

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A Model of Employee Pathology in the Public Sector Due to Political Appointments: Development and Qualitative Validation Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT**Introduction**

The current research is based on the assumption that political appointments in the Iranian public sector are phenomena beyond a managerial challenge and result in the systematic erosion of human capital. The main problem of the research is the existence of an analytical gap in the existing literature; previous research has mainly described the correlation between variables, but it has remained silent in explaining the underlying process through which an organizational event (political appointment) turns into a multidimensional pathologic cascade at the personal level. Accordingly, the main aim of this research is to fill this gap by designing and validating a human-centered process Pattern for the pathology of this phenomenon.

Theoretical Foundations**1. Political Appointments**

Political appointments refer to the process by which the selection and appointment of individuals to public positions, especially in the middle and technical levels, takes precedence over technical competence and professional competence based on political criteria such as party loyalty, factional affiliation, or personal relationships (Peters & Pierre, 2020; Gallo & Lewis, 2022). Political control and agency theory introduces this action as a rational tool by politicians (the employer) to align the bureaucracy and manage the risks of information asymmetry and conflicts of interest with bureaucrats (agents) (Eisenhardt, 1989; Peters & Pierre, 2019). Network theories and social capital have revealed the practical mechanism of these choices and show how informal relationships and networks based on ethno-factional trust block the path to merit (Burt, 2005). Finally, institutional theory seeks the most fundamental cause in the conflict between political logic (based on power and loyalty) and professional logic (based on expertise) (North, 1990; Friedland & Alford, 1991).

2. Transition from Organizational Analysis to Person-Centered Pathology

Pathology focuses on explaining the causes and ways of injury formation (Scott & Davis, 2016). Classical Patterns of organizational pathology (such as those of Nadler-Tashman, Weisbord, or Techie) are fundamentally organization-centered and are powerful at detecting macro disorders (such as lack of coherence of structure and strategy) (Rahimi, 2020), but they are facing a serious analytical gap in explaining how a particular employee personally experiences these disorders and how this experience is narrated in the form of biopsychosocial suffering.

Personal vulnerabilities can be classified into three main categories: (1) psychological vulnerability, (2) social vulnerability, and (3) physical (biological) vulnerability.

3. Processing Pathology Narrative: From Perception to Incarnation

By combining the above theories, pathos can be narrated not as an event, but as a multi-stage process that transforms an organizational phenomenon into an individual debilitating

experience:

1) Perception and emotional response, 2) Resource erosion, and 3) manifestation of chronic pathos (Maslach et al., 2001).

Empirical Background of the Research

The research literature shows that political appointments lead to negative behavioral reactions such as intensification of organizational silence by directly undermining the principle of meritocracy (Sarvari-Lak & Amirpour, 2024). This atmosphere is associated with a significant increase in psychological and professional stress among employees (Mohammad-Rezaei, Rezaei-Manesh, Vaezi, & Ghorbanzadeh, 2023). Bedi and Schat (2013) comprehensive meta-analysis showed that perception of organizational policy is associated with a sharp decline in positive variables such as trust, fairness, job satisfaction, and emotional commitment.

Narrative Conceptual Framework

Inspired by Engel (1977) Biopsychosocial Pattern (BPS), this research challenges the reductionist and variable-oriented approach. Engel argued that human pathology cannot be reduced to physical disorders alone, but should be seen as the product of the dynamic and intertwined interaction of the three biological, psychological, and social dimensions. This call for a paradigm shift from a harm-centered to a human-centered forms the conceptual basis of this research in order to explain the pathological narrative of an organizational phenomenon in the lived experience of employees. Accordingly, the present conceptual framework considers political appointment as a triggering event that activates three parallel and intertwined paths of harm:

Psychological path: This path begins with a cognitive rupture in the form of a perception of injustice and violation of the psychological contract (Bedi & Shat, 2013), and leads to negative reactions such as stress, anxiety, and erosion of motivation (Mohammad-Rezaei, Rezaei-Manesh, Vaezi & Ghorbanzadeh, 2023).

Social path: Political appointment leads to the polarization of the workplace (insider and outsider) by creating a crisis of legitimacy, erodes social capital, and leads to the formation of destructive norms such as organizational silence (Danaeifard, Sadeghi, & Mostafazadeh, 2015).

Biological path: This path, which is the main innovation of the framework, explains the embodiment process of stress. Continuous perception of threat leads to the exhaustion of the body's physiological systems and eventually manifests itself in the form of physical exhaustion, chronic fatigue, and psychosomatic symptoms.

Conceptual Framework Synthesis: Narrative Plot of Pathology

To integrate these paths, a narrative plot structure is used, which depicts the pathos as a trajectory map in three-stage time. This plot, which forms the conceptual skeleton of the research and will be used as the main analytical tool in the data analysis, can be described as follows:

1. Input pathos (beginning of the narrative): This stage includes the triggering event (political appointment) and the initial cognitive-emotional processes.
2. Mediating pathos (Development of narrative): In this stage, the pathos is processed and deepened. Chronic mistrust and hopelessness arise.
3. Output pathos (Temporary end of the narrative): Pessimism, apathy, and destructive work behaviors, breakdown of the relationship network, and physical exhaustion.

Methodology

This research uses a two-stage exploratory-interpretive qualitative design developed to answer the research questions systematically. In the first stage (Patterning), the narrative data obtained from 13 in-depth interviews with government employees were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). The purpose of this stage was to develop a conceptual Pattern based on the lived experiences and meaning-making of the participants. In the second stage i.e., validation and refining, the Pattern extracted by the researcher was subjected to the judgment and consensus of 10 executive experts through the Delphi Technique to be refined and finalized with a pragmatic goal to ensure its content validity and practicality. Content validity using Content Validity Index (CVI), Construct Validity using Lauchet's Content Validity Ratio (CVR), and Inter-Coder Reliability using Cronbach's alpha were measured after conducting interviews, which were (S-CVI/Ave=0.93), (CVR=0.85), and ($\alpha = 0.87$), respectively.

The data were analyzed using the reflective thematic analysis method based on the six-step approach of Brown and Clark (2021) and with the help of Atlas.ti software, the output of

which was the initial conceptual Pattern of PSB. Quantitative data analysis of Delphi was performed using SPSS 27 software.

Findings

The data analysis and validation process led to a final 12-component Pattern that explains pathology as a three-dimensional, process narrative. This Pattern demonstrates that the pathos begins with a psychological dimension, which includes the perception of injustice, the subsequent emotional, attitudinal, and motivational reactions. Then, this pathos spreads to the social dimension and manifests itself in the form of undermining shared trust, norms and values, and the destruction of the organization's social network. Ultimately, this process leads to the biological dimension, where chronic stress and exhaustion materialize in the individual and manifest themselves in the form of psychosomatic and physical consequences.

Discussion and Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to validate and refine the conceptual Pattern of psychosocial-biological pathology (PSB). The empirical findings confirmed the core of this Pattern and turned it into a 12-component operational and validated Pattern that depicts the dynamic and cascading pathos from initial perception to its multidimensional consequences.

The pathos begins with an initial psychological trigger, i.e., the perception of injustice (T1), quickly leads to emotional (T2), attitudinal (T3), and behavioral (T4) reactions, and serves as a bridge to the transfer of pathos from the individual to the social level.

Next, social contagion occurs. The dominance of political logic (T5) leads to mistrust and polarization of the space between insider and outsider groups (T6), which destroys organizational cohesion and leads to the destruction of social capital and the emergence of group conflicts (T9) by promoting negative norms (T7) and erosion of morality (T8).

The main innovation of the Pattern is in validating the third dimension, i.e., bioembodiment. Chronic psychosocial stress materializes in the employees in the form of physical symptoms (T10) and physical burnout (T11). The findings confirmed the moderating role of contextual factors (T12) such as individual resilience and organizational support in intensifying or weakening this process.

Research innovation includes the presentation and empirical validation of the Psychological-Social-Biological Pathology Pattern of Employees of Political Appointments (PSB) that covers several key gaps in the literature such as addressing the gap of an integrated and process approach, eliminating the gap of person-centered Patterns, and presenting a native and testable Pattern.

The limitations of this research include dependence on the cultural context of Iran, the qualitative nature of the data, and the cross-sectional nature of the data.

KEYWORDS

Political Appointments; Employee Pathology; Human-Centred Process Pattern; Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

