure of the organization itself as if the organization exists independently of external forces that might create relations, processes, and structures within organizations' (1998: 426). Thus, calls for definitional clarity in the study of white-collar crime (e.g. Braithwaite, 1985), though well placed, have produced a degree of fragmentation across levels of analysis.

Rather than hold fast to the distinction between corporate and occupational crime, the present article considers simultaneously organizations *and the environments* of organizations as contexts for human action. Specifically, we explore the relationship between (1) strategically designed and implemented structures and (2) deviant and criminal acts perpetrated at lower levels of the organization. Organizations are more than just incidental or neutral locations where deviant behavior occurs. The role of organizations, and their leaders and managers, often extends beyond a failure to do certain things (e.g. monitor, prevent, punish, respond with sufficient vehemence) to include implementing strategies for formal structure that facilitate deviance by participants and make such deviance both predictable and a predicate of organizational 'success'. Specifically, we identify how organizations, through aspects of their *formal structure* and strategies for eliding this formal structure, play a significant facilitating and causal role in the deviance that occurs within them. In this, our approach parallels Vaughan's (1982, 1997) multilevel analysis of organizational deviance. We extend her analysis by offering a more general theoretical framework that draws on neo-institutional organizational theory (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, 1991; Scott, 2001).

Neo-institutionalist theories conceive of formal organizations as deeply permeated by broader cultural forces. As Scott argues: 'Socially constructed belief and rule systems exercise enormous control over organizations—both how they are structured and how they carry out their work' (2003: 120). Neo-institutionalists thus challenge traditional ideas about the rationality of organizational structure and call into question whether the primary purpose of formal structure is to monitor, constrain and evaluate behavior within organizations. Instead, the theory's proponents argue that independent of its technical rationality, organizational structure is institutionalized, that is, 'taken for granted as legitimate, apart from evaluation of [its] impact on work outcomes' (Meyer and Rowan, 1977: 344). Institutionalized structures enhance organizational stability by symbolizing, for external constituencies, the organization's conformity with broader cultural rules and expectations.

In this article, we examine what actually happens under the cover of institutionalized structure by focusing on the empirical observation of *decoupling*. When operating in complex and competing institutional (or 'rule') environments, organizations are often formally organized so as to shear structure (the blueprint for organizational action) from action (what actually happens on the ground). That is, formal statements of how and why things should be done are *decoupled* from how they are actually done. In so doing, organizations satisfy environmental demands by demonstrating appropriate structure and policies while simultaneously freeing lower-level employees to effectively and efficiently meet the organization's technical goals. Not surprisingly, in decoupled organizations, flexibility—including the willingness to violate formal rules in the pursuit of organizational goals—is a highly valued quality among workers (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Although organizational sociologists have long known that informal structure is pervasive in formal organizations (e.g. Selznick, 1948; Dalton, 1959; Jackall, 1988; Van Maanen, 1991; Scott, 2003), neo-institutional theory suggests organizational mechanisms by which informal structure may be systematically linked to formal structure. That is, the unofficial relationships and patterns of behavior that exist alongside formal policies and structures may be more than accidental or incidental: they may be the product of decoupling as a formal organizational strategy.

Previous research on deviance in for-profit organizations has identified decoupling as a contributing factor, although researchers have not used the term 'decoupling' nor do they connect their arguments to the work of neo-institutional theorists of organizations. For example, in their independent discussions of the effects of the 'finance mode of control' in organizations, Jackall (1988) and Pearce (2001) argue that: (1) for-profit organizations may manage conflicts between imperatives for profit and for adherence to external regulations and norms by implementing a finance mode of control where formal responsibility for how work is accomplished is pushed down the hierarchy; (2) financial information alone is conveyed up the chain of

command; and (3) workers at the bottom of the hierarchy have flexibility in how things get done. Pearce concludes that this control strategy:

Explains why so many safety, health and environmental violations are the effects of the policies of higher management without this necessarily being traceable to any specific decisions that they have made about product quality, health and safety. It maximizes the likelihood of 'willful blindness' (Wilson, 1979) since it allows those at the top to be ignorant of the activities of subordinates and to ignore the difficulties that subordinates face.

(Pearce, 2001: 44; see also Braithwaite, 1984; Pearce and Tombs, 1998)

Simply put, when organizational leaders set financial goals for subunits and set their workers loose to pursue those goals, they encourage norm-violating behavior while simultaneously buffering themselves from accountability for the actions of lower-level participants. Both Jackall (1988) and Pearce (2001), however, limit their analysis to the context of for-profit organizations and to the goal of profit making.

The effects of conflicting norms on individual behavior have also been extensively developed in the criminological literature. Specifically, strain theory suggests that non-conformist behavior may result when the achievement of societal goals is blocked by overly restrictive institutionalized means (Merton, 1938; Cloward, 1959; Dubin, 1959; Agnew, 1992). Vaughan (1982, 1997) has argued for the application of strain/anomie theory to organizational as well as individual behavior. In doing so, she (1) applies the notion of opportunity structures to *organizations*; and (2) advances a reconceptualization of Merton's distinction between means and goals—at least in the context of organizational deviance—as 'scarce resources for which both individuals and organizations compete' (1997: 98). In her analysis of the *Challenger* disaster, Vaughan attributes faulty decision making at NASA to the larger contradictory environment—what she labels 'a triumvirate of conflicting cultural imperatives' (1997: 113)—in which NASA operated. In this analysis, Vaughan connects the decision making of individuals within NASA to the larger cultural environment of the organization via organizational structures and practices. In an environment of scarce resources and competition (for contracts, in the case of NASA contractors, or public funding, in the case of NASA), and conflicting cultures, 'organization structure facilitates misconduct as a solution to blocked opportunities by creating structural secrecy . . . [and by] providing difficult-to-monitor mechanisms for carrying out illegal acts that conceal rather than reveal' (1997: 100).

In this article, we argue that decoupling is a more general process that plays out in a variety of organizational types (e.g. for-profit organizations, but also state and professional organizations). In particular, the environments of organizations may be contradictory in ways that extend beyond competition for profit or for scarce resources. Neo-institutional theory offers a general framework in which we may consider organizations as contexts and also the context of organizations, or what we term the

embedded context of organizations. This approach provides a general framework in which to simultaneously consider (1) the macro-level contradictions faced by organizations; (2) how such conflicting norms shape organizational structures (usually via the actions of upper-level organizational actors); and (3) how such structures influence individual behavior.

More specifically, we explore how organizational structure mediates between the larger rule environment and organizational participants, and how particular structural arrangements arrived at by the conscious choices of managers, executives and leaders facilitate flexible, and sometimes deviant, responses by organizational participants to conflicted institutional environments. In such structures, rule-breaking behavior is to be expected. By explicitly linking macro-level rule environments, organizational structure and participant behavior, we challenge explanations for deviance in organizations that presume neutrality on the part of the organizational structure and those who design and implement that structure.

In developing this general framework of organizational deviance we draw on two disparate empirical cases: (1) the abuses by American military personnel at the prison in Abu Ghraib; and (2) the falsification of internship records by architects-in-training. Using these cases—usefully aligned on opposite ends of the spectrum of severity and notoriety—we illustrate how deviance is produced by organizations when the organization decouples structure from action. In particular, we examine: (1) organizational strategies that simultaneously elaborate and trivialize formal structure as a social control mechanism; (2) behaviors on the part of individual participants (including formal rule violations) that occur in, and contribute to the effectiveness of, organizations facing complex and competing institutional environments; and (3) the complex environment in which organizations exist that influences the extent to which structure is decoupled from action in organizations.

The cases: Abu Ghraib prison and architectural internship

Abu Ghraib

The Abu Ghraib prison abuses came to light in the spring of 2004 when photographs, taken in the autumn of 2003, of Iraqi prisoners being abused by American soldiers were nationally televised on *60 Minutes II*. By that time, numerous investigations of the prison abuses had been completed or were underway, including investigations by the International Red Cross and US Army General Antonio Taguba (ultimately released as the Taguba Report). Congressional hearings followed during the summer of 2004. Explanations for the deviant behavior varied from ‘bad apple’ prison guards to prison guards claiming to be ‘following orders’ to ‘poor leadership’ by superior military officers. The Abu Ghraib prison was but one of numerous prisons set up in Iraq following the American occupation.²

Formally, the prisons were under the command of Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski who oversaw the Military Police Units that established and maintained the prison system. The prisons, however, had dual functions: they housed Iraqi prisoners who were under the control of US Military Police and were the sites of prisoner interrogations on the part of Military Intelligence and civilian contractors. And, crucial to our argument, the chain of command of the latter did not coincide with that of the former (Cha and McCarthy, 2004; Cha and Merle, 2004; Higham et al., 2004; Smith and White, 2004). We will argue that this convoluted chain of command—a product of organizational decoupling more than bad management or poor planning—along with other structural arrangements provided a facilitating organizational context for the abuses at Abu Ghraib. Data on the Abu Ghraib prison abuses were drawn from published news accounts as well as publicly available reports of investigations into the abuses.

Architecture's Intern Development Program (IDP)

After graduation from architecture school, budding architects in the USA are required to complete approximately 5600 hours of work experience in 16 different areas of architectural practice before they can take the Architectural Registration Exam (ARE), the final step in the process of becoming a registered architect. To qualify, work experience must be acquired in an appropriate setting, typically in an architectural firm under the supervision of a registered architect. IDP, a formal program run by the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB), tracks the amount and types of work experience of these graduates and certifies to state registration boards when an intern is qualified to take the ARE. Interns document their work experience by submitting training records ('Training Unit Reports'), whose accuracy is verified by their architect-supervisors, to NCARB's national office.

A 1998 evaluation of the IDP, commissioned by NCARB and conducted by the second author and an architecture school colleague, found that falsification of 'Training Unit Reports' sent to NCARB was a widely known and accepted practice, and that the profession of architecture was largely indifferent to the practice (Quinn and Monahan, 2001; Monahan and Quinn, 2002; Quinn, 2003). Our data on the falsification in the IDP are drawn from data from this evaluation and our observations of its aftermath.³

Analysis

At first glance, these cases seem incomparable in significance and context. We would suggest, however, that our argument is strengthened by finding similar structures and outcomes in seemingly incomparable settings. Notably, even in their apparent differences, these two cases share im-

portant structural features. Both are instances of deviance within highly elaborated and formalized bureaucratic structures. In both cases, the bureaucratic structures serve primarily symbolic functions rather than the technical function of controlling participant behavior. Lastly, and importantly, in both cases, organizational structure buffers lower-level participants and their activities from the pressures created by large, competing social institutions and actors, thus creating the context for organizational deviance.

Decoupled organizational structure

Decoupling is the organizational practice of disconnecting structure from action (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2003). Classical theories of bureaucracy presumed that organizational structure served as a form of social control, creating organizational structures that control, coordinate, monitor and evaluate individual workers in an ongoing way (Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1947 [1924]). Empirical research since the late 1960s suggests, however, that these theories overstated the technical functions of organizational structure, and reveals that organizational structure is often 'institutionalized' (i.e. directly reflective of the institutional environment of the organization), primarily symbolic in its effects, and 'decoupled' from practice within the organization (for an early example, see Meyer et al., 1981).

Deviance and strategies for decoupling

The strategy for decoupling—separating structure from action—adopted in an organization is contingent upon the symbolic capital the organization holds. Symbolic capital refers to claims made by the organization and their social value; this is akin to what Sutherland (1949) referred to as 'goodwill' developed and nurtured by organizations. When strong claims are made and trusted by the public, the organization accrues value from its symbolic capital. The military's symbolic capital rests on its claims to a clear chain of command and formalized standard operating procedures; architecture's symbolic capital rests on its claims to professionalism. When decoupling occurs—usually because of contradictions in the organization's environment—symbolic capital is emphasized in public claims and its veracity generally goes unquestioned even if activity within the organization deviates from the stated formal structure. We suggest that in these situations, organizations, via their participants, are positioned to commit organizational deviance (see also Biderman and Reiss, 1967).

Because their symbolic capital differs, different techniques are used in Abu Ghraib prison and architecture's IDP program to decouple organizational structure from activity. For the prison, flexibility at the ground level was achieved via convoluted reporting lines (ironic in an organization that publicly extols the virtues of a clear chain of command), vague and conflicting statements of policies and procedures, and underground prac-

tices that existed alongside official practices. These activities took place behind the symbolic curtain of clear chains of command and formalized standard operating procedures. For architecture's IDP, flexibility at the ground level was effected through a combination of geographically dispersed training sites and a highly formalized and nationally centralized reporting system. Falsification in architecture also takes place behind a symbolic curtain, but in this case, the curtain consists of 'guarantees' by supposedly trustworthy architectural professionals whose word is not questioned, what Meyer and Rowan (1977) refer to as 'the logic of confidence and good faith'.

Deviance in the Abu Ghraib prison

In his 2004 report, General Antonio Taguba identified a range of intentional abuses perpetrated by military police at Abu Ghraib:

... Punching, slapping, and kicking detainees; jumping on their naked feet ... Forcibly arranging detainees in various sexually explicit positions for photographing ... Forcing detainees to remove their clothing and keeping them naked for several days at a time ... Forcing naked male detainees to wear women's underwear ... Forcing groups of male detainees to masturbate themselves while being photographed and videotaped ... Arranging naked male detainees in a pile and then jumping on them ... Positioning a naked detainee on a MRE Box, with a sandbag on his head, and attaching wires to his fingers, toes, and penis to simulate electric torture ... Writing 'I am a Rapist' (*sic*) on the leg of a detainee alleged to have forcibly raped a 15-year old fellow detainee, and then photographing him naked ... Placing a dog chain or strap around a naked detainee's neck and having a female soldier pose for a picture ... A male MP guard having sex with a female detainee ... Using military working dogs (without muzzles) to intimidate and frighten detainees, and in at least one case biting and severely injuring a detainee.

Clearly, the activities at Abu Ghraib prison violated various formal norms, both domestic and international, regarding the treatment of war prisoners. Such diverse groups as the International Red Cross, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the FBI, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Coalition's Provisional Authority and the State Department issued reports and warnings about the divergence of prison practices from those allowed by the Geneva Convention as well as standard military protocol (Chandrasekaran and Wilson, 2004; Gellman and Smith, 2004; Higham and Stevens, 2004; Slevin, 2004; Slevin and Wright, 2004; White, 2004; Wright and Kessler, 2004).

Decoupling at Abu Ghraib prison

We suggest that these deviant practices were not simply the result of bad apples or various forms of failed leadership—all individual-level

explanations—but were empowered, so to speak, by *structural arrangements* at the prison. A reading of official reports, the news coverage and published statements from various military officials indicates a number of ways in which the prison was structured so as to increase flexibility at lower levels. First, a formal decision on 19 November 2003 by Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez altered the *chain of command* at the prison, shifting authority over the prison guards from Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski (commander of the 800th Military Police Brigade) to Col. Thomas Pappas (commander of the 205th Military Intelligence Unit) (Graham and Ricks, 2004; Smith and White, 2004). The shift was particularly significant, given the disparate missions of Military Intelligence and Military Police: Taguba [in his 2004 report] said the move, ordered by Sanchez, ‘violated Army doctrine by making military police subordinate to interrogators’ (Graham and Ricks, 2004: A01), a move that was problematic ‘due to the different missions and agenda assigned to each of these respective specialties’ (Taguba quoted in Smith and White, 2004: A01). An earlier inspection report by Maj. Gen. Donald J. Ryder, dated 6 November 2003, concurred with Taguba’s assessment, finding that allowing MPs to ‘actively set favorable conditions for subsequent interviews runs counter to the smooth operation of a detention facility’ (Higham et al., 2004). Taguba found that as a result of this shift in command ‘coordination occurred at the lowest possible levels with little oversight by commanders’ (Taguba quoted in Smith and White, 2004: A01). Despite the change in command, Pentagon officials (specifically, Undersecretary of Defense Stephen Cambone) ‘defended the decision, saying it was intended to improve prison management and did not mean military police operations came under the control of military intelligence officers’ (Graham and Ricks, 2004: A01).

Other chain of command issues were raised by the presence and activity of civilian contractors in the prison. In his report, Taguba recommended reprimands for two civilian contractors involved in the Abu Ghraib prison abuses, and raised questions about whether civilian contractors working with military intelligence in the prison were issuing orders to military police personnel (Cha and McCarthy, 2004). Through ‘outsourcing’ the military has blurred the lines between military and civilian personnel, and injected independent and largely unregulated individuals into the military setting:

Contractors typically have no formal authority to manage military personnel and many consider themselves partners or advisers. In practice, however, soldiers say contractors may exert tremendous influence on the rank and file because of their technical expertise and because they are often brought in to work with high-level military officials. Their presence, some argue, has complicated what used to be a clear chain of command.

(Cha and Merle, 2004: A01)

Behind the symbolic curtain of a clear chain of command, the organizational reality on the ground is opaque, and within the reality of a convoluted and unclear chain of command, the prison abuses occurred.

The Abu Ghraib prison also operated under *ambiguous and constantly shifting policies and procedures* regarding the treatment of prisoners. An Army report released 25 August 2004 identified unclear policies as one cause of the prison abuses:

Army Gen. Paul J. Kern—who oversaw the drafting of the report—said in an interview . . . that Sanchez 'wrote a policy which was not clear,' and that by doing so, he allowed *junior* officers to conclude mistakenly that they were following an official policy as they stepped over a legal line.

(Smith, 2004: A01, emphasis added)

Other official documents contributed to the ambiguity, including a memo signed by Donald Rumsfeld that 'authorized harsh interrogation methods for prisoners at Guantanamo' and another memo, signed by US President Bush, that 'declared that fighters detained in Afghanistan were not entitled as a matter of law to the protections afforded by the Geneva Conventions' (Smith, 2004: A01). Kern's report concluded that senior military officers 'didn't clarify for those *young* interrogators what their responsibilities were' (quoted in Smith 2004: A01, emphasis added). In the absence of clear guidelines, numerous violations of both Army rules and Geneva Conventions were perpetrated by low-level military personnel: 'the use of dogs to frighten detainees, the repeated stripping of detainees, and the use of extended isolation and sensory deprivation' (Smith, 2004: A01).

Of particular note are the informal channels by which policies approved for use at Guantanamo Bay migrated to the prison system in Iraq. After a visit to Iraq by Lt. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, the commander at Guantanamo Bay, 'some of these [questionable] tactics—including the use of dogs—were incorporated in a memo drafted by Sanchez's legal office on Sept. 10 and sent to prison interrogators' (Smith, 2004: A01). Rather than being official and established, rules and regulations were in flux, unclear and migratory.⁴

Taguba (2004) also identified another set of policies and procedures, the *designation and treatment of ghost detainees*, as problematic:

The various detention facilities operated by the 800th MP Brigade have routinely held persons brought to them by Other Government Agencies (OGAs) without accounting for them, knowing their identities, or even the reason for their detention. The Joint Interrogation and Debriefing Center (JIDC) at Abu Ghraib called these detainees 'ghost detainees.' On at least one occasion, the 320th MP Battalion at Abu Ghraib held a handful of 'ghost detainees' (6–8) for OGAs that they moved around within the facility to hide them from a visiting International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) survey team. This maneuver was deceptive, contrary to Army Doctrine, and in violation of international law.

The term 'ghost detainees' is evocative: the designation and treatment of 'ghost detainees' are practices that occur locally within military units while hiding behind the symbolic curtain of standard operating procedures and policies.

Through these strategies for decoupling, the military leveraged its symbolic capital—clear chains of command, formalized standard operating procedures—while simultaneously allowing for substantial flexibility and innovation in day-to-day practice. The potential for flexibility, often framed as cooperation or close relations between personnel from structurally distinct units, was valued by high-ranking Pentagon and military officials including Stephen Cambone and Geoffrey Miller (Higham et al., 2004). In practice, it sometimes took the form of abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners.

Deviance within the IDP program

The 1998 evaluation of IDP found that falsification of Training Unit Reports was a widely known and accepted practice. We define falsification as lying on official documents about experience, education or training. This is a more limited understanding than Shapiro's exposition of lying in the context of white-collar crime—'misrepresentations, deception, exaggeration, omission, distortion, fabrication or falsification of information by those in position of trust' (1990: 351) in that we focus on such acts with respect to official documents. None the less, the typology of falsification that emerges from our data on architectural internships reflects all of the forms of 'lying' that Shapiro identified.

Analysis of participant responses to open-ended survey questions uncovered four types of falsification, all of which center on the Training Unit Report form, the mechanism in IDP that links local architectural practices to NCARB's national-level certification process (Quinn and Hill, 2000; Quinn, 2003). First, interns may circumvent the requirements for diverse work experience by *misrepresenting the content* of their work through 'creative categorization'. This occurs, for example, when interns report time spent on easily obtained construction drawings as experience in an area where it is more difficult to gain experience, such as design work. Second, interns may *circumvent duration and training setting requirements* by filing Training Unit Reports for experience gained during a period of employment too short to meet the duration requirement or for an employer who does not meet the training setting requirement. Third, interns may 'pad' their Training Units by *reporting more units than actually worked* in an area where it is difficult to gain experience. Ten units become fifteen, thirty-two are rounded off to forty. Similarly, interns may 'pre-report' by claiming credit for experience not yet gained but expected in the future, or completely fabricate significant portions of experience. The fourth form of falsification—the *forgery* of a supervisor's signature—is ancillary to the other forms. Interns forge signatures out of administrative expediency or, more seriously, to hide other forms of falsification.

The surveys revealed that practicing architects and others in the profession, such as board administrators, know that falsification occurs. This was particularly evident in practitioner concerns about the absence of

external verification of intern-submitted forms. None the less, few practitioners were themselves willing to police the process, and in some cases, practitioners admitted that they too participated in falsification by signing forms they knew to be exaggerated or otherwise inaccurate. In all, it appears that interns, firms and the profession circumvent, re-create, justify and 'massage' messy and complex day-to-day work experience into a formalized system of reporting that bears questionable resemblance to reality.

But why? Unlike the canonical profession of medicine, architecture is marked by low profit margins, fluctuating demand for services and no centralized institutions to serve as training sites (diverse and geographically dispersed firms versus medicine's teaching hospitals). These environmental conditions make it difficult for the profession to provide a consistent and coherent internship program, especially when interns are most effectively used on high volume, repetitive tasks such as construction drawings. The symbolic imperatives inherent in being a profession, however, *demand* it (Boyer and Mitgang, 1996; Quinn, 2003).

Decoupling in architecture's IDP

Falsification in the IDP is facilitated by architecture's mechanism for reporting and certifying training units, the Training Unit Report that is completed by architectural interns, signed by registered architects and accepted as documentation of completed work by NCARB. This report bridges the geographic distance between local architectural firms and NCARB; the integrity of the report, suspect given the lack of monitoring of local activity by a nationally-based organization, is assured by the certifying local professional architect.

Although the reporting mechanism links the local to the national via a report of work experience, only the report is actually observed by NCARB. The work itself is 'performed beyond the purview of managers' (Meyer and Rowan, 1977: 357), and is vouched for by local professionals who are trusted to act in the best interests of the profession and society. When recorded in documents at the national level, the work experience becomes 'real', whether or not it really was performed. Falsification exists at the nexus of the local and the national, when the local communicates with the national and establishes an official record that becomes the reality of the profession. Falsification works in decoupled systems because it is performed by those—in architecture's case, architects and budding architects—who are trusted to act honorably even in the absence of regulation or monitoring. This is a classic example of 'the logic of good faith and confidence' (Meyer and Rowan, 1977: 357).

Thus, in IDP, structure (the recording of training units) is decoupled from action on the ground (the acquisition of actual work experience) via a

system of tracking internship hours and experience that relies upon optimistic, perhaps even naïve, assumptions about the good behavior of interns and architect-supervisors. As one 25-year-old architectural intern put it:

[H]ow hard is it to get your employer to sign off on something that you haven't done? That's one question this questionnaire failed to ask. It's anonymous so why not ask some tough questions, i.e. how often have you lied or cheated on filling out the time sheet?

Commonalities

Despite these disparate strategies for decoupling, Abu Ghraib prison and architecture's IDP share three common qualities. First, in both cases, the organization faces sharply conflicting environmental pressures that are resolved via decoupling. Second, the military hierarchy and architecture's professional organizations do little to monitor or audit the activities of lower-level participants. Third, in both cases, high-ranking officials in the organization respond to accusations of participant deviance with indifference about the systemic forces that might facilitate or generate deviant behavior. That is, they resist looking to the organization itself for an explanation of deviance.

Conflicting environmental norms

Decoupling occurs most commonly in organizations that face complex and conflicted institutional environments (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), and it allows the organization and its leaders to manage conflicting expectations by signaling its adherence to societal norms while simultaneously retaining the ability to effectively accomplish work (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2003). In decoupled organizations, 'institutionalized' organizational structures are adopted, where bureaucracy is deeply permeated by cognitive, normative and legal expectations from the environment. Highly institutionalized structures may, however, interfere with the organization's on-the-ground effectiveness. Under those conditions, Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue, the organization and its leaders face a dilemma: adhere to environmental expectations at the expense of performance or reject the environmental demands at the expense of legitimacy. The strategy of decoupling allows organizations to have it both ways: the institutionalized structure is a symbolic display, while action within the organization proceeds largely independently from the structure. That independent action—the 'domains of discretion, flexibility and individual initiative' (Scott, 2003: 284)—is one locus of deviance that occurs within organizations. Although not all 'discretionary' activity is necessarily deviance, deviance is a predictable and even productive response to such institutionalized structures. Consequently, the dismay of organizational executives and managers, when they profess surprise at such deviance, should be read with caution and perhaps cynicism. Meyer and Rowan put it clearly:

[In institutionalized organizations] human relations are made very important. The organization cannot formally coordinate activities because its formal rules, if applied, would generate inconsistencies. Therefore individuals are left to work out technical interdependencies informally. The ability to coordinate things in violation of the rules—that is, to get along with other people—is highly valued.

(1977: 357)

In the case of the Abu Ghraib prison, the conflicting norms coming from military intelligence, on the one hand, and human rights groups and treaties, on the other, were resolved via ritualization of organizational structure and the implementation of an explicit organizational strategy of increasing the flexibility of and cooperation among workers on the ground. Structurally, control of the prison guards was removed from Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski and shifted over to military intelligence personnel (Taguba, 2004); operationally, the goal was to increase cooperative activity at lower levels (i.e. between prison guards and interrogators):

Karpinski recalled that [Col.] Miller told her he wanted to 'Gitmo-ize' the prison . . . the concept has been misunderstood, and [according to Undersecretary of Defense Stephen Cambone] all the Pentagon had in mind was 'a cooperative attitude, team-building, call it what you will, between' intelligence interrogators and military police to produce more and better information.

(Smith and White, 2004: A01)

General Taguba's report concluded that, at Abu Ghraib, 'coordination occurred at the lowest possible levels with little oversight by commanders' (quoted in Smith and White, 2004: A01), a situation that is typical of decoupled organizations. Accommodation to the conflicting environmental pressures thus occurs at two levels: (1) at the lowest levels of the military, where military police 'cooperate' with military intelligence on the ground, but also (2) at higher levels of the military, through its establishment of structural arrangements that facilitate such cooperation on the ground. Most of the attention, however, is focused on low-level actors who engaged in disturbing and reprehensible behavior at the expense of an analysis of the decisions about structure that facilitated the deviance.

In the case of architecture's IDP, pressures toward professionalization conflict with market pressures toward efficiency: that is, architects seek to legitimize themselves as autonomous and self-regulating professionals (and having a formal internship is a symbol of this) while simultaneously pursuing profit in a competitive market of architects and others (e.g. structural engineers) with a claim to design buildings (Guttman, 1988; Cuff, 1992; Boyer and Mitgang, 1996). This conflict forces architectural interns to get 'double-duty' from their work in that they have to simultaneously satisfy NCARB's requirements for quantity and distribution of work experience and still produce profit for the firms that employ them. Decoupling occurs as a result of this conflict. The reporting mechanism for

IDP is ritualized—a highly formalized and complex system that tracks and ultimately reifies data of questionable quality. This allows architectural firms to use interns in the most economically profitable way, a response to market pressures, while simultaneously allowing interns to accumulate evidence of sufficient training units to sit for the Architectural Registration Exam, a response to pressures toward professionalization. As one intern astutely noted, ‘IDP record keeping is wonderful if one can feel comfortable looking at it flexibly.’ Both interns and architects understand the flaws of the system, but also its advantages. Accommodation to the conflicting environmental pressures is again made at two levels: (1) at the lowest levels of the profession, by interns and their architect-supervisors, through their falsification of records in order to simultaneously satisfy the market and the profession, and (2) at the highest levels of the profession, through the structural features of the IDP program that itself facilitates falsification.

Absence of effective monitoring of activities

Organizational leaders can maintain the façade that formal structure accurately reflects action only if they do not examine too closely what actually happens on the ground. Too much internal attention to institutionalized requirements can, after all, lead to gross inefficiencies; that is the problem solved by decoupling. Thus, minimal or ceremonial inspection and evaluation is a hallmark of decoupled organizations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The first line of attack is minimal evaluation or evaluation that is suspect because it is conducted by internal actors in the tradition of professional (be it architecture or military) self-regulation. IDP could be monitored via NCARB audits of Training Unit Reports; this does not, however, happen. There is no mechanism for auditing the accuracy of Training Unit Records; once certified by local architects, veracity of reports is assumed. In the case of Abu Ghraib prison, the evaluation that took place was internal and remained secret for quite a while. Thus, an internal report by General Ryder (whose findings were partially disputed by the later Taguba, 2004, report) and a series of reports from the International Red Cross (Slevin and Wright, 2004) were not made public until after the scandal broke in the mainstream press. That said, Taguba’s report was publicly released upon its completion, breaking with the military’s string of secretive, internal, ceremonialized monitoring.

In addition to minimal and internal evaluation, there was also little accountability for problematic behavior when it was identified. This speaks to the organizational leaders’ strategies for responding, or not, to being ‘outed’ for deviant behavior in the ranks. In the months leading up to the Abu Ghraib prison abuse, Taguba found that, ‘After escapes, follow-up and accountability were lacking. Investigations into escapes were “rubber-stamped” and approved by Karpinski, but there was no evidence that any of the general’s orders for changes were followed’ (Higham et al., 2004: A01).

Similarly, in architecture's IDP, NCARB did not establish any official penalties for falsification. Findings from the initial surveys and a small follow-up survey that queried directly about falsification show that it was widely known that IDP 'has no teeth' (in the words of a current intern) and most interns know there are few consequences for falsifying records. As one intern noted, 'there are no checks, no penalties, no way to get caught'. When asked in the follow-up survey what NCARB might do if it caught someone falsifying records, 31 percent thought the individual would simply be asked to re-submit an accurate form. Less than 10 percent of interns surveyed thought a serious penalty would be assessed, such as having hours denied, being suspended or being kicked out of the program. In both cases, the relatively empty regulatory environment increases the likelihood of deviance, especially in the context of conditions of strain and cultural definitions in favor of deviance.

Minimal or ceremonial monitoring is particularly easy to implement when work is done outside the presence of managers. Although Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski commanded Abu Ghraib prison until 19 November 2003, Taguba's 2004 report found that she rarely visited the prison, especially after the insurgency exploded. Instead, she supervised the prison from the Baghdad Airport (Higham et al., 2004). Similarly, NCARB's IDP tracks intern hours in various tasks at a great geographic distance, keeping records in Washington DC for work accomplished in local architecture firms around the country. Although geographic distance need not produce weak monitoring, it certainly facilitates it.

Confronted with deviance: the response

Deviance is the dirty secret of decoupled organizations. That is, to effectively function in an environment with conflicting norms, workers engage in innovation, cooperation or flexible behavior, each of which can fairly easily cross the line into deviance. Given this, it is not surprising that leaders of decoupled organizations resist self-inspection and, more significantly, change in organizational structures or procedures. Their resistance draws from two domains: (1) the sheer efficiency of deviant behavior impels the organization to ignore or trivialize it, and (2) the obvious availability of a deviant actor on whom to pin blame allows the organization to deflect criticism. We see both in the IDP and Abu Ghraib cases.

Overall, there is significant evidence that warning signs of trouble in Abu Ghraib were systematically ignored or glossed over by the military. The International Red Cross, other human rights organizations, the FBI, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Coalition's Provisional Authority and even the State Department sent out early warnings of potential problems in the prison (see Chandrasekaran and Wilson, 2004; Gellman and Smith, 2004; Higham and Stevens, 2004; Slevin, 2004; Slevin and Wright, 2004; White, 2004; Wright and Kessler, 2004). By all accounts, nothing changed and no one was punished as a result of these reports, another hallmark of

decoupled organizations. Once the allegations of abuse became public, individuals—Military Police, commanders—were blamed for their individual deviant behavior, thus deflecting attention from the wider systemic issues that shaped the deviant behavior. Individual ‘bad apples’ and ‘poor leadership’ became convenient scapegoats for deeply entrenched organizational strategies and processes.

Similarly, despite a thorough dissemination of the research findings with respect to falsification among architectural interns (e.g. Hill and Quinn, 1998; Mitgang, 1999; Quinn, 2003) and seemingly genuine concern of leaders in the profession, these findings have had little impact on the structure and administration of IDP. NCARB has instituted some internal monitoring of the Training Unit Report forms, but it is unclear how a process conducted within the confines of NCARB’s Washington office will be able to detect falsification originating in geographically dispersed architectural firms. No processes of independent verification (e.g. auditing firm records) have been implemented. The NCARB board did pass a resolution attaching some penalties to confirmed acts of falsification, but little effort has been made to make them known to interns and their employers. For example, sanctions for falsification of IDP forms are not directly mentioned in the official IDP Handbook. Tellingly, the recommendations of the Collateral Internship Task Force—an ad hoc committee charged with addressing the problems of internship and who had access to the findings of the evaluation—make no mention of the problem of falsification (Czarnecki, 2001).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that torturing prisoners of war and lying on documentation about professional training are bad acts. These bad acts are, however, the product of strain produced by a conflicted institutional environment and the interrelationship of organizational and individual responses to that strain. Popular explanations for deviance in organizations focus on individuals (e.g. the bad apples, the failed leaders) and their malfeasant or negligent behavior. As previous sociological research has found, however, individuals who engage in deviant behavior are often influenced by power relationships, cognitive processes or socialization processes within the organization (see Vandivier, 1972; Kelman and Hamilton, 1989; Gioia, 1992; Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993; Crelinsten, 2003). We add to the discussion about deviance and organizational context by proposing a general theoretical frame for examining how formal organizational structure—specifically, decoupling—facilitates and obscures participant deviance, and how formal structures are influenced by a complexity of external environmental factors (beyond simply economics and state policy making). That is, our analysis of the cases of Abu Ghraib prison and architecture’s IDP program allows us to identify a variety of specific structural practices—opaque and convoluted

reporting mechanisms, work done outside the view of management, the logic of confidence and good faith, ambiguous and constantly shifting policies and procedures, avoidance of inspection and evaluation—by which ignorance at the top of an organization is created and maintained while discretion, flexibility and innovation at lower levels is facilitated. Although our analysis describes the occupational deviance of lower-level workers, the lens of neo-institutional theory clarifies how these seemingly informal practices are connected to and indeed *the product of* formal structure and practice, including decoupling.

As Merton (1938) first noted, there are a variety of responses to mismatched cultural goals and institutionalized means. Innovation as a form of deviance gets the most attention, but there are other deviant responses including retreatism and ritualism. Interestingly, when applied to organizationally bounded behavior, a kind of 'functional specialization' may emerge between the organization and its participants, where structure is *ritualized* and so facilitates *innovative* individual responses. The response to conflicting environmental norms is a complex interplay between the organization and its actors, neither independent of the other and neither alone a sufficient explanation for organizational deviance.

These disparate cases illustrate that decoupling is not specific to for-profit organizations, but may be a more general organizational innovation in situations of environmental contradiction. Decoupling is a strategy for balancing the demands for organizational effectiveness with the organization's need for external legitimacy. Effectiveness, however, means different things in different contexts (e.g. profit in market-driven contexts, quantity of interrogations or control of prisoners in military contexts). Across such contexts, however, decoupling is a commonly used strategy to negotiate environmental contradictions. Thus, decoupling takes different forms in different types of organizations (e.g. state organizations, professional organizations), but its effects are the same: decoupling facilitates deviance. Given the mundaneness of decoupling in organizations, deviance in organizations is strikingly normal and predictable. This is powerfully illustrated through our comparison of the serious and highly publicized abuses of Abu Ghraib to the more mundane and obscure acts of architectural interns. This suggests that what happened in the former might be a result of more than the operation of torture regimes (Crelinsten, 2003). In a contemporary twist on Hannah Arendt's (1963) notion of 'the banality of evil', these horrendous acts of torture may find their roots in a mundane structural problem faced by many organizations in complex and contradictory environments.

Neo-institutional theory also helps account for organizational reactions and inaction when deviance is uncovered. As Pearce (2001) noted, decoupling creates plausible deniability for organizational leaders. That is, organizational decision makers can deflect attention from structure, practices and even policies by focusing on the lower-level participants who personally engage in deviant behavior. The scapegoats are clearly identified in the

cases we explored: Military Police officers who engage in prisoner abuse, military leaders who fail to adequately train or supervise personnel, architectural interns who lie on Training Unit Reports and architects who certify documents they know have been falsified. The formal structures that facilitate deviance, however, remain intact and largely unquestioned.⁵

Focusing on the organizational structures within which deviance occurs leads to a set of questions that move beyond 'who is to blame?' When the broader environment consists of competing or conflicting norms, organizational leaders and managers respond with structural arrangements that simultaneously absorb those conflicts and become the context for deviance. The organization effects a sort of buffering of lower-level workers from the environment by offering sufficient flexibility—in the absence of serious monitoring—to accomplish work. When deviance is detected, however, this buffering (i.e., the distancing) may be employed against these lower-level actors as it is now the organization and its leaders who are protected from blame by the process of decoupling and the scapegoating that ensues. In this is embedded the central dynamic of organizational decoupling: that deviance is normalized as long as it is invisible, and disavowed when it comes to light.

These findings have profound implications for policies aimed at correcting and preventing these forms of deviance in organizations. To begin to address these conundrums, we must move beyond demonstrating how white-collar crime differs from other forms of crime (Schlegel and Weisburn, 1993). Indeed, it may be more productive to dispense with the term white-collar crime altogether and turn instead to the study of organizationally bounded deviance. Such an approach elides some of the persistent problems in white-collar crime research (see Braithwaite, 1985) by moving beyond considerations of the occupational role of individuals or a fictitious agency of organizations. Neo-institutional theory provides the conceptual tools to effect an integrated, cross-level analysis of the *embedded context of organizations* and the *organizational embeddedness* of 'deviant' individuals.

Notes

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1. Note, however, that an early International Red Cross analysis did identify 'system' problems (Slevin, 2004).
2. In an unfortunate historic parallel, the Abu Ghraib prison was on the site of a notoriously brutal prison under the regime of Saddam Hussein.
3. For a description of the research methodology, see Quinn (2003).
4. There is an uncomfortable issue lurking in the background—beyond the scope of the present article—and that is the question of the particular *form* these tactics took. Historian Alfred McCoy (e.g. 2005) argues that the pictures from Abu Ghraib could serve as illustrations for a CIA interrogation manual that has been in circulation since the Cold War. While he offers no structural explanation for why the abuses occurred, he argues that their *cultural form* was influenced by these age-old and—interestingly, largely ineffective—interrogation tactics.
5. Interestingly, the believability of these scapegoating accounts may be strengthened by the broader ethos of individualism and anti-structuralism that pervades American culture.

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