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## **Beyond human relations: exploring informal power and soft control in contemporary organizations.**

### **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the role of human relations in shaping informal power, soft control, and decision-making processes within contemporary organizations. A qualitative descriptive-analytical approach was adopted, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, allowing for an in-depth understanding of subtle organizational dynamics. The findings revealed that informal networks, trust, and professional alliances significantly influenced employee behavior, access to information, and organizational decisions. While these mechanisms enhanced collaboration, flexibility, and knowledge sharing, they also generated hidden pressures and potential inequalities when left unregulated. In contrast, formal bureaucratic structures contributed to fairness, transparency, and protection against arbitrary influence. The study concluded that human relations should be understood not merely as managerial tools but as structural mechanisms of informal authority that coexist with formal systems. The interaction between informal influence, soft control, and bureaucracy plays a critical role in organizational stability and effectiveness.

**Keywords:** human relations, informal networks, organizational politics, soft power, bureaucracy, organizational authority, institutional stability

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## **Más allá de las relaciones humanas: explorando el poder informal y el control suave en las organizaciones contemporáneas**

### **RESUMEN**

Este estudio examinó el papel de las relaciones humanas en la configuración del poder informal, el control suave y los procesos de toma de decisiones en las organizaciones contemporáneas. Se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo descriptivo-analítico, y los datos se recopilaron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y observación participante, lo que permitió comprender en profundidad las dinámicas organizacionales sutiles. Los resultados evidenciaron que las redes informales, la confianza y las alianzas profesionales influyeron significativamente en el comportamiento de los empleados, el acceso a la información y las decisiones organizacionales. Si bien estos mecanismos favorecieron la colaboración, la flexibilidad y el intercambio de conocimiento, también generaron presiones ocultas y posibles inequidades cuando no fueron regulados. En contraste, las estructuras burocráticas formales contribuyeron a la equidad, la transparencia y la protección frente a influencias arbitrarias.

Se concluyó que las relaciones humanas deben entenderse no solo como herramientas de gestión, sino como mecanismos estructurales de autoridad informal que coexisten con los sistemas formales.

**Palabras clave:** relaciones humanas, redes informales, política organizacional, poder suave, burocracia, autoridad organizacional, estabilidad institucional

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## **Além das relações humanas: explorando o poder informal e o controle suave nas organizações contemporâneas**

### **RESUMO**

Este estudo examinou o papel das relações humanas na formação do poder informal, do controle suave e dos processos de tomada de decisão nas organizações contemporâneas. Foi adotada uma abordagem qualitativa descritivo-analítica, com coleta de dados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas e observação participante, permitindo uma compreensão aprofundada das dinâmicas organizacionais sutis. Os resultados mostraram que redes informais, confiança e alianças profissionais influenciaram significativamente o comportamento dos funcionários, o acesso à informação e as decisões organizacionais. Embora esses mecanismos tenham promovido colaboração, flexibilidade e compartilhamento de conhecimento, também geraram pressões ocultas e possíveis desigualdades quando não foram devidamente monitorados. Em contraste, as estruturas burocráticas formais garantiram equidade, transparência e proteção contra influências arbitrárias. Concluiu-se que as relações humanas devem ser compreendidas não apenas como ferramentas de gestão, mas como mecanismos estruturais de autoridade informal que coexistem com sistemas formais.

**Palavras-chave:** Relações humanas; Redes informais; Política organizacional; Controle suave; Burocracia; Autoridade organizacional; Estabilidade institucional

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In classical organizational theory, institutions have been traditionally conceptualized as rational systems governed by formal rules, hierarchical authority, and bureaucratic procedures designed to ensure efficiency, predictability, and accountability. As noted by Weber (2020), bureaucratic structures provide stability through clearly defined roles and standardized processes. Within this framework, human relations have historically been understood as managerial tools aimed at enhancing communication, collaboration, and employee satisfaction (Binda, 2020). Early approaches emphasized the importance of interpersonal dynamics primarily as a means to improve productivity and organizational climate, rather than as mechanisms of influence or power.

However, contemporary organizations operate in increasingly complex and dynamic environments that challenge purely formal interpretations of organizational life. Beyond official structures, informal networks, personal alliances, and subtle forms of influence play a decisive role in shaping decision-making processes, access to information, and the distribution of organizational resources (Buchanan & Badham, 2020). As Peiró and Meliá (2003) suggest, power within organizations is not exclusively derived from formal authority but also emerges through interpersonal relationships and social positioning. These informal dynamics, often invisible within formal regulations, interact with bureaucratic systems to produce outcomes that cannot be fully explained through structural analysis alone.

Recent organizational transformations driven by globalization, digitalization, and knowledge-based work have further intensified the relevance of informal influence. Flexible organizational structures and evolving employment relations have increased reliance on trust, collaboration, and decentralized decision-making (Hage & Powers, 1992; Yang & Horak, 2019). In this

context, soft control mechanisms—such as shared values, cultural norms, peer expectations, and symbolic recognition—have become central in regulating behavior without direct supervision (Riaz et al., 2019; Lartey et al., 2023). According to Fleming (2009), contemporary organizations increasingly rely on normative and cultural forms of control that shape employees' identities and behaviors in subtle but powerful ways. These mechanisms complement, and sometimes substitute, traditional forms of hierarchical control.

From a micro-political perspective, organizations can be understood as arenas where individuals and groups negotiate influence, legitimacy, and access to resources (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998; Stowell, 2021). Informal power operates through credibility, strategic alliances, and social capital, often influencing organizational outcomes beyond formal mandates (Kadakure, 2023). As Reed (2010) argues, modern employment relationships are characterized by a combination of formal authority and informal control, reflecting a shift toward more complex governance systems. This perspective highlights the importance of understanding how human relations function not only as social interactions but also as structural mechanisms that reproduce authority and influence within organizations.

Despite extensive research on human relations and organizational behavior, a significant gap remains in understanding how interpersonal relationships function as mechanisms for reproducing informal power and shaping organizational authority. Most traditional studies continue to treat human relations as tools for improving employee satisfaction and motivation, overlooking their role in structuring access to information and decision-making processes (Binda, 2020; Dwyer, 2005). This gap is particularly relevant for human resource management and administrative practice, as neglecting informal networks and micro-political dynamics may lead to inequitable resource distribution, hidden pressures, and inefficient decision-making (Chukwu et al., 2025). Addressing this limitation requires a more integrative analytical framework that combines structural, relational, and political perspectives.

In response to this gap, this study examines how human relations, informal power, and micro-political dynamics coexist with bureaucratic frameworks to influence authority, compliance, and decision-making in contemporary organizations. By integrating insights from management theory and micro-political analysis (Pfeffer, 1992; Israel, 2018), the research provides a comprehensive understanding of organizational dynamics that bridges theory and practice. This approach recognizes that formal and informal systems are not mutually exclusive but interdependent elements shaping organizational effectiveness and institutional stability.

## **Research Objectives**

### **Main**

To examine the role of human relations in shaping informal power, soft control, and organizational decision-making within contemporary institutions.

### **Objective:**

### **Specific Objectives:**

- To analyze how personal relationships create informal networks of influence that affect daily organizational practices.
- To investigate how soft control mechanisms—such as shared norms, peer expectations, and symbolic recognition—regulate employee behavior.
- To explore the influence of micro-political dynamics on decision-making processes and resource allocation within organizations.
- To assess how formal bureaucratic structures stabilize organizational operations and mitigate risks associated with informal power.

## **Research Questions**

- How do human relations contribute to the formation of informal networks of influence within contemporary organizations?
- In what ways do informal power and organizational politics affect decision-making processes beyond formal administrative structures?
- How do soft control mechanisms operate through personal relationships in the workplace?
- To what extent can bureaucratic rules and formal organizational structures mitigate potential risks associated with informal power dynamics?

### Hypotheses

Given the qualitative descriptive–analytical approach, the following hypotheses are formulated as analytical expectations:

- **H1:** Human relations within organizations create informal networks that significantly shape access to information and participation in decision-making.
- **H2:** Informal power and organizational politics influence decision-making processes beyond formal hierarchical authority.
- **H3:** Soft control mechanisms, such as peer expectations and cultural norms, regulate employee behavior subtly without relying solely on formal supervision.
- **H4:** Bureaucratic structures and formal rules provide a stabilizing framework that mitigates the risks of informal power and personal favoritism.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1. Human Relations and Organizational Dynamics

Human relations have long been recognized as a central component of organizational management. Traditionally, they were framed as tools to enhance communication, motivation, and employee satisfaction (Mayo, 1933). However, contemporary research highlights that personal relationships extend beyond improving organizational climate: they function as channels through which influence, authority, and informal power are reproduced.

In modern organizations, human relations create informal networks that affect access to information, participation in decision-making, and the distribution of resources (Landells & Albrecht, 2019). These networks foster trust, collaboration, and knowledge sharing, contributing to organizational efficiency. Simultaneously, they may generate subtle inequalities if certain actors are excluded from influential networks. Understanding these dynamics is therefore crucial for human resource management, as it informs strategies for fair allocation of responsibilities, talent development, and employee engagement.

### 2. Informal Power and Soft Control

Informal power refers to the ability of individuals to influence outcomes without relying solely on formal authority (Buchanan & Badham, 2020). It is exercised through personal credibility, reputation, and strategic alliances within the organization. Soft control, on the other hand, operates through subtle mechanisms such as cultural norms, shared expectations, and symbolic recognition (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2019).

These mechanisms shape behavior by creating internalized expectations and guiding employees' decision-making. Unlike formal oversight, soft control does not require explicit enforcement; instead, it relies on social and relational processes embedded in daily interactions. For human resource managers, recognizing the impact of soft control is essential for designing policies that align organizational objectives with employee motivation and compliance, without relying solely on rigid rules or supervision.

### 3. Micro-Politics in Organizations

Organizations are micro-political arenas where individuals and groups negotiate influence, legitimacy, and access to resources (Rosen et al., 2018). Micro-political dynamics involve negotiation, coalition-building, and impression management, which can coexist with formal bureaucratic authority. While often perceived negatively, these dynamics are inherent to organizational life and can enhance problem-solving and adaptability when managed ethically.

By studying micro-politics alongside human relations, organizations gain insights into the distribution of influence, the functioning of informal networks, and potential risks of power concentration. HR policies can then be designed to encourage transparency, ethical behavior, and equitable participation in decision-making processes.

### 4. Bureaucracy and Stabilization of Informal Dynamics

Contrary to the perception that bureaucracy limits flexibility, formal rules and hierarchical structures provide a stabilizing function in contemporary organizations (Weber, 2020). Bureaucratic frameworks define roles, standardize procedures, and establish accountability chains, protecting employees from arbitrary decisions and informal favoritism.

When combined with informal networks and soft control, bureaucracy creates a balance between personal influence and institutional fairness. Effective HR management requires understanding this interaction to maintain organizational stability, promote equitable opportunities, and safeguard employees against the negative effects of informal power.

### 5. Integrative Perspective

This study adopts an integrative approach, combining insights from human relations theory, micro-political analysis, and classical bureaucratic theory. By examining how informal power, soft control, and micro-political dynamics interact with formal structures, the research provides a holistic understanding of authority, compliance, and relational dynamics in contemporary organizations.

## **Methodology**

### **1. Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive-analytical design to examine the role of human relations, informal power, and micro-political dynamics in contemporary organizations. Qualitative approaches were particularly appropriate for analyzing complex social phenomena involving subjective meanings, interpersonal interactions, and context-dependent processes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In line with Espinoza Freire (2020), qualitative research was considered a valuable and ethical tool for understanding human behavior within real contexts. By focusing on participants' lived experiences, this design enabled an in-depth interpretation of how informal influence and soft control mechanisms operated alongside formal bureaucratic structures (Bryman, 2021).

### **2. Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, both widely recognized in qualitative organizational and legal research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2019; Romero Flor, 2016). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to reflect on their experiences while enabling the researcher to guide discussions around key dimensions, including personal relationships, informal networks, and perceptions of organizational power. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, ensuring depth and consistency. Participant observation complemented this method by providing contextual insights into everyday organizational interactions and informal alliances. As noted by Guamán Chacha et al. (2021), combining multiple techniques strengthens the validity and richness of qualitative inquiry.

### **3. Sampling Strategy**

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants capable of providing relevant and meaningful insights into the research topic (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Selection criteria included active involvement in decision-making processes, direct interaction with colleagues and managers, and sufficient professional experience to observe informal dynamics. This approach ensured the inclusion of individuals from different hierarchical levels and functional areas, thereby capturing diverse perspectives on organizational authority and influence. According to Antar (2016), purposive sampling is particularly suitable in qualitative and legal research contexts where depth of information is prioritized over statistical representativeness.

#### **4. Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which facilitated the identification of patterns and meaningful insights within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The process involved four stages: familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, and interpretation. First, interview transcripts and observation notes were carefully reviewed to ensure comprehensive understanding. Second, relevant segments related to informal networks, micro-politics, and soft control were coded. Third, these codes were grouped into broader analytical themes. Finally, findings were interpreted in light of the theoretical framework, linking them to organizational behavior and power dynamics. As highlighted by Espinoza-Freire (2021), systematic analysis enhances the rigor and coherence of scientific argumentation.

#### **5. Ethical Considerations**

Ethical standards were strictly followed throughout the research process, ensuring respect for participants and the integrity of the study (Israel, 2018). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants' identities were anonymized to protect confidentiality, and all data were used exclusively for academic purposes. In accordance with Espinoza Freire and Calva Nagua (2020), ethical research practices are essential to guarantee transparency, trust, and scientific validity. Furthermore, ethical considerations were aligned with principles of responsible research and academic integrity, as emphasized by Espinoza-Freire (2022), ensuring that participants could share their experiences openly and without risk.

### **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

#### **1. Human Relations as Informal Networks of Influence**

The analysis revealed that human relations extend beyond interpersonal interaction and evolve into structured informal networks that significantly shape organizational practices. Participants consistently indicated that access to strategic information, participation in decision-making processes, and the capacity to mobilize resources were not exclusively determined by formal hierarchical positions, but rather by relational embeddedness and professional alliances. These findings suggest that influence within organizations is relationally constructed and socially distributed.

This result reinforces the argument that human relations should be understood as structural mechanisms of influence rather than merely managerial tools aimed at enhancing satisfaction or collaboration (Landells & Albrecht, 2019). Informal networks operate as channels through which power circulates, often determining inclusion or exclusion from key organizational processes. From a human resource management perspective, recognizing these dynamics is critical to promoting equitable participation, as failure to address them may reinforce structural inequalities and marginalize individuals who are less integrated into dominant relational networks.

#### **2. Informal Power and Micro-Political Dynamics**

The findings demonstrate that informal power constitutes a central dimension of organizational life, actively shaping decision-making processes alongside, and at times

beyond, formal authority structures. Participants described how individuals leveraged personal credibility, strategic alliances, and negotiation capabilities to influence outcomes, confirming that organizational power is multidimensional and not confined to formal hierarchies (Buchanan & Badham, 2020).

Micro-political dynamics were observed to permeate everyday practices, influencing not only decisions but also the distribution of opportunities and resources. These dynamics manifested through the strategic control of information, coalition-building, and the negotiation of interests, which in turn shaped organizational priorities without the need for formal mandates. Such findings align with the view that organizations function as arenas of continuous negotiation, where actors pursue influence through both formal and informal means.

From an administrative standpoint, these results highlight the necessity of incorporating micro-political awareness into HR policies. Rather than attempting to eliminate informal power—which is inherent to organizational life—institutions should seek to regulate it through transparency, ethical guidelines, and inclusive decision-making frameworks. This approach enables organizations to harness the positive aspects of informal influence, such as adaptability and innovation, while mitigating risks associated with favoritism and opacity.

### **3. Soft Control and Subtle Mechanisms of Compliance**

The study identified soft control as a pervasive and effective mechanism for regulating employee behavior. Participants reported that shared norms, peer expectations, and symbolic recognition shaped their actions, often leading to self-regulation without the need for explicit supervision. This finding supports the argument that contemporary organizations increasingly rely on internalized forms of control embedded in social and cultural processes (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2019).

Soft control mechanisms were found to generate several organizational advantages. They foster intrinsic motivation, encourage discretionary effort, and facilitate coordination in environments where rigid hierarchical control may be inefficient. Moreover, they contribute to the development of a cohesive organizational culture, enhancing alignment between individual behavior and institutional objectives.

However, the analysis also revealed the ambivalent nature of soft control. While it promotes engagement and flexibility, it may simultaneously produce hidden pressures, conformity, and subtle forms of exclusion. Employees may feel compelled to adhere to implicit expectations in order to maintain social acceptance, which can limit diversity of thought and reinforce existing power structures. Consequently, HR interventions become essential to ensure that soft control mechanisms operate within ethical boundaries, particularly through transparent feedback systems and equitable recognition practices.

### **4. Bureaucracy as a Stabilizing Mechanism**

Contrary to traditional critiques that portray bureaucracy as restrictive and inflexible, participants emphasized its critical role as a stabilizing mechanism within contemporary organizations. Formal rules, hierarchical procedures, and clearly defined authority structures were perceived as essential safeguards against arbitrary decision-making and the excessive concentration of informal power. These elements provided a framework for accountability, ensuring consistency and fairness in organizational processes.

This finding is consistent with classical organizational theory, which highlights the role of bureaucracy in maintaining order, predictability, and institutional integrity (Weber, 2020). Importantly, the results suggest that bureaucracy does not necessarily conflict with informal dynamics; rather, it complements them by establishing boundaries within which informal influence can operate. In this sense, formal and informal mechanisms should be understood as interdependent rather than antagonistic.

The integration of bureaucratic structures with informal networks creates a dynamic balance between flexibility and control. While informal relations enhance responsiveness and innovation, formal systems ensure that such dynamics do not undermine equity and transparency. This balance is essential for sustaining organizational legitimacy and long-term stability in complex institutional environments.

## **5. Integrative Discussion**

The findings of this study demonstrate that organizational effectiveness and stability are contingent upon the interplay between human relations, informal power, and bureaucratic structures. Rather than functioning in isolation, these elements form an interconnected system that shapes authority, compliance, and decision-making processes. Human relations emerge as foundational structures through which informal influence is generated and reproduced, redefining their role beyond traditional managerial perspectives.

Soft control operates as a complementary mechanism that enhances formal authority by guiding behavior through internalized norms and shared expectations. At the same time, bureaucratic frameworks serve as institutional safeguards that regulate informal dynamics and prevent the concentration of unchecked power. This triadic interaction underscores the necessity of adopting an integrative approach to organizational analysis, one that accounts for both formal structures and relational processes.

From a practical perspective, these insights offer significant implications for human resource management and organizational design. Institutions must move beyond purely structural or relational models and instead develop hybrid strategies that balance formal regulation with the recognition of informal dynamics. By doing so, organizations can optimize decision-making processes, promote fairness, and strengthen institutional resilience in increasingly complex environments.

## **CONCLUSION & THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION**

### **1. Conclusion:**

This study demonstrates that human relations in contemporary organizations are not merely managerial tools; they operate as fundamental mechanisms shaping informal power, soft control, and micro-political dynamics alongside formal structures. Key insights include:

Informal networks influence access to information, participation in decisions, and resource distribution.

Soft control mechanisms—peer expectations, cultural norms, and symbolic recognition—guide behavior subtly, enhancing compliance, engagement, and collaboration.

Bureaucratic structures stabilize operations, ensuring fairness, transparency, and protection against arbitrary influence.

Overall, organizational effectiveness depends on balancing formal rules with relational dynamics, allowing institutions to leverage informal influence while maintaining equity and stability.

### **2. Theoretical Contribution:**

This research offers four main contributions:

**Reframing Human Relations:** Treats human relations as structural mechanisms of influence, not just satisfaction-enhancing tools.

**Integrating Informal and Formal Dynamics:** Shows how informal power, soft control, and bureaucracy interact to shape authority and decision-making.

**Advancing Micro-Political Analysis:** Provides a nuanced understanding of contemporary organizational functioning.

Implications for HR Management: Highlights strategies to recognize informal networks, balance soft control with formal rules, and promote ethical, equitable practices.

### **STUDY LIMITATIONS**

This study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the findings were based on a specific organizational context, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other settings. Additionally, the qualitative approach involved a degree of subjective interpretation from both participants and the researcher. Finally, certain mechanisms of informal power and soft control, due to their implicit and subtle nature, may not have been fully observable, even through the use of semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research could expand the scope of this study by conducting comparative analyses across different sectors and cultural contexts in order to enhance the external validity of the findings. Additionally, the integration of mixed-method approaches is recommended, particularly incorporating quantitative techniques such as social network analysis to more accurately map informal influence dynamics. Finally, further studies could explore the impact of digital transformation and remote work on the configuration of informal networks and soft control mechanisms in contemporary organizations.

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### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. This research was conducted independently, without any external influence that could compromise the objectivity, integrity, or validity of the results presented.

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