

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**Hidden Lived-Profiles: A Narrative of Employees' Organizational Life Besieged by "Organizational Bigfoots"****Ali Yasini*** 

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Receive Date: 22/Feb/2026

Revise Date: 19/April/2026

Accept Date: 21/April/2026

How to cite

Yasini, A., (2026). Hidden Lived-Profiles: A Narrative of Employees' Organizational Life Besieged by "Organizational Bigfoots" *Public Organizations Management*, 14(3), 137-162.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT**Introduction**

In contemporary organizational research, increasing attention has been directed toward the subtle and often unregulated dynamics of informal power. Although formal hierarchies remain central to organizational theory, symbolic power, reputation, informal networks, and discretionary access to information can substantially shape employees' everyday experiences. Within this context, the metaphor of the "organizational Bigfoot" describes influential actors whose power extends beyond formal organizational structures while remaining partly invisible. These individuals, often senior managers, tenured faculty, or long-established employees, may exercise disproportionate influence through social prestige, narrative control, informal alliances, and gatekeeping. Their presence can shape workplace culture, communication, and decision-making, while generating caution, emotional tension, and reduced employee agency even without explicit threats or coercion.

Academic institutions provide a particularly relevant context for examining such invisible power. Despite universities' emphasis on intellectual freedom, collegiality, and scholarly autonomy, academic environments are also influenced by hierarchies associated with academic rank, reputation, disciplinary networks, and access to scarce resources. Consequently, junior faculty and administrative staff may encounter powerful actors who influence career advancement, committee decisions, research opportunities, and acceptable forms of dissent. The organizational Bigfoot metaphor therefore offers a useful framework for understanding how symbolic authority becomes embedded in everyday organizational interactions and psychological experiences.

Although previous research on toxic leadership, workplace bullying, abusive supervision, and organizational silence has established the consequences of negative power dynamics, much of this literature emphasizes observable behaviors or quantitative relationships and provides less insight into how individuals subjectively interpret and experience covert forms of influence. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of staff and faculty members working under the influence of organizational Bigfoots. Specifically, it examines how employees perceive covert authoritarianism, understand its effects on organizational functioning, and develop coping strategies. By doing so, the study seeks to advance understanding of informal domination and its implications for employee well-being, innovation, morale, and institutional vitality.

Methodology

This study was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, viewing organizational phenomena as socially constructed through human interpretation. Given the aim of understanding participants' lived experiences rather than measuring predefined variables, a qualitative design based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the psychological, relational, and symbolic dimensions of informal power and how individuals make sense of complex organizational experiences.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 25 purposively selected faculty members and administrative staff at Ilam University who had direct experience with powerful informal actors. Interviews were conducted privately and lasted 60–90 minutes. The interview guide addressed experiences of covert power and informal authority, emotional and cognitive responses, effects on communication and innovation, coping strategies, and perceptions of organizational culture and leadership.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly reviewed, followed by initial coding, theme development, and iterative refinement of themes to establish conceptual clarity and coherence.

Research rigor was assessed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was enhanced through member checking with three participants and peer debriefing. Confirmability was supported through reflexivity and analytic memos, while transferability was strengthened through rich contextual descriptions. Dependability was addressed through a transparent audit trail documenting methodological procedures, coding decisions, and theme development.

Findings

Data analysis revealed **five overarching themes**, each reflecting distinct dimensions of participants' lived experiences under the influence of organizational Bigfoots. Fifteen subthemes supported these main categories

1. The Heavy Shadow of Covert Authoritarianism

Participants described these powerful actors as possessing an “aura of untouchability,” wielding authority beyond formal roles. Their presence was experienced as a constant, looming force shaping meetings, decisions, and informal conversations. Even in their absence, employees modified their behavior based on anticipated reactions. This shadow governance produced climates characterized by self-censorship, anticipatory compliance, and emotional vigilance.

2. Organizational Ecosystem Blockage

The second theme captured the structural and procedural barriers created by these individuals. Participants described how powerful actors acted as gatekeepers, controlling access to resources, approval channels, collaborations, and information flows. Innovation and creative initiatives were often stalled, redirected, or dismissed unless aligned with the preferences of the dominant actor. This produced a sense of stagnation in which organizational processes became rigid, slow, and tightly filtered.

3. Psychological–Emotional Erosion

Participants reported chronic emotional strain, including anxiety, frustration, anger, and diminished self-worth. Repeated exposure to subtle intimidation, dismissiveness, or exclusion eroded professional confidence. Many described emotional fatigue and a progressive withdrawal from organizational engagement. This erosion was not the result of overt hostility but of persistent micro-dynamics that undermined psychological security.

4. Systematic Betrayal

A strong subtheme centered on the failure of organizational structures to protect employees. Participants expressed pessimism toward formal complaint mechanisms, perceiving them as symbolic rather than functional. Some believed that institutional processes implicitly protected powerful individuals due to their prestige, long tenure, or political connections. This sense of institutional betrayal intensified feelings of vulnerability and mistrust.

5. Survival and Camouflage Strategies

Employees developed adaptive behaviors aimed at minimizing exposure to risk. These included strategic silence, impression management, limiting initiative, avoiding visibility, and “professional camouflage.” Although these strategies enabled short-term self-preservation, they simultaneously reinforced organizational stagnation. Participants noted that genuine creativity or constructive criticism became emotionally costly and professionally risky.

Across all themes, participants repeatedly referenced two emergent collective phenomena: “graveyard silence”—a climate of pervasive quietude, avoidance, and conformity—and “innovation sterilization”, in which creative energies are redirected away from productivity and toward coping and self-protection. Together, these patterns illustrate how organizational Bigfoots reshape the entire institutional ecosystem, affecting not only individual experiences but also organizational outcomes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study provides a nuanced understanding of how informal power operates in organizational contexts through the metaphor of the organizational Bigfoot. Unlike formal authority, Bigfoot-style power is diffuse, symbolic, and often invisible—yet deeply consequential. The findings demonstrate that such actors influence not only interpersonal relationships but also institutional structures, communication norms, and psychological climates.

One of the most significant theoretical insights concerns the invisible nature of dominance. The shadow cast by these powerful individuals does not require overt aggression; rather, it functions through perceived consequences, collective narratives, and internalized expectations. This aligns with emerging theories of symbolic violence and soft domination within organizations, where power operates through perception rather than explicit coercion.

The identified phenomena of “graveyard silence” and “innovation sterilization” offer important contributions to understanding organizational dysfunction. When employees devote cognitive and emotional resources to managing uncertainty and navigating powerful informal actors, their capacity for creativity, collaboration, and risk-taking diminishes. Over time, this dynamic becomes self-reinforcing: reduced innovation weakens organizational vitality, which further concentrates power among dominant actors.

Practical implications are equally significant. Organizations—especially universities—must recognize the limitations of formal structures in addressing informal power dynamics. Training programs that promote ethical leadership, emotional intelligence, and accountability are necessary but insufficient. More importantly, institutions need to introduce confidential reporting mechanisms, transparent decision-making processes, and distributed leadership models that reduce the likelihood of power monopolization.

In conclusion, this study expands theoretical understanding of informal power by conceptualizing organizational Bigfoots and empirically examining their effects on employees' lived experience. By revealing the emotional, relational, and structural consequences of shadow domination, the study underscores the importance of organizational cultures that promote psychological safety, transparency, and equitable access to influence. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering workplace environments where innovation, well-being, and organizational learning can thrive.

KEY WORDS

Organizational Bigfoot, Toxic Leadership, Interpretive Phenomenology, Thematic Analysis, Organizational Lived-Profile.

