

Organizational Politics

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Organizational politics has unanimously been accepted as omnipresent, but its variability according to the Indian context has not been much discussed. This study explores the employees' perceptions of politics and the coping mechanisms they adopt to handle it. The idea of this comparative study is to understand and explore how the employee's perception of organization politics and the coping mechanisms vary with changing sectors. Data was collected from a public sector company, a private sector company, and startups. The analysis of the data was done using a qualitative approach. The findings indicated that the employees' perception of politics, their emotional status, and the coping mechanisms were different in different sectors.

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Theoretical Considerations

Politics is omnipresent. Be it any organization or institution of any size, one can find or perceive its presence. It can exist at both macroscopic as well as microscopic levels. Even, at the level of interpersonal relationship, most of the time, we can find ourselves as a user or a recipient of power. Politics can be operational at interpersonal/intergroup, intra-organizational or inter-organizational level or at all the levels, at the same time. The degree and the form of its practice might differ from one organization to another depending upon the organizational culture, structure, external environment and the contingent situation which can be influenced by many factors and forces. It can be driven by tangible or intangible needs of a person/group/organization. We know that any organization is consisting of people who have varied beliefs, values, needs, personal and career aspirations, and different interests and they all want to fulfill their needs and desires. Also, it is a fact that any organization has a fixed amount of resources because of which, when the organization fails to fulfill everyone's needs through rationality and objectivity, political behaviors become commonplace. Olorunleke (2015) argued that politics exists in every organization,

the intent behind it might be positive (collaborative) or negative (competitive & destructive) and might vary but its presence could not be denied. Before we explore the dynamics of the work politics and try to delve into more depth regarding its functionality and the implications of that on the employees, it is important to delineate what exactly is meant by politics and what is the common theme behind it that leads to the acceptance of the fact that it is everywhere.

Organizational Politics

Burns (1961: 257) suggested that politics occurs when “others (individuals) are made use of as resources in competitive situations”. The literature does not show a single, standard and widely accepted definition of organizational politics (Wangui, 2014). Hartel & Berry (1999: 32) noted that “there is no standard definition of organizational politics since organizational politics was most often perceived and described as behaviors that the organization itself (as personified by top management) undertook to influence employee behaviors and attitudes.” However, broadly, organizational politics is understood as the activities undertaken as an attempt to influence others with the motive to pursue self-interest by means which might not be formally sanctioned by the organization (Cacciattolo, 2014; Pettigrew, 1973; Pfeffer & Pfeffer, 1981). To have a clearer understanding of the dynamics of organizational politics, it is important to have a more clear picture of the different dimensions of it. Bradshaw-Camball & Murray (1991) depicted that organi-

zational politics is thought by some researchers to have three dimensions: (i) Structure (Who are the parties? What are their interests? How much power do they have? What are the bases of power?) (ii) Process (How is power used in pursuit of each party’s interest?) and (iii) Outcomes (Who gets what? What is the impact on the ongoing relationship of the parties/others who comprise the organization and its stakeholders?). Therefore, we can say that the significance of organizational politics lies in the potential outcomes.

Perception of Organizational Politics & Coping Mechanism

In the context of organizational politics, the subjective interpretation or experience is considered to be more significant than the objective reality of politics. Ferris & Kacmar (1992) argued that organization politics should be understood based on what people experience rather than based on what is actually manifested because people respond to their own perceptions of reality rather than to the reality itself. We can assume that generally, there is a strong accordance between the objective reality and the perceived reality but it has to be accepted that perceptual variations can happen (based on many factors) and thus, it becomes more important to understand how, why and when this happens.

Ferris & Kacmar (1992) observed that the perception of politics is influenced by organizational factors such as centralization (formalization, hierarchical level, span of control), job/enviromen-

tal influences (job autonomy, job variety, feedback, advancement opportunity, interactions with coworkers and supervisors) and personal factors (age, sex, manipulative-nature and self-monitoring). For example, women working from lower positions or people who have been exposed to political activities more than their peers will view their workplace to be more political. Vigoda-Gadot and Drory (2006) established that increased internal organizational politics may be due to the external competitive demands experienced by organizations, resulting from globalized economies and technological transformations. Ferris et al. (1989) suggested that the informal nature of an organization where there is uncertainty about decision-making creates a space for political behavior. Kacmar & Ferris (1991) tried to measure perception of politics and they came up with three dimensions which were labeled as 1) General political behavior, 2) Going along to get ahead, 3) Pay and promotion. Later, Kacmar and Carlson (1997) made several modifications to the original 12-item scale and came up with the same three dimensions.

Political behavior is a function of the personality of the actor, the situation, the context of the organization and the person against whom it is going to be employed.

From the above discussion, we can understand that people might use different strategies to negotiate their needs and desires in different circumstances. But the question comes what sort of behav-

ioral tactics are generally employed which are perceived as political in nature. Theoretical studies have concluded that political behavior is a function of the personality of the actor, the situation, the context of the organization and the person against whom it is going to be employed. Allen et al. (1979) identified eight types of political tactics which generally people employ: (1) attacking or blaming others, (2) using the information as a political tool, (3) creating a favorable image (impression management), (4) developing a base of support, (5) praising others (ingratiation), (6) forming power coalitions with allies, and (7) creating obligations (reciprocity) and 8) associating with the influential.

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The existence of organizational politics, be it, perceived or actual, has been considered to have a major and largely negative influence on the employees. (e.g., Burns, 1961; Gandz & Murray, 1980; Porter, 1976). Many theoretical researchers have concluded that organizations with a higher degree of political climate lead to a variety of harmful work consequences, which includes higher stress, turnover intentions, lower job satisfaction and commitment, due to which, organizational productivity and profitability suffers (Ferris et al., 1989; Kacmar & Baron, 1999). While many scholars argued that perception of politics has

adverse effects on job involvement, job satisfaction, and leads to organizational withdrawal outcomes, like turnover and absenteeism (Drory, 1993; Ferris et al., 1989; Vigoda, 2000). Parker, Dipboye & Jackson (1995) found no such relationship. On the other hand, there are a few researchers who have suggested that the perception of organizational politics is not always negative for the employees.

However, organizational politics has mostly been taken in a negative light. The important question comes now, how employees cope up with these issues. Drory (1993) suggested that change in attitude can be one of the immediate reactions to the perception of organizational politics which can lead to more negative responses by the employees in the long run. In such a scenario, people resort to different ways to handle the stress and strain created by organizational politics, popularly known as coping strategies. Dhar (2009) defined coping strategies as the ways that the employees' resort to in order to deal with organizational politics. Hirschman (1970) suggested that the option to exit (leaving the organization) can be a possible way to cope up with the workplace politics. This behavior differs from more constructive responses, such as voice (intention to stay and fight for one's beliefs and occupational goals) and loyalty (willingness to adjust and comply with the current environment).

Dhar (2009) explored how the prevalence of politics in the Indian organization affects employee's psychology, ulti-

mately resulting in poor performance. He observed employees use four types of coping mechanisms:

- 1) At your mercy strategy: People totally give up
- 2) Let's flock together strategy: The strategy to participate in the organizational politics.
- 3) I don't care strategy: People who are aggressive by nature choose such strategies.
- 4) Turning a blind eye strategy: People are aware of what is going around but they choose to be indifferent towards it.

Research Gap & Questions

As we can understand from the current literature, any organization comprised human beings will see the prevalence of organizational politics. The literature also supports that the perception of organizational politics is influenced by many (organizational, job, personal and situational) factors (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992). But, the current literature lacks the contextual and granular insights about the organizational politics in Indian organizations of different sectors. It does not answer the questions like how the perception of politics, political tactics, and coping mechanisms differ with different organizational structures?

So, to bridge that gap, in-depth interviews were conducted with the employees of a public sector company, a private sector company, and startups to gain insights about how the political climate

changes with a different structure, what kind of political tactics come into play and how people cope-up in such scenarios. The exploration is important as it will help the employees in understanding what kind of political culture to expect if they go to a particular sector. It will also contribute to the literature of person-fit climate, thereby, helping employees in making a sound choice on the basis of their attitude, interests, ability, and capacity. This will help managers in understanding how to deal with a particular political climate and what kind of coping mechanisms can be adopted to handle organizational politics.

The objective of this study is to explore the employee's perception of organizational politics and the coping mechanisms they use to deal with it, in a sample of employees working in different sectors. Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the data. The employees were chosen from different sectors. For this comparative study, one company from the public sector, one company from the private sector and two startups were chosen.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect the first-hand experience of the employees. The semi-structured interview process was chosen to have a direction to cover all the questions while also having the flexibility to obtain the depth of insights. The interviews were taken from 16 employees. Five of them were from the public sector, seven were from startups and four

were from the private sector (well-established organizations). The interviews lasted up to 40-45 minutes and the questions were open-ended. For the first five minutes, time was devoted establishing trust by giving confidentiality assurances and by creating an informal environment. Data collection was stopped when the stage of theoretical saturation was reached. It is a stage in data collection when no longer new insights can be found. But, at the stage of analysis, we had to talk to participants again to clarify ambiguous statements.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was done by following the steps suggested by Colaizzi (1978). These steps included: read all the transcripts, extract "significant statements" from the transcripts, try to determine the meaning of each significant statement—"formulating meanings," repeat the prior step and organize "formulating meanings" into "clusters of themes," and integrate results into an "exhaustive description" (Dhar, 2009). The objective of the analysis was to compare how the perception of politics, its consequences, and coping mechanisms change with changing sectors. For this, the data was collected from a public sector company, a well-established private sector company, and two startups. The

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Findings & Discussion

The findings indicate that the perception of organizational politics, the consequences, and the coping mechanisms are different for the employees working in different sectors. In the public sector company where jobs are secured, employees no longer have to fight for survival. Since the salary is fixed, the promotion opportunities become the resource here and the politics happen around that. Also, the employees cannot see the impact of their work. As a result, they do not feel the ownership of their work and do not feel connected with the organizational goals and hence, their personal ambitions supersede the organizational priorities, leading to workplace politics around promotions.

In the private sector, the executives and managers are the decision-makers. This fact gives a lot of scope for subjectivity in decision-making. Employees' dependence on the managers increases. And this gives rise to the politics around appraisal system, assignment of new projects and on-site projects. Private-sector organizations in India tend to recruit their relatives to top positions, and accordingly practices related to promotion, transfer and benefits are manipulated as a result of social contacts and personalized relationships (Dutta, 1997). This creates a culture of politics which is difficult to keep in

check because of the large number of employees. Here, one can understand the role of the job in an organization but the impact is not visible, so people focus more on personal needs and benefits than organizational goals. Also, the resources like promotions and other attractive benefits are relatively scarce (given a large number of employees), manipulative employees try to use different tactics like impression management and flattery to get the job done in their favor. This creates a culture of politics where the employees who chose not to participate go through frustration and anxiety.

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In startups, the resources are really scarce as it is an organization which is in the initial phases of the establishment. So, the politics is externally directed with shareholders and external agents. Since the number of employees is less and, more or less, the organizational structure is open and flat, most of the employees are working what senior level employees are supposed to do, it gives them a sense of ownership and they feel an important part of the organization as the impact of their work is clearly visible. Startups comprised a few employees wearing multiple hats. This makes their work hectic yet it is exciting to them as they get to learn a lot. Because of a smaller number of employees, the manager has the opportunity to interact with everyone and this makes it a very transparent and open system

where everyone gets the opportunity to put their view. This whole process decreases the perception of politics among the employees. The analysis was done in an excel sheet and it was compared in a tabulated format.

Table 1 Characteristics of Different Sectors

Public Sector	Private Sector(Well-established organization)	Private Sector(Startups)
Government Ownership and control. (Mathur, Aycan, Z., & Kanungo , 1996)	Shareholders and Executive groups control decision-making process.(Mathur et al., 1996)	Entrepreneurs and Shareholders control decision-making process. (Mathur et al., 1996)
The Objective is Social Gain. Nigam (Mathur et al., 1996)	The objective is Profit.Singh (Mathur et al., 1996)	The objective is profit.Singh (Mathur et al., 1996)
Hierarchical structure. (Amba et al, 2000)	Hierarchical but open structure	Flat organization, open structure
Job Security (Budhwar and Boyne, 2004, Mathur et al., 1996)	No Job Security (Budhwar and Boyne, 2004)	No Job security
Salary is fixed according to government rules.	Salary can differ on the basis of many factors. (Dutta, 1997)	Relatively good and fair salary.
Predictable Environment	Partially unpredictable environment	Unpredictable environment

Table 2 Perception of Politics, Consequences & Coping Mechanisms

Public Sector	Private Sector (Well-established firm)	Private sector (Startups)
Politics around Promotions	Politics around appraisal, new or on-site project, uneven distribution of opportunities	No perception of politics
Political groups based on the same caste, same place of origin	Political groups based on the criteria of usefulness to the manager	Minimal perception of political groups
Closeness to group matters	Closeness to the manager matters	Only Performance matters
Frustration because of politics	Frustration, Stress, and Anxiety because of politics	Stress because of high-pressure jobs
People either chose to participate or to be indifferent to organizational politics	Coping mechanisms are: Active participation in politics, Professionalism, Quitting is one of the options	No such scenario

Table 3 Reasons for Politics

Public Sector	Private Sector	Startups
Professional jealousy and Ego Issues	Scarce resources like promotions, appraisal, on-site projects, foreign trips and dependency on the seniors for opportunities.	Minimal politics
Lack of alignment of individual goals with organizational goals	Partially aligned goals	Superordinate goals
After a period of time, repetition of job	After a period of time, learning process saturates and personal ambition and aspirations supersede.	Exciting work and a continuous learning experience
Large no. of employees	Large no. of employees	No. of employees are less

The above analysis depicts that the perception of organizational politics, its consequences, and the coping mechanisms are different in different sectors. The analysis reveals that the perception and the coping mechanisms in different sectors are influenced by many factors. For example, the perception of politics in the public sector is around promotions while in private sectors, it is around appraisal and other criteria where there is the scope of subjective decision-making. Most of the respondents accepted that they feel frustrated due to organizational politics and the respondents from private sector said that sometimes, it leads to anxiety and stress and if not handled well, it can lead to turnover intentions. However, since, in India, the public sector provides job security, leaving the job is never

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an option to cope with organizational politics. So, people cope by either participating in the politics in one way or the other or by being indifferent and choosing to focus on their work only. On the other hand, in startups, most of the respondents (around 75%) reported the perception of workplace politics to be minimum and stated the high-pressure of the job to be the sole reason for workplace stress. Participants responded that the number of employees is relatively less in any startup and the goal to take the company ahead is shared by everyone which leads to a flat organization and an open atmosphere. Also, they get to do significant work and the impact of that work is quite visible and it gives them a sense of ownership and a sense of belongingness with the company.

Till now, a lot of studies have been done on organizational politics and its impact on the employees. (Huang et al., 2003; Ferris et al., 2002; Chang et al., 2009). A few studies have also talked about the coping mechanisms which em-

ployees adopt to deal with the organizational politics (Ferris et al., 2002, Vigoda E., 2000, Miller, Rutherford & Kolodinsky, 2008). However, these studies have been mostly focused on foreign companies and most of the studies have been quantitative in nature. In this study, we have tried to explore the employee's perception of organizational politics, its consequences and coping mechanisms in different sectors. The study was done using qualitative methods.

Contributions

This study contributes to the existing literature by giving empirical insights into the employee's perception of politics, the feelings they develop while working in a politically influenced environment and the coping mechanisms they adopt to deal with the workplace politics. However, the key contribution of this study is the comparative analysis of the employee's experience in different sectors, which was not tried earlier. This study gives the evidence that with the changing sectors, the dimensions of perception of politics, the emotional status of the employees and the coping mechanisms vary. In the public sector, the perception of politics is more around promotions while in private, it is more around appraisals and new opportunities. In the private sector, switching jobs is one of the coping mechanisms while in the public sector because of job security, nobody thinks about it.

This study has also tried to explore the prevalent work culture in the different sectors of Indian organizations. Kanungo and Mendonca (1996) mention

that the environment of developing countries is characterized by high complexity due to the presence of heterogeneous elements, low predictability due to the presence of unstable and turbulent elements and low munificence due to the scarcity of needed resources. Monetary form of compensation and job security are therefore highly valued by Indian employees (Gopalan & Rivera, 1997). Sinha et al. (2004) have identified the impact of societal culture on organizational culture in India. They found four major pan-Indian societal dimensions: hypocrisy, corruption, inaction and respect for power. Three dimensions: quick rich disposition, non-work orientation and face keeping were differently endorsed at a different location. This study extends the previous research by highlighting the employee's experience of organizational politics and the coping strategies they adopt while working in different sectors.

One of the major contributions of this study is in the field of human resource management. To curb organizational politics and to create a healthy organizational culture, it is imperative to understand the dynamics of the organizational politics and its consequences and how this experience is contextual in nature and influenced by organizational and job factors. To bring a positive change in any organization, first, it is required to understand the context in which the organization is embedded. This study attempts to throw some light on the differences in the employee's experience due to contextual differences. So, to create a positive work environment, it is important to consider the politics done at different levels in different contexts.

As stated by Dhar (2009: 51) “As earlier research has already proved, organizational politics also has a positive side, emphasis should be made to use this skill of employees to increase the employee productivity. Effective human resource practices, supported by top management, can help to create a healthy work environment and employees need to be promoted to develop such a culture, which is based on mutual trust and support.”

Limitations

The present study has some limitations which are important to be highlighted. The first limitation is, since the data of this study was collected from different organizations during the working hours, there was a time limit of 45 minutes for which each participant was allowed to give their interview. Because of the time constraints, many important points could not be probed deeper which could have led to interesting insights.

Also, the data is based on the respondent’s self-report which depends on their memory, recall abilities and their honesty. So, the possibility that the informant might have given inaccurate or misleading answers, cannot be excluded. Also, the qualitative research design was purposefully chosen to explore and describe the participant’s experience and it precludes causal claims. Though the study gives deeper insights into the employee’s experience of organizational politics and the coping mechanisms they adopt to deal with it, the results cannot be generalized as it is constrained by the context of the research. The present re-

search is also limited by the fact that the sample of the participants was taken from a single public sector organization, a single private sector organization, and two startups. So, the findings are influenced by many contextual factors which have not been explored.

Further Research

The contributions and limitations of this study lead to a number of opportunities for further research. While the present study explores the employee’s experience of organizational politics in different sectors, this study can be extended quantitatively. The factors that influence organizational politics are organizational, job/environmental, personal as mentioned in the seminal work of Ferris et al. (2002). The summary of the findings of his work has been tabulated (Table 4).

The above result and the present study can be analysed together and it would be advantageous to do a quantitative comparative analysis to understand the contextual differences of employee’s experience of organizational politics in public sector organization, private sector organization and in startups. We delineate a few propositions for future research work.

- P1: Job autonomy is more in startups than in other sectors.
- P2: Job variety is more in startups than in any other sectors.
- P3: Feedback is more in startups than in any other sectors.

Table 4 Factors Influencing Organizational Politics

Inc-Increases, Dec-Decreases, C-Centralization, P- Politics, F-Formalization and so on.			
Category	Factors	Contribution	Comment
Organizational	Centralization	C inc, P inc	Power concentrated at the top; People at lower level may feel powerless
	Formalization	F inc, P dec	Reduces ambiguity
	Hierarchical level	H inc, P Inc	More politics at the top
	Span of Control	SC inc, P Inc	Attention on every employee decreases
Job/Environmental	Job Autonomy	JA inc, P dec	Reduces uncertainty
	Job Variety	JV inc, P dec	Makes them feel empowered
	Feedback	F inc, P dec	Gives a direction to improve
	Advancement Opportunity	AO inc, P dec	Less AO, political nature of DM is perceived
	Interaction with co-workers and supervisors	As Interaction inc, P dec	People are not viewed as opportunistic
Personal	Age	Age inc, perception of politics increases	More exposure to politics
	Gender	Women experience more Politics	Working from inferior position
	Manipulative-natured and self-monitoring	High Mach and High SMPerceive it more political	Inherent nature to manipulate things in their favor.

Source: Ferris et al. (2002)

P4: Older people are more attracted to public sector job than to the private sector job.

P5: Younger people are more attracted to startups than to private sector (well-established company)

P6: Women are more attracted to public sector job than to the private sector job.

P7: Women are more attracted to the well-established company than to startups.

P8: High self-monitoring people will be more attracted to the private sector (well-established company than to startups).

The present study can be extended to understand the pattern of job satisfaction, job commitment or pattern of turnover intentions in different sectors. This study can be extended to explore the similarities and differences in human resource management practices in different sectors. Further research can also focus on the causes behind adopting certain coping strategies and how it is influenced by personal and organizational factors.

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