Job-Rejection Letters as Bureaucratic Propaganda

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I analyze job-rejection letters received from departments of sociology, as instances of what Altheide and Johnson (1980) call "bureaucratic propaganda." My purpose is to show that mundane documents can contain portrayals that legitimate the sending organization. In job-rejection letters, departments consistently are portrayed as meeting ideal norms of conduct: their members are rigorous, fair and nurturant, and they employ universalistic criteria. Rejected applicants are consistently portrayed as possessing superior job qualifications. All failures of departments to attain ideal standards are excused by reference to uncontrollable contingencies. I argue that the portrayals are rhetorical, and are independent of departmental action. Their existence in such mundane documents illustrates both the detailed efforts made to legitimate organizations, and the pervasiveness of bureaucratic propaganda in the society.

In recent years, a considerable literature has developed about bureaucratically produced reports. Exemplified by the work of the ethnomethodologists (e.g., Garfinkel, 1967; Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963), part of this literature explains the processes of "practical reasoning" used to fit real-world events into standardized, bureaucratic categories. Items like crime and suicide records and school counselors' reports have been shown to be "managed" phenomena only vaguely related to the complex flux of events they purportedly describe (e.g., Littrell, 1973).

A related literature shows that bureaucratic documents, as well as bureaucratic behavior, can have rhetorical, often political, purposes and effects. For example, Goffman (1961:101-102) described how members of asylums created "institutional displays" for outsiders. Edelman's (1977) analysis of "political language" reveals that its banality serves to support any and all policies. Manning's (1977) "presentational strategies" depict the actions of organizations in idealized manner, as approximating widely respected norms of conduct.

Recently, Altheide and Johnson have developed the concept "bureaucratic propaganda," which incorporates all written features of such activities. They define this in the singular, as:

> Any report produced by an organization for evaluation and other prac-
> tical purposes that is targeted for individuals, committees, or publics
> who are unaware of its promotive character and the editing processes
> that shaped the report (1980:5).

A main purpose of such productions is the maintenance of the "appearance of legitimacy" (Altheide and Johnson, 1980:1).

The concept of bureaucratic propaganda draws attention to the role that documents play in the creation and maintenance of relationships among organizational insiders and outsiders. The authors suggest that bureaucratic documents should be expected to contain elements of persuasion usually associated with classical propaganda, but that, given prevailing standards of legitimacy, they should work most clearly to present "the image of the organizational form as rational and efficient" (Altheide and Johnson, 1980:42). And, unlike classical propaganda, bureaucratic propaganda should be encountered in diverse arenas in an organizational society.

When marshalling evidence in support of their concept, Altheide and Johnson almost exclusively offer concrete descriptions of how members of particular organizations manage information. Each instance they present is fully understandable only by reference to the specific goals, conflicts, structures and contingencies of that organization.[1] But organizationl members face common as well as idiosyncratic situations. Specifically, I follow Alfred Schutz's contention that knowledge of, and communication with, "contemporaries" requires use of typifications (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973:84-90). "Contemporaries" are those whom one knows not personally but as representatives of social "types" (e.g., a typical sociology job applicant). Any communication with a contemporary should be socially stereotyped, since it must be recognizable to and respected by a social type rather than by a personal acquaintance. Hence, there must be elements of bureaucratic propaganda that are *common* across a *class* of such documents.

We can deepen our understanding of the concept and the extent of its use, by analysis of the general contents of documents themselves. This has been done elsewhere, as with Edelman's (1977) and Gusfield's (1976) analyses of political and scientific documents. Such studies show that documents ranging from official state records to ledgers of religious organizations have "banal" components—they employ trite phrases, repetitive themes, and popular generalizations. At the same

time, these documents are "important." It is *expected* that they will be given attention. They are carefully scrutinized and discussed by relevant publics, and they affect action.

However, many documents are *not* "important." They may follow very restricted and codified formats that diminish the significance of their messages. They acquire a "throw-away" quality. Yet, they may still be significant in conveying organizational images. As such, these "mundane" documents may be important examples of bureaucratic propaganda. Almost never are such mundane documents analyzed.

I wish to extend the literature on bureaucratic propaganda to a particular example of just such mundane documents: academic job-rejection letters from sociology and related departments. Job-rejection letters are an interesting topic of investigation for two reasons. First, they fully meet the criteria for mundane documents. They are sent to a large number of applicants, with the manifest purpose of merely informing them that they will not be hired by the sending insitution.

Second, there is almost no literature on job-rejection letters. The rejection letter "style" has received some informal commentary, mostly in criticisms of the treatment of young Ph.D.s (Ledger and Roth, 1977; Anonymous, 1976; Lyson and Squires, 1978). But, there exists only a single reference to job-rejection letters, in *Sociological Abstracts*, between 1974 and 1984. In this study, Bobys and Willis (1980) assessed the prevalence of certain characteristics of rejection letters (e.g., their length) and demonstrated a statistical relationship between the prestige of the sending department and the tendency to offer "regrets" to recipients.

My purpose is to analyze job-rejection letters as items of bureaucratic propaganda. I will demonstate the existence of such "propaganda" in the most mundane of documents, and thus indicate something of the scope and detail of efforts that are made to construct and legitimate formal organizations.

The Study

My analysis is based on some 161 job-rejection letters, mostly from faculty recruitment committees in sociology departments. These include letters from 64% of the "top 25" doctoral programs in the country, plus letters from other doctoral, masters, bachelor and associate-level programs, and a few letters from programs in related fields (e.g., American Studies). This sample of convenience includes the entire contents of my personal file of rejections ($n = 113$), plus the non-

overlapping letters from the files of three colleagues $(n=43)$. Additionally, I requested and received copies of the form rejection letters from departments with which I have had formal affiliations $(n=5)$. I wrote one of the letters myself.

The letters were received by male doctoral candidates who had applied for positions as beginning assistant professors. However, various lines of evidence let us infer that the characteristics of recipients are not important; rather, the letters are mass-produced documents sent to a number of rejected applicants. First, members of a number of departments informed me that they employ standard letters, or sets of letters, that may be used for several years and that are sent to all rejected candidates. In fact, the departments with which I have had formal affiliations all supplied me with letters which contained uniform texts and blank areas where names, addresses, dates and salutations would be added.[2] Second, various characteristics of the letters themselves demonstrate the form nature of at least 57% of the sample. This includes (1) blurring, fadedness or glazing, which indicates mass duplication (14%), (2) use of an impersonal salutation ("Dear Applicant" or "Dear Colleague") or lack of salutation (16%), or (3) a difference in physical characteristics of the print between the body of the letter and the address/salutation (38%). Third, in some letters (12%), writers apologized for the use of "form" letters. Fourth, sometimes letters received by colleagues, or received in different years, have identical texts.

Since this sample is not randomly drawn, I do not claim that it represents all rejection letters. For example, all are dated between 1978 and 1980, a period characterized by a downturn in the sociology job market and a large number of applicants for advertised positions (see for example, Foster and Gregory, 1983). Over half the letters (55%) openly refer to this, mentioning either "large" numbers (31%) or more specific figures (24%) (e.g., "almost 300"; "one hundred forty-one"). Also, all the unsolicited letters went to applicants for the assistant professor position who ultimately landed positions in teaching or research. All the letters were responses to, or were created in preparation for, a mass of applications, so they can be assumed to be authentic letters of rejection. Thus, I will document "propagandistic" elements within this group of letters, though I will draw inferences to a wider realm. As with Jacobs' (1967) study of suicide notes, analysis is based exclusively on the letters themselves, and does not rely on information about how any given letter was created or how accurately it depicts the activities of members of that department.

Common Themes in Rejection Letters

While there are considerable differences in the form and style of letters in the sample, they share a number of themes that collectively present their departments as achieving bureaucratic ideals. However, they also legitimate their departments by reference to ideals of professionalism and humanitarianism that are antithetical to bureaucratic ideal characteristics. These themes—professionalism, helplessness, integrity, praise and personalism—are discussed below.

Professionalism

The most common theme is the professional nature of the rejecting department. This is first communicated by means of commonly recognized characteristics of formal communications. First, almost all the letters are on departmental stationery, on which the name of the university and often a sylized logo or picture appear. The address and phone number of the university—sometimes of the department—also appear. Use of such letterhead announces that the relationship is one between an institution and the individual. In one instance, the rejection is conveyed on a postcard. Here the name of the university appears under the name of the writer.

Letters always follow "business letter" formats. Date, address and signature all are present in 80% of the cases. In 86% of cases, there is a set of initials below the signature of the writer, indicating that the person warranted a secretary to type the letter. All the letters are typed. The rank or position of the writer is typed just underneath his or her name. The form of address also is formal. Except as noted above, applicants are addressed as "Professor," "Dr.," "Ms.," "Mr.," or so forth.

The style of language also is formal, and avoids colloquialisms. Where these do occur, they are set off by indicators that they should not be taken to mean that the letter is not formal. For example, one letter states that the receiver, along with several other candidates for a position, "were 'in the running,' to be colloquial." Interestingly, contractions like "I've" and "we've" are fairly common, and give a "personal" tone to some letters (see below). Conditional and indirect terms are common, as are use of third-person constructions and (less commonly) passive voice. While sometimes "trendy" terms are used (e.g., there was a lack of "interface" between a department's needs and a candidate's qualifications), generally the news is given straightforwardly.

Helplessness

A common theme is that of departmental difficulties, so that departments are portrayed as necesarily not fully in control of recruitment. Two general forms of this appear. First a number (52%) of letters indicate that departments cannot hire candidates who ostensibly are qualified for academic employment in the rejecting departments. Thus, one letter states that "we would have had no trouble filling a half-dozen faculty positions with persons who show promise of contributing greatly to this department." Another states that "[t]he fact is that it was a very difficult job to choose from among so many ["over 300"] good people, and I find myself wishing we had more than two positions to fill." Another expresses "distress . . . caused by our inability even to interview all the applicants who might competently fill the position. . . ." A variant on this theme states that an outside force or event (a strike, a budget cut, a position loss) has forced a curtailment, restriction or delay in hiring.

Second, some letters (12%) contain apologies for their standardized nature, or (13%) for the length of time it has taken to notify applicants. Thus, "I apologize for the form letter and the late date in notifying you. Both are due to the fact that we received almost 400 applicants for our one position." Again, the large number of applicants or an outside situation is often blamed, though some letters refer to the "hectic" nature of the job search.

Integrity

Another theme is the integrity and professionalism of the review process: "I can assure you that our review of your materials was not at all impersonal, but rather careful and thorough." More fully, "your application was logged upon receipt. . . . [A] Eleven were reviewed in terms of the candidates' qualifications and the requirements of the job openings." Some two-thirds (68%) of the letters mention one or another "integrity" topic, and in all those cases the departmental search is portrayed as a rigorous, rational, competitive process in which universalistic criteria were used exclusively. Those hired "seem to fit our needs most closely."

Several forms of such legitimating statements are used. Most commonly (in 38% of letters) the decision represents the wishes of a professional group: the "personnel committee," "the department," or "our entire collectivity." A third of the letters (33%) justify the rejec-

tion by reference to unnamed departmental "needs": e.g., "we have found that your qualifications do not suit our present needs for this position as fully as other applicants." Substantial numbers of letters mention the various stages of their search process (19%), that they will save the applicant's file (13%), or the precise specialty requirements for the position (10%). Fewer than five percent mention the loss of a position, the special qualifications sought, the general specialty areas sought, the sources of advertising of the position, the fact of missed deadline, democratic measures like a secret ballot, or the department's attempt to follow Affirmative Action guidelines. Some letters carry several of these messages.

Praise

A fourth theme concerns the appropriate qualifications of the rejected applicants. In this sample, no candidate is told that he or she is unsuitable for a position in the rejecting department. The closest message to "unsuitability" is "you do not meet our rather specific needs for this year as well as do some other candidates." Thus, departments send mass mailings telling applicants that "your qualifications appear outstanding." The departments are "impressed by the high calibre of intelligence and the excellent professional training and experience" of the rejected applicants. Those rejected would "have been a major asset to our program." In some cases, the individual's relative standing is mentioned, but only if it is high and only in generalities: ". . . you were in the top one-fifth of our numerous applicants and your record and background were certainly worthy of very stiff competition." An extreme case states that *all* of its applicants were outstanding. In most cases, this "praise" is not direct, but implied. While half (52%) mention the high qualifications of applicants in general, only 19% praise the recipient directly.

Personalism

Even though rejection letters are standardized, impersonal documents, almost all (95%) of letters in the file contain statements that imply a personal relationship or personal feelings of the sender. In addition to the mentioned use of personal "tone," rejected applicants are *told* that the letter writers or departments are personally concerned with them: 84% extend "thanks" or appreciation, or thank applicants "heartily," 56% give "best wishes," 49% act with "regret" or "sorrow." While regrets, thanks and best wishes are the most common personalisms, others also are used. One letter states that a com-

pensation for the task of selection was "the opportunity of becoming acquainted, at least indirectly, with such a variety of interesting sociologists."

Rejection-Letter Themes as Bureaucratic Propaganda

Despite individual variation, rejection letters in this sample share form and content. They present the sending department, the recipient, and the relationship between the two in stereotyped ways. Further, actions of the departments and their members are legitimated by these prsentations. The "hidden editing" used in the construction of these letters, along with their legitimation function, makes them instances of bureaucratic propaganda (Altheide and Johnson, 1980:5). I will discuss these two ideas separately.

Legitimation

The images used in the letters in this sample always present the sending departments as meeting widely respected norms of organization and conduct. Of course, this does not mean that each letter employs an example of every theme, as we have seen. Rather, each letter contains some combination of statements which legitimates the department. Further, contrary to Altheide and Johnson's expectation, legitimation also employs some non-bureaucratic images. This positive set of images is especially important in comparison with the absolute absence of delegitimating images.

Stereotyped presentations require both the inclusion of ideals and the exclusion of violations. In the sample, no letter contains a statement, or takes a form, that violates stereotyped ideals. None portrays the department as less than fully competent, motivated, or ethical. Nor do any portray condidates in ways that would challenge their claims of competence. No letter gives a concrete reason for rejection, except where this does not reflect on a candidate's true worth (e.g., ABD status, missed deadline, or loss of a position).

The variety of combinations indicates that there is a "grab bag" of statements, having rhetorical force, which writers use to craft legitimating accounts. In portraying the sending departments, writers can use combinations of the bureaucratic ideals of legality, rationality, universalistic criteria, and competence. These all are parts of Weber's (1946) conception of bureaucracy. Also, they can use the professional ideal of democracy and the humane ideal of personalism. Any combination of these justifies departmental action (Scott and Lyman, 1968) by reference to ideals that "anyone" should recognize (Garfinkel, 1967).

These create positive images of the department. In contrast, statements praising candidates, or mentioning the numbers of candidates or other constraints on the departments, appear defensive. By stressing difficulties, they excuse departments (Scott and Lyman, 1968) by indicating that events are not fully controllable. Those letters that contain apologies do so *only* with reference to contingencies that reasonably would tax even skilled professionals. Thus, "praise" statements both avoid challenging the applicants' claims of competence and excuse departments by stressing the number of praiseworthy applicants. If the department cannot consider *this* candidate, it is not to be blamed.

Hidden Editing

The rhetorical force of rejection letters in the sample stems *not* from the inherent accuracy of their presentations, but from the careful selection and formulation of their contents. I do not claim that these letters lie. I did not study the processes of constructing individual letters. However, there are reasons to believe that the letters are bureaucratic propaganda rather than factual descriptions of departmental reality.

First, consider the fact that letters offer only ideal images. A massive organizational literature indicates that there is a major gulf between ideal, formalized organizational structure and action on the one hand, and real organizational structure and action on the other (e.g., Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Generally, organizational members recognize that their particular organizations, offices or positions exist only as approximations of socially accepted types. Their activities often violate ideal prescriptions for such activities (e.g., Sutherland, 1949; Ermann and Lundman, 1978; see accounts in Westin, 1981), and they work to develop portrayals that more closely approximate ideals (e.g., Altheide and Johnson, 1980). Their activities range from full "fabrication" (Goffman, 1974:83) to selective inclusion and exclusion of descriptive statements.

Further, organizational theory indicates that members' behavior will violate ideals for a number of reasons (see Perrow, 1979:chs. 3-4). Unless sociology departments are anomalous organizational units, their members sometimes make off-the-cuff decisions, use personal preferences and prejudices, fight among themselves, compromise, bargain, form coalitions, and develop "quicky" ways of managing workloads (e.g., March and Simon, 1958; Crozier, 1966).

Most evidence on the nature of activity in sociology departments is anecdotal, but it indicates that sociologists act much like members of other sorts of organizations, sometimes performing "hustles" (Lyson

and Squires, 1978: n.d.) or working toward personal interests at the expense of scholarship, collegiality, or fairness (e.g., Van den Berghe, 1970; Lee, 1976; Martindale, 1976). Concerning issues where clear evidence is available, there is acknowledged gender and ethnic inequality in the discipline (e.g., Williams, 1982; Dill, Glenn and Huber, 1983), though the causes are subject to debate. Further, it seems clear that sexual preference enters into hiring and promotion decisions, contrary to norms of universalism (Huber et al., 1982).

In all, we have *no* reason to expect sociologists to act in ways utterly unlike members of other sorts of organizations. They may be more or less likely to follow ideal norms, but this is relatively unimportant in the context of the stereotyped portrayals found in the rejection letters. Thus, we can infer ongoing editing by organizational members.

Bureaucratic Propaganda in Modern Society

Rejection letters reveal how legitimation is worked into organizational documents. Like other forms of bureaucratic propaganda, rejection letters are tools used to create and maintain a definition of social reality. Images of social reality are used to maintain organizations which sustain members both symbolically and materially. We have seen this occur even where the documents are apparently insignificant.

A second purpose of rejection letters may be to "cool out" failed applicants. Goffman (1952:452) introduced the term "cooling out" to refer to situations in which failure in a role leaves one's expectations and self-conceptions shattered. At that time, steps must be taken to ensure that the failed person does not behave in a socially disruptive fashion. From the standpoint of others, the person must be compelled to "accept" the failure, so that others can continue their ongoing activities. All the major themes in the letters work toward this end. Close adherence to the rejection letter format must be partly intended as insurance against the rare applicant who contemplates challenging a decision. Apparently, in some universities, lawyers instruct departmental chairs how to writer letters so as to preclude lawsuits.[3]

In a society dominated by large organizations, legitimation activities are an essential task of those operating within, or as agents of, organizations. Bureaucratic propaganda constitues a significant portion of the constuction of reality in the public world. We face a "sea" of bureaucratic propaganda, portraying organizations in ideal terms. Not only does this legitimate, but it also tells the public what kinds of behavior they should display. In phenomenological terms, we can ex-

pect legitimating ideas about bureaucracy to become more solidly
sedimented in the public consciousness (see Bittner, 1974; Jehensen,
1973).

Following Weber's (1946) argument that the locus of domination in
modern society will be bureaucracies organized along legal-rational
lines, Coleman (1982) and others (e.g., Denhardt, 1981; Rubenstein,
1975) argue that the relationship of individuals and organizations is in-
creasingly "asymmetrical." Greater power and rights accrue to
organizations than to persons. In rejection letters, organizational
members legitimate themselves and their institutions by reference to
legal-rational standards. The letters assert the power of departments:
persons apply, departments choose.

Bureaucratic propaganda appears to be a constituent feature of the
modern world. Members of departments of sociology, just like mem-
bers of other organizations, use commonly recognized legitimating
themes extensively. In fact, the general rejection-letter "style" is so
easily recognized that it has been lampooned in Charles Schultz's
(1974) "Peanuts" cartoons. The ubiquity of this form allows the
reiteration of those ideals. Individual departments and their members,
and the general organizational form, are continuously re-legitimated.
In consequence, organizational domination is reproduced.

Reference Notes

1. For example, Altheide and Johnson's report on bureaucratic propaganda in a
   welfare agency depends, for understanding, on an explanation of (1) the generally
   hierarchical nature of power in the organization, (2) the degree of antagonism and
   suspicion existing between those at different levels in the organization, (3) the actual
   structure of the work of agents, (4) the political nature of funding for the agency, (5)
   the nature of the official categories of agent behavior on bureacratic forms, and (6)
   the ongoing "negotiation" employed in developing the propaganda.
2. In one case, a colleague at another school, in charge of writing her department's
   rejection letter, acquired a standardized letter by copying one from my file rather
   than composing one. Neither she nor anyone else to whom I have mentioned this has
   seen her behavior as terribly unethical. I believe the contrast of this with our per-
   ception of the copying of a professional paper demonstrates the gatekeep-
   ing—rather than informative—purpose of the letters.
3. I have not personally witnessed this, but it is suggested by a colleague. Two letters
   in the file do mention similar strictures against giving information: "I have . . . been
   advised that I should not try to explain to each of you the specific reason(s) why we
   did not select you." I have also seen this in a letter not in the file.

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