

# Social Bonds to City Hall

How Appointed Managers Enter, Experience,  
and Leave Their Jobs in Western Local Government

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## CHAPTER 6

# Playing by the Rules in Portuguese Local Government: Interpretations of the Discourse of Administrative Leadership

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This study attempts to extend research on local government through an interpretation of the agents' discourse. By partially drawing on Anthony Giddens' perspective (Giddens 1984), we assume that discourse is built into the relation between the everyday conduct of municipal chief administrative officers (CAO) (and its respective rationalization) and the broader context where this *action* takes place. This means that we search for an empirical ground in the agents' *subjectivity*. This search has two implications: first, there is a departure from strict positivist or functionalist approaches; second, this demarcation is supported by a method that, being necessarily malleable, is at the same time aware of its uncertainty.

### *Rationalities, Power Relations and the Organization*

Traditional social scientific theories tend to gravitate between structures or systems on the one hand, and individuals bearing rational strategies on the other. This discourse thus tends to favour the idea of integration, of an individual and a social reproduction that unites society and (in an indirect manner) scientific discourse itself. A possible starting point for a different perspective would be to assume the importance of the mechanisms behind that reproduction, the process by which *meaning* is produced.

The concept of bureaucracy is a good example of this argument: the bureaucratic organization is often simplified in order to symbolize a kind of machine that generates dysfunctions, partly due to the actors' strategies (Merton 1949; Selznick 1949; Gouldner 1954; Crozier 1964), or, in a somewhat opposite interpretation, a machine that simply generates a neutral framework for the above mentioned societal or organizational integration (Woodward 1965; Pugh *et al.* 1969; Perrow 1972). A common scientific strategy uses both perspectives in an effort to improve the efficiency and transparency of bureaucratic organizations expecting to eliminate their *neurotic* po-

tential. The problem is that the scientist usually sees himself becoming either an instrument or an *academic* outsider for the reproduction of that bureaucracy. A possible alternative to this instrumentalization would be a stronger concern with epistemological and theoretical problematization, avoiding an excessive belief in its effective impact and assuming the humble and hermeneutic status of scientific work.

In the more specific context of local administration, it is necessary to sustain a perspective that is aware of the presence of multiple frameworks. This awareness results from the combination of theoretical and empirical sources. Thus, we argue that ideas, such as those derived from Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration (Giddens 1984) and from the French post-structuralism (Foucault 1983; Deleuze & Guattari 1988) can be quite illuminating, since finding more or less evident features in the context under consideration is interpreted in order to privilege their relative condition, in the sense that those features are not only malleable but also reflect local signs of an inescapable relational context.

Our particular concern with the administrative structuration of local governments does not mean that the presence of a political dimension in such a context can be ignored. Power is here more than an inevitable element derived from the organization's nature. A relational theory of power sees the entire organization as an entity produced and reproduced by a frame of structures and actions embedded in power relations. In addition to this perspective, Michel Foucault (1979) develops a critical argument, stressing the diffuse character of such relations and assuming an overall condition of modern societies and organizations in which people become subjects, in the sense that they are simultaneously 'subjectified' and constituted as isolated individuals.

It could be argued that this perspective prevents the search for a solid empirical basis, since the key concept of power has a diffuse and relational nature. However, what is being suggested is that since power is above all something that creates and shapes structures and actions, research conducted on this basis is not focused on power itself, but on its effects, being the *subjectification* of the actors involved. This means that the separation between a macro and a micro level is quite artificial and that any understanding of the multiple frameworks that involve local governments' administrative personnel requires a methodology which can simultaneously focus on a structural or institutional background and on the agents' strategies, tactics and reactions that reflect dynamics of empowerment and disempowerment, constrained by a more general frame of power relations.

### *A Brief Remark on the Methodology*

The empirical approach we are developing here sees administrative personnel in local governments as engaged in a frame of relations that involve constant exchanges of power. In this sense, to assume that such a group has a stable identity is misleading, since those people face a constant dynamic of relations that involve different purposes or effects, varying from a simple recognition of the role performed by the administrative officer to the search for control over strategic positions.

In an attempt to define patterns in the dynamic identities and strategies within the organization, our perspective aims to combine two rationalities often seen as contenders: the first one usually combines a global strategy with subsequent tactics, while the other tends to be a more confused or ambiguous process. As many recent theories stress, social agents share these two poles of social action. The failure of *technocratic* organizational theories suggested above can thus be seen as an unsuccessful attempt to eliminate *ambiguous* behaviour, wrongly believed as irrational, that was allegedly blocking the organization's efficiency. A first important rupture in this technocratic view is attained by studies that stress organizational ambiguity with regard to technology, decision-making and participation (for an overview see Reed 1985).

Dealing with empirical findings, we assumed that the two rationalities were expressed by municipal CAOs in two different ways: the more calculating rationality, corresponding to their 'discursive consciousness' (Giddens 1984, 7), was particularly evident when CAOs were confronted with the survey conducted in 1996 (see technical appendix) or with the presence of a researcher, as was the case in the interviews conducted between 1991 and 1995 that we also consider relevant for this study. The other *rationality*, more reactive or emotional, more often seeking the immediate effect or benefit, is particularly present in CAOs' everyday actions, corresponds more to their 'practical consciousness' (Giddens 1984, 7), which we tried to capture through a general interpretation of our empirical materials, namely through the crossing of some variables of the survey and through qualitative data (interviews, structured observation) related to that 'everyday action'.

Finally, this study shares some similarities with the one developed by Morten Balle Hansen (see the following chapter), since it also deals with the relation between the *games* concerning organizational rules and the way these games are rationalized and enacted. We consider as crucial a contextual game, played around the general rules that push Portuguese local government into a peripheral position.

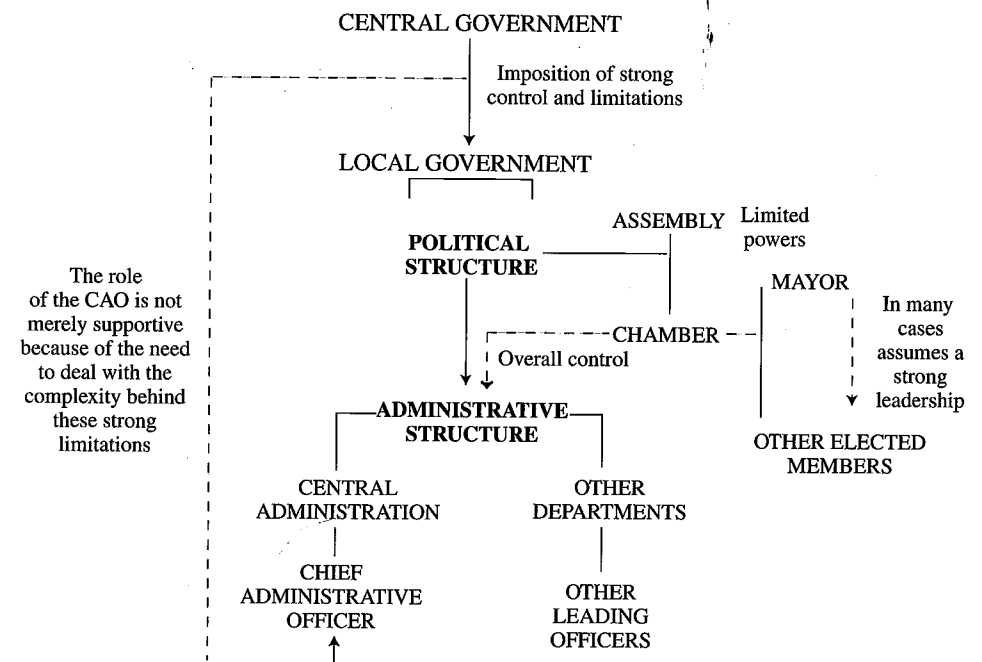
### *The Political-Administrative System Surrounding the CAO*

The context surrounding the CAOs' position and rationalities is heavily influenced, on one hand, by the political structure that governs Portuguese local government and, on the other, by the body of legislation that stands as a permanent concern and source of legitimization for the CAOs' activities.

As we try to illustrate in figure 6.1, Portuguese municipalities, despite a 'political status' that grants them relatively high autonomy (elected bodies, financial autonomy, extended duties), have in fact a low 'legal status', in the sense that they see their functions as very limited (Goldsmith 1995, 247). This low legal status can be seen as a consequence of multiple factors, some of them present in local leader's opinions. In fact, they tend to highlight the lack of financial resources and the complexity of bureaucratic procedures as the most important barriers to the development of their policies. The historical context is one of centralization, a tradition that has

hardly changed under the democratic regime established after 1974. Two examples illustrate our point: first, the recent defeat, by a referendum, of a regionalization project that had the support of a majority of local leaders but which faced a strong opposition in many local communities, directed mainly against the geographic delimitation of the different regions. Second, we find that national leaders, whether in central government or in key positions in political parties, are rarely recruited from among local government leaders. These leaders, if invited to occupy these important positions, tend to be reluctant, preferring to maintain their role as influential persons in their local communities.

Figure 6.1: Political and administrative structures of Portuguese local government.



It is important to note that this dependent role played by Portuguese local government is nevertheless crucial to the political struggle involving central and local government relations. The mayor tends to act as an advocate for the local community in its demands. Recent changes in local government legislation have increased the mayor's powers. Thus, the mayor has become the real chief executive officer (CEO) of the municipality, since he is also responsible for the management and direction of human resources, and he has the power to 'change or revoke acts carried out by municipal personnel' (section 2 of Article 53, Act 100/84, amended by Act 18/91). Figure 6.1 highlights this leading role assumed by the mayor; however, since the council (chamber) is elected according to a proportional system (in some cases there is not a single party majority), this leadership is weakened if the mayor faces a hostile and strong opposition.

The administrative structure, being more diversified than what is shown in figure 6.1, is clearly divided into different 'services' or 'departments', each one with its respective hierarchy and usually placed under the overall responsibility of one of the elected members. However, the 'general' or 'central administration' (led by the CAO) is almost always under the mayor's direct supervision. Since the legal framework for the CAO's activity has recently changed, we will present it in more detail.

Until 1984, the administrative functions of Portuguese municipalities were under the responsibility of a chief secretary, a position similar to that of a chief executive officer in other countries. The chief secretary worked under a national board placed under central government control: his status and functions were defined by national administrative law, which was applicable countrywide. This situation began to change after the 1974 democratic revolution, which proclaimed the principles of decentralization and local autonomy.

The administrative structure of Portuguese local governments was thus consolidated between the years 1984 and 1991, though at the expense of a bureaucratic and dispersed legal framework. Briefly, there are three laws (with some additional amendments) that we regard as the most relevant: (1) Act 116/84, a general frame determining the municipal autonomy to organize local administration, revoking the old national board (1936); (2) Act 247/87, defining the careers and recruitment of local government personnel, enacting nominations as the common procedure (this principle was revoked four years later); (3) since the recruitment of leading officers in public administration was regulated in 1989, central government passed Act 198/91, which determined the status of leading administrative personnel placed in municipalities.

Each municipality is to set up and elaborate its own organization and personnel. Thus, the activities of chief administrative officers can vary from one municipality to another. Generally, they participate in the drawing up and carrying out of the municipality's policies and budgets. They also participate in human resource management and supervision and manage organizations that belong to the general directorate of the department, division or area under the authority of the mayor (or other councillors). National law also determines a somewhat unstable position for CAOs, for these professionals must be recruited on a temporary basis (three years, but renewable). These contracts, known as 'commissions of service', are equivalent to others for leading personnel in public administration.

That we are dealing with a confused legal framework can be confirmed if we recall that Act 116/84, the first attempt to reorganize local governments' technical and administrative services, has been amended in various articles, many of them changed seventeen months later (Act 44/85).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the regulations for recruiting

1 An important change from Act 116/84 to Act 44/85 relates to the financial situation of the chief administrative officers: instead of earning up to 50% of their basic wage from their function as notary in municipalities' contracts, the limit was increased up to 70%. Recently, some CAOs lost this privilege, as their mayors interpreted this 'private' notary public as irregular.

technical or administrative personnel are dispersed in several laws, as in many cases national laws were later (but only partially) adapted to the municipal context.

There is indeed an interesting outcome of this legal *jumble*: in 1991, recognizing the persistence of irregular recruitment and promotion in many municipalities, the government passed a law (Act 413/91, amended in 1992) that prescribed severe financial punishments for any future violations. Elected members are now personally responsible for any undue payments made to personnel who have been irregularly recruited or promoted.

In a general appraisal, chief administrative officers, based on their financial and mainly legislative knowledge, control an important resource: the interpretation of rules. So, it is not evident, as some CAOs maintain, that their importance is decreasing. As one of our interviewees explained:

My duty is to execute and to decide ... I mean, I decide (...) in terms of giving legal advice so that the elected bodies may decide; furthermore, I decide on the administrative queries that may occur, like when licensing private buildings' construction: the officer asks me if a certain project needs the municipality's permission, or if any other entity should be consulted - there I'm the one who decides, I must say 'it has to be done this or that way' (...) When there is doubt about a promotion, I'll have to decide.

If the CAO can be seen as a disempowered agent in the whole local government *game*, we must recognize that he is nevertheless a relevant *player*, as he uses his resources (mainly control over important rules) in order to mediate parts of the relations between local government and other agents.

According to Pierre Grémion, there is a local political-administrative system that connects the external and the organizational contexts through 'relays' (mediating brokers). Thus, 'permanent networks are structured around some *relays* who become crucial in the organization's concrete action' (Grémion 1976, 12). In this context, it is possible to understand the CAO as a special type of relay (see figure 6.1): operating in the core of the bureaucratic structure, maintaining a permanent relation with external agents, supporting many of the decisions made by the political structure.

### *Between Rules and Rationalization: the Chameleonic CAO*

In the previous section we focused on the institutional arrangements relevant to the position occupied by chief administrative officers. Here we wish to emphasize that the impact of the *formal* context varies according to certain characteristics of the CAOs, including the way they rationalize a whole set of rules and relations that constitute the everyday activity of these professionals.

A central variable for the characterization of Portuguese CAOs is their educational background. As we show in table 6.1, this background is strongly influenced

by the CAOs' age. This is explained by a more general cause: Portugal saw the global educational level increasing, particularly in the last two decades.

Table 6.1: Age 'versus' educational background of Portuguese CAOs %. (N = 102).

Age	Years in school			Total	N
	6 - 9	10 - 12	13 or more		
29 - 42	3	11	86	100	36
43 - 52	25	43	33	100	40
53 - 67	42	35	23	100	26
Total	22	29	49	100	102

Total  $\chi^2 = 33,865$ ; probability of non-association: less than 0.0001.

Source: U.Di.T.E. survey. Two respondents did not answer one or both of the questions.

We see in table 6.1 the difference between a younger generation, more educated, and the older CAOs, who surely did not have the same opportunities to go to the university: Among the CAOs 43 years or older, only 21% has university degrees (not displayed) and only 29% had more than 13 years of full-time education (19 out of 66).

Most of the CAOs are in their current position for a few years (the average is between four and five years), independently of their age or educational background. This finding reflects the above-mentioned recent transformation in the formal structures of local government. It may also have an overall influence on the CAOs' attitude toward their jobs (in many cases a new post obtained after a long career in local administration), an attitude that reveals a tension between the desire to introduce changes and the importance of acting according to the rules. This orientation to rules is also related to the above-mentioned dependent role played by Portuguese local government, but here seen in a more indirect manner. In order to understand the attitude of CAOs, we should remember that their position in local administration is closely related to the control over legislative knowledge. In Portugal, a particularly complex body of legislation is applicable to local administration: this is so because there has been a constant increase in local government duties, there are new rules deriving from the use of European funding, and there are national laws that need to be interpreted in the specific frame of local administration. Underlying this complexity, we again find the strong presence of the State (typical in non-advanced capitalist economies), that generates a global dependence of civil society toward the public institutions and thus requires control over the activities that involve the use of public resources.

#### *The Powerful Rule*

During our research, one of our recurring difficulties was the uniform attitude of chief administrative officers toward the legislation with which they have to deal

every day. This attitude can be summarized in the statement of one of our interviewees: 'in the good pursuit of my duties, first of all, it is necessary to have a profound knowledge of the legislation that rules us. Without a profound knowledge, one can't go very far'. Thus, we think of this attitude as a riddle, laying its solution possibly on the variation behind that common statement. In other words, a general concern with a very complex problem (the mentioned legal jumble), is probably rationalized by our agents in different ways.

We find a first source of diversity in the work routine of a CAO: it consists of a series of diversified and often brief contacts with many persons in order to deal with legal problems. However, this activity can be somewhat chaotic (from the CAO point of view). As the above-mentioned interviewee stated, 'there are many circumstances that really disturb the action. There are many problems that appear when I'm not expecting them. The unexpected, the difficulty in predicting what may happen during the day, raises difficulties and forces me to change the plans I've made in the beginning'. Another CAO wrote a specific note in the survey stressing the variety and adventure contained in her job. There seems to exist a daily tension for the CAO, opposing the 'unexpected' events and the attempt to control them.

The priority that CAOs attribute to the knowledge of legislation is probably the solution they find for that tension. When confronted with a (hypothetical) concrete situation that demands a rating between three possible strategies (see table 6.2), 68% of the Portuguese CAOs prefer to comply with established rules and procedures.

One of the CAOs we interviewed used the image of the 'traffic warden' to illustrate his role. It is somewhat similar to the concept of 'relay' used above. In a context where rules become pre-eminent, the task of keeping the flow of rules in a sustainable status, avoiding accidents (violations) gains new importance.

Table 6.2: First priority given to different forms of dealing with a situation that demands a choice, in per cent (N = 100).

Possible strategy	CAOs who mention it as first priority %
Observing the established rules and procedures (e.g., laws, regulations and internal procedures)	68
Accomplishing tasks efficiently and quickly	19
Ensuring that all those involved with decision-making are satisfied with the decision-making processes and their outcome	13
Total	100

Source: U.Di.T.E. survey. Four respondents did not answer the question.

However, there are always margins of uncertainty, situations that show that these bureaucratic organizations are also, to a certain extent, 'loosely coupled systems' (March & Olsen 1989). The body of legislation can be interpreted in different manners. There are also circumstances where a rigid application of legal principles could endanger the organization's stability.

This seems to be the case with the employees' assessment (one of the duties of CAOs and other leading officers of the same rank). There are four possible grades (insufficient, sufficient, good and very good), but in fact CAOs adopt a criterion that in reality neutralizes the purpose of this assessment: they give the 'insufficient' or even the 'sufficient' mark to an employee only in exceptional situations, oscillating between the 'good' and the 'very good'. As one of the CAOs stated, 'In conclusion, good is the normal measure. It is what we want here, otherwise it would be a calamity.'

There is a difference between giving priority to the observation of rules and admitting that these rules can be broken. Hence, table 6.3 shows that in spite of being divided about the importance of keeping the rules, a sizable proportion of our respondents believe that no employee in the organization should ever break the rules (45%, whereas 55% express some doubts or disagree). Confronting this result with the variable 'educational background', we notice that the two most significant clusters are in opposite positions: on one hand, we have those who are more *educated* and tend to be less rigid about the possibility of breaking rules (32%); on the other hand, we find those 28% of CAOs who spent less years in school and who emphasize that rules should never be broken.

Table 6.3: Compliance to rules versus years of education. %

Years of full-time education	Rules of an organization should not be broken - not even when the employee thinks it is in the best interest of the organization			
	Totally agree	Other answers	Total	N
From 6 to 12 years	55	45	100	51
13 years or more	35	65	100	49
Totals:	45	55	100	100

Total  $\chi^2 = 4,123$ ; probability of non-association: 0.042.

Source: U.Di.T.E. survey. Four respondents did not answer one or both of the questions.

This result helps us to clarify how organizational rules are dealt with in the everyday activities of chief administrative officers. Our argument is that there is a possible difference between those who tend to assimilate the importance of formal rules versus those who maintain a certain 'discursive' distance toward the rules. Of course, part

of the explanation for this finding lies in the meaning of the word 'rule'. Here we will assume a twofold meaning, as Giddens also suggests: 'it is commonly taken for granted among social scientists that the more abstract rules - e.g., codified law - are the most influential in the structuring of social activity. I would propose, however, that many seemingly trivial procedures followed in daily life have a more profound influence upon the generality of social conduct' (1984, 22).

In the case of the CAOs who reveal a strict attitude, we suggest that they tend to mix those intensive and informal rules with the formalized and strongly sanctioned ones. That is, a more *severe* CAO tends to support his practice (i.e. the way he follows organizational regulations and conduct, particularly those that mediate his relation with others, such as language and conversation rules) assuming that not only legal rules but also many other tacit rules have a formalized and strongly sanctioned nature. The apparently liberal CAO who does not penalize the employees is somehow replacing a rule by a new and also rigid one ('otherwise it would be a calamity'). It is also important to note that part of the work methods in these administrative departments were introduced by the CAO: again, a more severe CAO may be quite proud of his work and prohibit any violation of the rules he has partly formulated.

In the case of the less rigid CAOs with a higher educational background, they seem to extend the way they follow formal rules to the *iceberg* of informal rules. They play with a larger margin of uncertainty, possibly thinking that rules need not be followed or that there are indeed different interpretations of a rule.

#### *The Modernist Discourse of Local Administration*

We shall now highlight another aspect of CAOs' discourse: namely, how they perceive their role as persons involved in possible changes that may affect local government. What we note is that almost all CAOs are in favour of the implementation of important changes: survey results show that they praise organizational change, that they value the employees' participation and find the development of new routines and work methods important or very important in their daily activity. Many CAOs also find their job quite attractive: as one CAO told us, 'knowing the persons, the elected members with whom we work, the place where we work (...) knowing every little corner of the house, all this is more than enough to justify why I'm not attracted to any other job'.

CAOs thus seem to be perfectly integrated in what we could term the modern *image* of local administration. This discursive rationalization, allowing these professionals 'to present themselves as active, modern managers' (Costa *et al.* 1998, 222), is depicted in table 6.4. We compared CAOs' attitude toward reorganization with their educational background, not in order to reveal an association between the variables, but to instead demonstrate the non-association. A majority of the CAOs clearly sustain the need to reorganize local administration (60%, opposed to the 7% that we count as holding a conservative position), independently of their educational background (or of their age, since these two variables are closely related).

Table 6.4: Attitude toward the need for reorganization 'versus' education. %

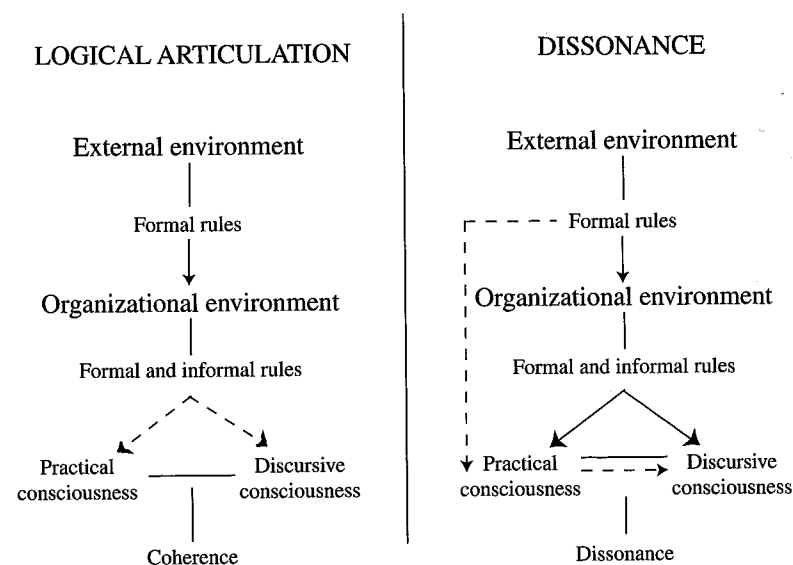
Years of full-time education	The need for change and reorganization of the local government sector has been greatly exaggerated			Total
	Totally agree %	Partly agree or undecided %	Disagree or strongly disagree %	
Until 12 years	6	37	58	100
13 years or more	8	30	62	100
Total	7	33	60	100

Total  $\chi^2 = 0.591$ ; probability of non-association: 0.7442.

Source: U.Di.T.E. survey. Two respondents missing.

At first glance, these results are not consistent with the previously emphasized over-estimation of the rules. However, more than a contradiction between what CAOs say and do, there is an effective tension on their discursive consciousness, oscillating between two poles: one, the ideal image of their role and of the need to change the rules of the game (e.g., the struggle for de-bureaucratization); the other, an image brought on by their practical consciousness, by their everyday action, pushing them toward the reproduction and constant surveillance of the rules (formal or informal).

Figure 6.2: Contexts for the articulation of practical and discursive consciousness.



This discursive *dissonance*, sketched out on the right side of figure 6.2, can also be seen as a consequence of the prevailing discourse in the organizational environment

(which is a decisive source for the CAOs socialization, as most of them worked their way up through the ranks of public administration). As officers in leading roles, CAOs also represent their local government, they know 'every little corner of the house'. Thus, CAOs are consonant with the modernist discourse of local government, which highlights the demand for more power to local government and the general belief that a reform of the entire public administration system is needed.

Nevertheless, many of the changes introduced in local government ended in more legislation and tighter rules, resembling what Michel Crozier (1964) termed the 'vicious circle' of bureaucracy. Thus, the modernist discourse that CAOs adopt tends to confirm Giddens's idea that: there are obvious sources of tension between practical consciousness (constant surveillance over rules) and discursive consciousness (the modernist discourse).

### Conclusion

In this study, we suggested that research on local government should focus on the hermeneutic character of social science, stressing that 'the discovery of (...) generalizations (...) is only one concern among others that are equally important to the theoretical content of social science. Chief among these other concerns is the provision of conceptual means for analysing what actors know about why they act as they do' (Giddens 1984, xix). Observing the relation between chief administrative officers' discourse and its context, we then searched for those conceptual means, through the analysis of survey and interviews' results.

The survey presented a stimulating challenge to us: some of the results revealed the specificity of the Portuguese case, particularly the fact that CAOs, in their everyday activities, attach great importance (more than in any other of the countries where the survey was conducted), to following established rules and procedures. Embedded in the local political-administrative system, the CAO is a special type of relay (see figure 6.1), operating in the core of the bureaucratic structure and maintaining a permanent relation with external agents, (legally) supporting many of the decisions made by the political structure.

As we approach the organizational environment, we find the CAO as an agent deeply concerned with the observation of rules, assuming the role of 'traffic warden'. This led us to clarify how organizational rules are dealt with in the everyday action of chief administrative officers. As Giddens explains, 'the discursive formulation of a rule is already an interpretation of it, that may in itself alter the form of its application' (1984, 22-23). This point deserves clarification. In fact, Giddens follows Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of the 'language game'. According to Jürgen Habermas, this conception 'determines the use of the linguistic expressions, not as the result of individual teleological actions on the part of isolated, purposively acting subjects but as the 'common behaviour of mankind.' Moreover, 'the network of activities and speech acts is constituted by an antecedent accord about an intersub-

jectively shared form of life, or by a preunderstanding of a common practice regulated by institutions and customs' (1995, 63). Given the language game behind the use of the term 'rule', there is a possible difference between CAOs who tend to assimilate the importance of formal and informal rules versus those who maintain a certain 'discursive' distance toward the rules. This difference is rather subtle, but it shows a possible fracture between more and less conservative CAOs.

The other result that we found in agreement with the overvaluation of rules is the fact that almost all CAOs are in favour of implementing major organizational changes: survey results show that they value the employees' participation in this change and that they find the development of new routines and work methods important or very important in their daily activity. We interpret these attitudes as a global effect of CAOs' organizational socialization, of an environment characterized by a unanimous discourse that praises the need to modernize local administration.

More than an ornament, this perception of being a modern manager is an important ingredient in the mediation between CAOs' practical and discursive consciousness. They stand at a peripheral position in the whole political game, facing the tension between the need to keep playing the game (as members of the local government's *modernist brotherhood*) and the obligation to play it with their own means. CAOs must be the guardians of the rules' temple.

## CHAPTER 7

### Actors, Structures, and Rules: the Life of Danish CEOs

BY MORTEN BALLE HANSEN

#### *Introduction*

No end of trouble has been brought about by the tendency of philosophers to presume that the question 'What is X doing?' has a unitary answer; ... For it soon becomes apparent that there are many possible responses to such a question: someone may be said to be 'bringing down a metal implement on wood', 'chopping logs', 'doing his job', 'having fun', etc. ... all these characterizations can be quite correct descriptions of what is going on – although, depending upon the context in which the query is formulated, only certain of them will be 'appropriate' [Giddens 1993, 87].

The literature on managerial work offers numerous descriptions of managerial behaviour (Carlson 1951; Mintzberg 1973; Stewart 1982). Colin Hales (1986; 1993) provides an illuminating review of many of these descriptions under the heading of 'form' and 'content', while Tony Watson (1994) has written an eminently ethnographic 'search for management'. The behavioural tradition has been criticized for being atheoretical (Fondas & Stewart 1994; Hales 1986; Mintzberg 1991), for ignoring the managers' embeddedness in institutional settings (Willmott 1987) and for a number of other 'failures'. This chapter addresses some of these issues. A conceptual framework for analyzing the structuration of managerial work from an institutional actor-structure perspective is elaborated and applied to a case study of the work of Danish municipal CEOs. The three most important methods were structured observations of fifteen Danish CEOs, semi-structured interviews with the same fifteen CEOs and a survey of all Danish CEOs. The structured observations were basically a replication of Mintzberg's study of managerial work (1973) with two important adjustments. Inspired by a suggestion by Martinko & Gardner (1985), the importance of the particular social context and an interest in the meaning of the interaction for the actors were emphasized in order to provide 'thick' description (Geertz 1973).

The study shares an interest in some basic questions from the behavioral research tradition: What do managers do? Why do managers act the way they do? How can