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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Organizational Sectarianism: Conceptualization, Life Cycle, and Managerial Strategies

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EXTENDED A B S T R A C T

Introduction

Organizations are not merely collections of formal structures, administrative regulations, and predefined procedures; they also contain hidden and informal layers of human relationships, power coalitions, and networks of influence. A significant part of organizational dynamism or dysfunction emerges not within formal organizational charts, but through these informal interactions .

Problem Description

One of the most important phenomena arising within this context is “organizational sectarianism,” a phenomenon that, although rarely studied independently in classical management literature, can be observed in many governmental, private, and semi-governmental organizations.

Importance of Research

In its general sense, a sect refers to a group of individuals within a larger structure who define distinct identities, interests, and behavioral patterns for themselves and attempt to exert influence over other parts of the system through internal cohesion and the expansion of intra-group relationships. In organizational settings, sects typically emerge in the form of informal power networks, managerial circles, patronage groups, or intra-organizational coalitions. Over time, these groups attempt to monopolize resources, information, organizational positions, and promotion opportunities while creating a parallel power structure by distinguishing between “insiders” and “outsiders”.

Research Goals

The present study aims to conceptualize organizational sectarianism, identify the process of its formation, analyze the life cycle of organizational sects, and propose strategies for managing this phenomenon .

Methodologies

The study adopts a qualitative approach based on “lived experience,” as organizational sectarianism is deeply behavioral, perceptual, and rooted in informal interactions, making it difficult to understand without direct experience in real organizational contexts.

Data Gathering

Research data were collected over approximately twelve years of professional observation and experience across eleven governmental, semi-governmental, and private organizations. The studied organizations mainly operated in industrial, service, financial, construction, and tourism sectors. The researcher had direct or

indirect interactions with more than 250 managers, experts, and employees at different organizational levels. Data collection methods included participant observation, analysis of formal and informal interactions, examination of appointment patterns, analysis of intra-organizational conflicts, and reflective interpretation of managerial experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Thematic Analysis through three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Initially, more than 120 primary codes were extracted from the data, which were subsequently integrated into 28 axial concepts and finally categorized into five major themes: conditions leading to sect formation, mechanisms of informal power exercise, the life cycle of organizational sects, consequences of organizational sectarianism, and strategies for managing sects.

Findings

The findings indicate that organizational sectarianism primarily emerges within contexts characterized by managerial ambiguity, lack of transparency, absence of meritocracy, conflicts of interest, and power-oriented organizational cultures. The more ambiguous organizational goals and visions become, and the more employees perceive success and advancement as dependent on relationships and group affiliations rather than professional performance, the greater the tendency toward participation in sectarian networks.

The findings further reveal that organizational sects do not necessarily originate with destructive intentions.

In their early stages, managerial groups or aligned circles are often formed with reformist, developmental, or transformational motivations, and their internal cohesion may initially produce positive organizational outcomes. However, over time, due to environmental pressures, increasingly complex power relations, the entry of new stakeholders, and escalating conflicts of interest, these groups gradually shift from “mission-oriented teams” into “power sects”.

Based on the findings, the life cycle of organizational sects consists of five major stages. The first stage is the “Idealistic Formation Stage,” during which managerial groups emerge with developmental and transformational objectives. At this stage, internal cohesion primarily serves organizational goals, and sectarian boundaries have not yet formed.

The second stage is the “Coalition Building and Patronage Stage.” At this point, parts of the managerial team gradually focus less on organizational objectives and more on consolidating their own positions. Merit-based relationships are increasingly replaced by loyalty-based relationships, and the processes of recruiting aligned individuals, controlling information, and building power networks begin. Gradually, the distinction between “insiders” and “outsiders” becomes institutionalized, and individuals are evaluated based not on performance but on their proximity to the core power structure.

The third stage is the “Sectarian Dominance Stage.” Here, the survival of the sect becomes the primary priority, and the organization effectively transforms into a tool for preserving group power and interests. Appointments become politically directed, information is filtered, independent individuals are marginalized or excluded, and decision-making processes become politicized. In this stage, sects frequently attempt to establish psychological superiority and portray opponents as incompetent, incompatible, or threatening.

The fourth stage is the “Organizational Sedimentation Stage.” When sects weaken or are suppressed, their effects do not disappear but instead become embedded within different layers of the organization. Members of weakened sects often become demotivated, passive, resistant to change, and contributors to organizational stagnation. The study compares this condition to sediment accumulating in arterial pathways, causing organizational processes to slow down and function only temporarily under managerial pressure before returning to stagnation once the pressure subsides.

The fifth stage is the “Reproduction or Collapse Stage.” Sedimented sects either find new opportunities to regain power and re-emerge more destructively than before, or they collapse due to internal conflicts of interest. In many cases, when members perceive inequalities in the distribution of benefits within the sect, internal conflicts intensify and group cohesion deteriorates. Members of collapsed sects frequently become frustrated, passive, and disengaged employees who merely await retirement or the end of their service period.

The study also demonstrates that organizational sectarianism has extensive negative consequences for organizations. These consequences include reduced organizational trust, weakened meritocracy, decreased productivity, intensified internal conflicts, resistance to change, reduced organizational agility, erosion of social capital, declining employee motivation, and failure to achieve organizational objectives. In sectarianized organizations, organizational energy is diverted away from development and mission fulfillment toward internal competition and the preservation of power balances.

Discussion and Conclusion

Within the theoretical framework, the study connects organizational sectarianism to related concepts in organizational behavior literature, including organizational politics, informal power, informal groups, organizational tribalism, social identity, resistance to change, and power-based subcultures.

The works of theorists such as Jeffrey Pfeffer, Henry Mintzberg, Edgar Schein, and Stephen Robbins suggest that many dimensions of sectarianism have previously been examined under studies of power, organizational culture, and organizational politics, although “organizational sectarianism” itself has rarely been independently conceptualized.

Other Findings & Suggestions

According to the findings, the most important strategies for managing organizational sects include reforming organizational culture, increasing transparency in goals and information flow, aligning individual and organizational interests, transforming sects into constructive informal teams, implementing job rotation, and, ultimately, decisive managerial intervention.

The findings indicate that the primary root of organizational sectarianism lies in power-oriented and hierarchical organizational cultures. When employees observe favoritism, opaque relationships, and the prioritization of loyalty over competence among senior management, these patterns become reproduced throughout lower organizational levels. Therefore, addressing sectarianism requires first and foremost the reform of managerial behavioral patterns and the reconstruction of organizational trust.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that information transparency is one of the most important tools for controlling sectarianism. The freer and more direct the flow of information, the less opportunity exists for the emergence of exclusive power circles. Similarly, establishing performance evaluation and reward systems based on actual performance indicators can reduce employees’ dependence on informal networks.

Another important finding is that rushed attempts to eliminate sects often produce counterproductive outcomes by strengthening their internal cohesion. In the early stages, transforming sects into constructive informal teams and directing them toward organizational objectives may be more effective than coercive interventions.

Overall, this study seeks to conceptualize organizational sectarianism as a structural, cultural, and behavioral phenomenon and to demonstrate that it is not merely the product of individual behavior, but rather the result of complex interactions among organizational culture, power structures, reward systems, managerial ambiguity, and informal relationships. Consequently, managing organizational sectarianism requires a multidimensional and gradual approach grounded in the reform of organizational culture, structures, and processes.

KEYWORDS

Organizational Sectarianism, Informal Power, Organizational Culture, Informal Groups, Conflict Management, Patronage, Organizational Tribalism, Power Networks.

