

Extended Abstract:

Rhetorical Dimensions of Place in the Context of Agency Organizational Behaviors

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At first blush, the notion of “incorporating place into decision-making” seems to imply that “place must not be incorporated into decision-making right now.” I think that topic remains an open question, however, and suggest that we approach the issues from more of a research platform rather than an advocacy position. The purpose of this paper, then, is to analytically consider the relations between place and decision making, beginning with observations about how these topics currently intersect in natural resource management, and assessing (and demonstrating) how they might, or should.

First, “knowing place” has always been a central feature in natural resource management – or, at least, “knowing place” in a specific way (as “resource”).

Managerial actions in natural resources contexts seem to be almost always based on detailed understanding of specific sites (“places,” ecologically and objectively defined) where people engage in activity of one sort or another. For example, the basic model of “the outdoor recreation system” includes three elements: a visitor; management actions; and necessarily, the natural resource base (a site, a “place”). Most recreation management texts also give a fairly standardized inventory of the characteristics of the sites (places) where recreation occurs; these features include (Jubenville 1978) soil, water, air, flora, and fauna, and are addressed within the professional description of “recreation resource management” (with “resource” as another name for “place”) as

including site management, vegetation management, landscape management, ecosystem management, and hazard management, to name a few.

These observations lead to the conclusion that managers know and understand place (typically as “resource paces”), and work place-based knowledge into their decision-making activities, in highly objective, routine ways that presuppose the rightness and inevitability of manager’s discourses about the topic of place. A manager “knows place” by having well-established and predictable ways of thinking about ecological and functional features of spaces-defined-as-places.

Second, because managers apply place-based knowledge in routine ways, their bureaucratic decision-making practices presuppose the rightness and inevitability of their own discourses about places.

Managerial activities occur within existing bureaucratic contexts, and calls for new types of citizen participation and collaboration with managers (based on citizens’ direct and close understanding of place, and the “meanings” they describe as valued) are nevertheless constrained by bureaucratic structured and function – and efforts to incorporate other views into routine practices of decision-making must take into account the bureaucratic contexts that sustain the routine practices of managing.

Thus, place discourses that diverge from those produced by managers, however, are likely to be unanticipated, and given unequal attention, if they’re even acknowledged to exist – and it is unclear what managers should do with place meanings and understandings that are outside their prevailing interpretations. Moreover, as bureaucratic organizing processes become routine, the objects they manage also are

objectified, stabilized, and routinized ... with the consequence that places, and people's sentiments about places, are also generalized and become less place specific, less unique, less meaningful.

Jubenville (1978, p.7-8) defines "the managerial role in outdoor recreation" as being "very complex – incorporating resource management (effects of the landscape on the visitor and the visitor on the landscape), visitor management (enhancing the social environment in order to maximize the recreational experience), and service management offering necessary and desirable services so the user can enjoy both the social and the resource environs in which he (sic) participates."

Third, the routinization of managers' decision making processes also presupposes a taken-for-granted view of organizational structure and processes that support decision-making in natural resource management. As much as decision-making constitutes much of what managers do in their day-to-day work, and even though our fields are filled with how-to manuals about operations and administrative tasks, organizational behavior in general, and decision-making processes within natural resource agencies in particular, are vastly under-studied. If anything, management is defined as a problem-solving process – rather than an area of scholarly investigation into organizational processes.

There seems to be, in fact, very little research specifically focusing on processes of decision-making in resource management. (Anticipating and encouraging such research by considering how one might "fit" place ideas into managerial processes thus also seems timely.) Moreover, the lack of foundational research into organizational processes in natural resources management does not seem to limit claims, however, that

organizational transformation is needed. It is common these days, for example, to call for agencies to move from top-down managerial styles into more bottom-up, grassroots, collaborative processes.

There seems to be considerable discussion in all our literatures about transforming planning (and one presumes, associated managerial processes such as decision-making more generally) from top-down styles into more bottom-up, grassroots, collaborative processes. Given that there is no parallel discussion about reforming bureaucratic structure to accommodate new ways of sharing power, the new collaborative agenda seems to me to be an exercise in “nostalgic democracy” ... democracy that we envision as an ideal, but not necessarily a democracy that agencies find practical in application.

It is not entirely clear that these processes either: (a) assist managers in making better decisions; (b) assist citizens in having their views heard and applied; (c) assist environmental organizations in being more efficient or effective, (d) assist planners in applying tools and techniques more productively, or (e) assist researchers in developing greater insights about place, about organizing, about decision making and applications, or about much of anything else.

These observations lead to several important questions. First, what is it exactly about “place” that needs to be incorporated into decision making? That is, what aspects of the developing body of knowledge about place issues seems especially relevant for decision making processes, and vice versa? (Is it people’s attachments to places, or the strengths of their feelings about places, or whatever we come to know as “meanings” of place, or the ways places are used, or something else? Is it the ecology of places, features

about the geography of places, or some combination of things beyond the social, psychological, and utilitarian aspects of places?)

A second, parallel question is this: What is it about decision making specifically that we feel needs to be revised to accommodate place knowledge or understandings that managers now lack? (Is it: organizational restructuring to better accommodate citizens' concerns or meanings? Is it decision making procedures themselves that are not working? Is it some sort of organizational process or function that cannot obtain or manage certain kinds of place understandings or knowledge? Is it lack of leadership?)

Answering these questions (which I intend to do in the next version of this abstract / paper) serves as a basis for considering new ways of thinking about the “place” of place in the context of organizational behavior in natural resource agencies. The second part of the paper will focus specifically on planning aspects of natural resource decision making – and will provide a context for discussing place by applying Friedmann's (1987) analysis and critique of planning philosophies.

One approach to understanding the relationships between place and organizational behavior (especially relative to decision making) is found in Friedmann's (1987) study of the emergence of scientifically-based planning. Asking “what are the characteristics of a good society?,” Friedmann described four philosophical traditions (social reform, social mobilization, policy analysis, and social learning) that support different bureaucratic structures and processes, and result in different approaches to social planning. He then asks whether these approaches are outdated in today's post-millennium world.

We might fruitfully adopt a similar approach in analyzing how place is currently understood and applied in the organizational processes of natural resource management, what philosophical traditions support contemporary approaches as well as challenges to current approaches, and what the consequences of alternative philosophical perspectives might be for bureaucratic action. In this analysis, I aim to particularly consider the rhetorical (i.e., persuasive) dimensions of place-based knowledge and organizational process.

In this paper, I use Friedmann's model to analyze the relationships between place, decision-making, and organizational process in natural resource management, focusing specifically on the rhetorical (i.e., persuasive) dimensions of place-based knowledge and organizational process.