DEFINING ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS

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Abstract

The paper discusses the type of political behaviour, mainly Mintzberg's (1985) collection of games, Allen *et al*'s (1979) individual political tactics, and Lawrence *et al*'s (2005) types of power, as well as the causes of political behaviour. Some argue that politics are rooted in the wider configured environment (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 498), while others argue that politics are a result of interpersonal antagonisms (Vince, 2001) or emotional matters (Vince, 2002). With regards to organisational politics, the literature presents various types of political behaviours, and research to date tackled the area of politics mostly in a purely theoretical manner. Moreover, studies presented to date have paid more attention to the general perceptions of politics rather than the observable political behaviours.

Keywords: Organisational Politics, Power in Organisations, Organisational Behaviour

Introduction

Aristotle (1934) portrayed the idea of politics as a *'master-craft'* and thus is a tolerable and practical social phenomenon (Provis *in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006*: 98). However, in general, organisational politics is often defined as the behaviour that is aimed at safeguarding the self interest of an individual at the cost of another (Allen *et al*, 1979: 77; Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 195; Ferris *et al*, 1989: 145; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 498; Latif *et al*, 2011; Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 252), and this behaviour often conflicts with the organisational goals (Ladebo, 2006: 259; Sussman *et al*, 2002: 314; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007: 665). Consequently, according to Beugré & Liverpool (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), organisational politics is an '*antisocial'* behaviour (2006: 124).

It is argued that the overt tendency for politicking is a human nature aspect that is a consequent of evolution, and the human nature drive for politicking is associated with power endeavouring, and derives from the interaction between the distribution of tasks and rank delineation (Vredenburgh & Shea Van-Fossen, 2010: 33). Meriac & Villanova (in Vigoda-Gador & Drory, 2006) argue that some people ought to benefit from the political tactics or else there would be no reason for them to engage in political behaviour (2006: 17). Liu *et al* (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) argue that individuals who benefit from political behaviour may go through feelings of pleasure and even exhilaration, especially when favourable results are only achievable through illegitimate strategies (2006: 168)

Organisational politics can also be viewed as a group phenomenon where people do not necessarily engage in politics just as individuals. Informal groups are often created within the workplace and various types of coalitions have a tendency to grow among individuals (Romm & Pliskin, 1997: 96; Seo, 2003: 11). James (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) argues that group politics may be encouraged or weakened by the organisational cultural values, which may also mould the route that the group politics will take (2006: 56). Among the many types of groups, these may consist of either managers and subordinates in a department, employees that fall in the same hierarchical level, or employees that fall in the same social circle. Political behaviour may also be present between other stakeholders of an organisation, such as unions and employers (Romm & Pliskin, 1997) though these macro-

scale politics are not the primary focus of this thesis' particular study. According to Romm & Pliskin (1997) the amount of politicking intensifies as the issue concerned is presumed as significant from the concerned group's position.

Causes of Organisational Politics

According to Vredenburgh & Shea-VanFossen (2010), some research has identified organisational conditions that cause employees to engage in workplace political behaviours. They argue that the origins of individual attributes and the nature of their interactions with organisational conditions that foster political strategies in work organisations come from the evolution of an individual's hereditary genetic structure (Vredenburgh & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 27). According to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, there is a distinction amid species and a change method of natural selection, which focused on the relationship between a being and its milieu, wherein a competitive effort for resources is acknowledged (Vredenburgh & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 28). This means that key attributes and behaviours have evolved as a result of the process of natural selection, in which better adapted organisms outlive those less in shape despite several challenges (Vredenburgh & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 29). Therefore, from this biological evolutionary perspective, human beings have inherent behavioural tendencies to engage in politicking (Vredenburgh & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 31).

However, Vredenburgh & Shea-VanFossen (2010) also argue that not all traits or behaviours are entirely genetic in origin, since some are derived interactively from biological elements and cultural circumstances (2010: 31). Nevertheless the consequential traits and behaviours can surface in various individual surroundings, including workplaces, in which they could encourage organisational politics (Vredenburgh & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 31). According to Beugré & Liverpool (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) if employees perceive that they are being manipulated or their interests are ignored, then they will end up engaging in self-serving behaviour (2006: 130). Similarly, Nicholson (1997) argues that humans have an innate predisposition towards power striving, which can cause workplace political behaviours where it comes into tension with the division of labour and status segregation. In the same kind of vein, Lubit (2002) argues that, narcissism, a facet which constituted the first stage of human species development, is another aspect of the human nature that enhances organisational politics (Vredenburgh & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 35).

In view of the above, a number of studies have promoted the view that some degree of predisposition towards politicking may be an innate part of human nature, but that this predisposition becomes most visible in workplaces where the objectives of the organisation are unclear, there is a limitation of resources, there is a fast changing technological and environmental aspect, and the decisions are unplanned (Curtis, 2003: 293; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 498; Ladebo, 2006: 256; Latif *et al*, 2011: 199; Poon, 2003: 138; Vredenburgh & Shea-VanFossen, 2010: 42). The larger the difficulty in such cases, the more sensitive is the political behaviour in which conflicts arise and ambiguity abounds (Ladebo, 2006: 261).

Beugré & Liverpool (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) state that individuals engaging in political behaviour often treat others with disrespect and try to thwart formal procedures, especially when these procedures are not clear (2006: 129). As such, research has identified several areas in which employees engage in political behaviour, namely pressures for economy, management and subordinates relationships, structural power struggles between configured groups such as unions and employers, conflicts between the workforce and management for construing agreements, uncertainty about standards and strategies of promotion, difficulty in linking reward with productivity, and policies and procedures (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 499; Latif *et al*, 2011: 203).

Indeed, individuals are more likely to engage in political behaviour when there is uncertainty involved in decision-making procedures and performance measures, and when competition is present among individuals and groups for limited resources (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 499; Othman, 2008: 43; Poon, 2003: 142). Moreover, according to Vigoda-Gadot (2007) the lack of nominal integrity and equality in these systems is a main root of higher perceptions of organisational politics (2007: 665). In organisations that adopt clear decision-making processes and where competitive behaviour is less, a high level of political behaviour is not likely to be present.

According to James (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) the increase of internal organisational politics may be due to the external competitive demands experienced by organisations, resulting from globalised economies and technological transformations (2006: 62). James also mentions the example of Tilly (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) wherein it is identified that severe and explicit negative politics are mostly present in low-resource countries (2006: 62).

Last but not least, according to Buchanan (2008), politics may also be caused by structural relationships within an organisation (2008: 54); one group of employees may have particular performance indicators and tasks to fulfil that are very different to those of another group. Jehn (1997) refers to these diversities as task-focused conflicts. According to Jehn, these types of conflicts may be beneficial to an organisation since they improve the decision-making results and output through constructive criticism (Jehn, 1997: 532). However, it is also likely that these task-related conflicts change into relationship conflicts, resulting into one group or individual disliking another group or individual and attach these task-related conflicts to personality issues (Jehn, 1997: 532).

In her study, Jehn also identified a process conflict, which includes a *"responsibility disagreement"*, meaning that incongruities occur regarding who is responsible for what; these also can lead to personality issues (1997: 540). It is therefore unavoidable that the agenda of each group or individual will differ or even conflict on some issues, and this shows how much political behaviour takes place due to the structural tensions within an organisation. Therefore politics is not just something that surfaces out of personal differences; it is often produced by tensions that exist between one function or category of employees and another; tensions which can often create irritation and frustration (Jehn, 1997).

Types of Individual Political Behaviour in Organisations

Sussman *et al* (2002) argue that political behaviour in organisations often conveys a normative, unethical implication (2002: 314). They confirm this through their quantitative study which they carried out regarding seven types of political behaviour in organisations as illustrated by Allen *et al* (1979), and their influence on communication media. The types of behaviour used in the study include: (1) Attacking or blaming others, (2) Using information as a political tool, (3) Creating a favourable image (impression management), (4) Developing a base of support, (5) Praising others (ingratiation), (6) Forming power coalitions with allies, and (7) Creating obligations (reciprocity). As will be seen, these types constitute an important part of the analytical framework of this study, and so merit some further explanation here.

Attacking or blaming others is a tactic that includes both reactive and proactive behaviours. Allen *et al* (1979) state that the reactive behaviour involves scapegoating: more specifically, the individual concerned in this behaviour avoids his or her involvement with a detrimental or failing situation at work (1979: 78). On the other hand, proactive behaviour involves an individual making a rival look bad in the eyes of significant members of the organisation (Allen *et al*, 1979: 78). Using information as a political tool includes individuals who engage in preserving, twisting or using information to devastate another individual.

Impression management involves an individual building and enhancing his or her self image by developing a reputation of being liked and being enthusiastic, to mention a few characteristics (Allen *et al*, 1979: 79). Drory & Vigoda-Gadot (2010) argue that impression management behaviour is one of the key strategies of organisational politics and is affected by cultural differences (2010: 198). In addition, Drory & Zaidman (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) state that impression management is beneficial and critical for career advancement, since merit alone is not sufficient (2006: 76). Drory & Zaidman further state that individuals who are likely to engage in impression management are often seeking to increase their compensation, preserve their self-esteem, and obtain limited available resources by ingratiating their boss (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006: 77).

Developing a base of support happens when a manager gets others to understand his or her ideas before making a decision and makes his or her subordinates feel as if the idea is theirs to guarantee their dedication (Allen *et al*, 1979: 80). Ingratiation occurs when an individual praises another in order to create a good rapport. In their study, Allen *et al* (1979) state that lower level employees use more 'colourful' expressions like *"buttering up the boss"* to explain this tactic (1979: 80). Meriac & Villanova (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006) refer to ingratiation as that 'friendliness' which endeavours to transform the notion a target has of the influencer so the target may be leaning towards providing the influencer with what he or she wishes (2006: 16). Forming power coalitions with allies is a tactic which is used by individuals that associate themselves with influential persons in an organisation or in social situations to gain popularity or feel important. Last but not least, reciprocity involves performing services or favours to create obligations – a very applicable expression is *"You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours"* (Allen *et al*, 1979: 80).

The findings of Sussman *et al* (2002) indicate that political tactics are both channel and sender specific. Moreover, attempts to influence others through self-serving messages are more likely to be sent through certain channels than others and are more likely to come from certain organisational roles than others (Sussman *et al*, 2002: 325). In this regard, Allen *et al* (1979) argue that politicking occurs more frequently at higher managerial and professional levels of an organisation, whilst supervisors may be less able to practice politics successfully due to their minimal power (1979: 82).

Others argue that organisational politics are highly culture dependent (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010), may be a natural phenomenon in organisations (Poon, 2003: 138; Zaleznik, 1971) and research on organisational politics has always treated politics as an emotional assemble (Othman, 2008: 46). Vince (2002) states that organisations are *'political containers'* that include individual and collective emotions (2002: 75). Likewise, Zaleznik (1971) refers to organisations as *'political structures'* in which the careers of employees, especially managers, are developed (1971: 53). Gotsis & Kortezi (2010) argue that political concerns can make up an inextricable part of organisational life due to the inevitable power systems within (2010: 497).

In general, a political climate establishes some ethical dilemmas to employees and eventually spawns various forms of actions that can be both unjust and unfair (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 502). However, it is important to note that culture affects how an individual comprehends and differentiates between actions and therefore, what is considered politically negative in one culture may be considered otherwise in another (Kurchner-Hawkins & Miller *in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory*, 2006: 343).

The often informal nature of organisational politics has been highlighted by several writers (Latif *et al*, 2011: 199; Mintzberg, 1985: 134; Poon, 2003: 139). In organisations, individuals often rely on informal means to make decisions, especially where there is uncertainty involved, which presents them with an opportunity to engage in political behaviour (Ferris *et al*, 1989: 151; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 499; Othman, 2008: 43; Poon,

2003: 138). As mentioned in the previous sections, politicking among members of an organisation may also occur due to the bare minimum resources available. This means that key people in organisations often 'bulldoze' to have what they perceive as a fair share of the limited resources available in the organisation for themselves or the group they belong to (Ladebo, 2006: 258). Zaleznik (1971) states that these lack of resources are mostly visible in capital budgeting (1971: 56).

Vredenburgh & Shea Van-Fossen (2010) draw an analogy to Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' account of evolution to illustrate how the case of limited resources in organisations, those individuals who are highly politically skilled end up being more successful in acquiring and controlling the same limited resources (2010: 28). According to Liu *et al* (in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), people who are politically skilled experience the perceptions of organisational politics less negatively than others, and may see politicking as a rewarding experience and as a sense of proficiency and achievement to their line of work (2006: 175).

Therefore, political behaviour is characteristically conflict-ridden, often setting individual or group employees against the power that is official, established principles and expertise, or against each other. Mintzberg (1985) argues that political behaviours may become amplified due to the lack of other systems of influence (1985: 134). As such, political behaviour is mainly concealed and subject to differing perceptions (Curtis, 2003: 293). Employees are sensitive to political decisions made in their organisations and individuals may react in different emotional and behavioural ways (Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005: 258).

Political Behaviour as a Collection of Games

Henry Mintzberg (1983) is one of the main business leaders, particularly in the strategy dominion. Mintzberg (1983) was found to be important for this thesis since in his research he presented an extensive review of political behaviour in organisations. His analysis assisted a time of awareness in the empirical study of the phenomenon of organisational politics (Meriac & Villanova in Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006), and thus, I found his types of political behaviours as 'illuminating' as a heuristic tool for understanding political behaviours. According to Mintzberg (in Lemieux, 1998), some of the political games, such as the rivalry games between organisational and support staff, may characterize persistent patterns of organizational behaviour (1998: 59). In view of this, the answer may be to first identify, as clearly as possible, the particular type of political organisation with which one is dealing and then determine the kinds of political games that have been occurring within it.

Mintzberg (1985) presents organisational politics as a Darwinian influence system that is exploited by politically skilled individuals to hasten their progression into leadership positions (Vredenburgh & Shea Van-Fossen, 2010: 27). Mintzberg (1983) also states that political behaviour is a collection of games that fall into the following four categories: authority games, power base games, rivalry games and change games (Curtis, 2003: 295-6). These four categories of games are similar to the types of political behaviour identified by Sussman *et al* (2002).

Mintzberg identifies two types of authority games: those that resist authority, also referred to as 'insurgency games', and managers that attempt to increase their control over the subordinates, also referred to as 'counterinsurgency games'. An example of 'insurgency game' presented by Thoenig and Friedberg (1976) is that of French government engineers against a minister who tried to restructure their department (in Mintzberg, 1985: 137). The 'counterinsurgency game' is played by people with power who retaliate with political or legitimate means (Mintzberg, 1985: 137).

Power base games are actuated in order for an individual to increase his or her organisational power – in this case Mintzberg illustrates six types of power base games; (i) the 'sponsorship game', (ii) the 'alliance building game', (iii) the 'empire building game', (iv) the 'budgeting game', (v) the 'expertise game', and (vi) the 'lording game'.

The 'sponsorship game' involves a person attaching himself or herself to a rising or established star and is usually played by those who wish to construct their power base, and they do so by using their superiors to acknowledge loyalty in return for power (Mintzberg, 1985: 137). The 'alliance game' involves peers agreeing to support each other, and is often played by line managers who bargain hidden deals of support for each other in order to move further up in the organisation (Mintzberg, 1985: 137). The 'empire building game' involves a person to engage in more responsibility in decision making, hence increasing his or her power and is also played by line managers who wish to build power individually with subordinates (Mintzberg, 1985: 137).

The 'budgeting game', which is similar to the 'empire building game' but is less conflict-ridden since it concerns the fight for resources, is played openly with clear specific policies by line managers (Mintzberg, 1985: 137). The 'expertise game' is played by staff specialists wherein experts in a field flaunt the expertise or try to keep the information to themselves, while non-experts attempt to have their work seem as expert to be viewed as a professional so as to be able to have control over it (Mintzberg, 1985: 137). The 'lording game' involves people using legitimate power in illegitimate ways with others who lack it and is mostly played by line managers and professionals (Mintzberg, 1985: 137).

In the case of power, Lawrence *et al* (2005) provide an explanation of two types of power in organisations: episodic power and systematic power. These forms of power offer guidance on how organisational politics affect the flow of information between individuals, groups and the organisation (Lawrence *et al*, 2005: 182). Episodic power refers to distinct and premeditated political behaviour that is initiated by self-interested actors who are most able to influence organisational decision making (Lawrence *et al*, 2005: 182). On the other hand, systematic power is directed throughout the social systems within organisations, and includes socialisation and accreditation processes. Some argue that the attention to power stems from the fact that social relations and learning processes do not happen in a vacuum but take place in a setting of interests and different power positions (Easterby-Smith *et al*, 2000: 793).

The 'rivalry games' involve persons or a group ignoring the expertise of another in order to make him or her or the group less powerful. Mintzberg (1985) identifies two types of rivalry games, namely 'line vs. staff' and 'rival camps' (1985: 136). The 'line vs. staff' game is described as the game that increases personal power and overpowers a rival wherein each side is likely to abuse rightful power in illicit ways (Mintzberg, 1985: 138). The 'rival camps' game transpires when the alliance or empire building games result in two main power troops and can be the most conflict-ridden game of all, since it can portray conflicts between departments or two opposing goals (Mintzberg, 1985: 138). Vince (2002) provides an example of a rivalry game in his action-research of 'Goodwill Company'. Here Vince illustrates how two sub-systems of the company think that their development initiative is of benefit to the company and both find ways to criticise each other's work, whilst trying to avoid working together (2002: 81).

'Change games' are designed to induce organisational change and include 'whistle blowing', 'Young Turks' game and 'strategic candidates' game (Mintzberg, 1985: 136). The 'whistle blowing' is a simple game played mostly by lower status employees to try and affect an organisational change in a different way wherein one reports a wrong doing of another in the hope to bring about change (Mintzberg, 1985: 138). Employees in this case may go outside the boundaries of the organisation and attempt to involve outsiders (Latif *et al*, 2011:

202). Likewise, the 'Young Turks game' is usually played to replace the people in authority while maintaining the system of authority intact, in which a group of revolt employees try to cause the downfall of the existing leadership of an organisation (Mintzberg, 1985: 139). Similar to this is the 'Obstructionism' which entails a tactic by employees in a lower level of an organisation that opposes top management policy making decisions (Latif *et al*, 2011: 203). The 'strategic candidates' game occurs when individuals or groups seek to affect change by campaigning for their own planned contenders through political means by coalescing others games such as empire building, alliance building, and rival camps (Mintzberg, 1985: 138).

In his study, Burawoy (1979) refers to the 'space for games' concept wherein he identified the games played by subordinates to be impulsive, independent and malicious construction of workers to breed power contests and divergence with management, though games are synchronized, sometimes coercively, by management (Burawoy, 1979: 85-6). However, Burawoy (1979) shows that confrontation between managers and subordinates is not the sole form of conflict (1979: 65–73). In this regard, Koski & Järvensivu's (2010) study identified that struggles to introduce new rituals caused tensions between managerial levels as well. The study of Koski & Järvensivu (2010) also identified that games may give subordinates more control over work processes, however, on a positive note, the games kept the process ongoing and effective, and the workers had the opportunity to show their professionalism through these same games (2010: 352).

Final Words

Organisational politics, as argued by various researchers, can be either positive or negative (Othman, 2008: 44). Othman (2008) mentions these two types in his paper on the role of justice, trust and job ambiguity (2008: 44), namely the negative side, which involves convenient and illegal behaviour, and the positive side which is a social function that is important for organisations to survive (2008: 44). Negative organisational politics are disapproved of because of the ethical dilemmas encrusted with them and the workplace conflicts that are generated, whilst positive organisational politics results from the amalgamation of shared goals and stimulating collaboration (Drory & Vigoda-Gadot, 2010: 196; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 509).

Consequently there are two ways of viewing organisational politics: either as a symptom of social influence processes that benefit the organisation, or a self serving effect that goes against the organisational goals (Mintzberg, 1985: 148; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 498). Nevertheless, the concept of organisational politics is a key social influence process that can be either functional or dysfunctional to employees and organisations (Allen *et al*, 1979: 82).

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