Being “flexible and labile”: the Brazilian jeitinho as a problem-solving strategy in an urban sustainability program

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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended as a contribution to the study of the complex relationship between organisation and culture. It focuses on a Brazilian social practice known as the jeitinho [jaytcheenyoo] which can be roughly translated as a ‘clever dodge’ to bend the rules, or ‘to cut through the red tape’. The jeitinho is used in different social contexts to deal with difficult or forbidding situations. It involves personal connections and simpatia (i.e. an immediate and strong affinity between two people), which are highly valued attributes in Brazilian society.

Based on a qualitative study conducted in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, the paper examines the jeitinho as an informal problem-solving strategy, within the organisational setting of an urban sustainability partnership program. The study found that the people involved in this program often resorted to the jeitinho when confronted with dilemmas arising from bureaucratic formalism, scarce resources and pressures to ‘get things done’.