

PERCEPTIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS AMONG STUDENTS IN AN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Although there is significant research on perceptions of organizational politics (POP) in the public and private workplace, little is known about POP's impact in the academic environment and how this affects students' educational experience. The current study examines students' perceptions of politics in higher education institutions. It focuses on the causes and outcomes of those perceptions. We predict that students who have positive perceptions of the academic climate and faculty guidance will perceive their academic environment as less political. In addition, we argue that that procrastination is one possible negative outcome of POP in an academic environment. The study is based on quantitative data collected from 290 college students. The findings suggest that interacting with students and providing them with academic advice and feedback on their performance reduces the extent to which students perceive their academic environment as being political. The results support that the theory that organizational politics are a universal phenomenon occurring in every organization and in all types of populations, including students in academic institutions or perhaps even children in schools. Additionally, the study shows that POP have a clearly negative influence on students' attitudes and behavior in the realm of academic procrastination.

Keywords: perceptions of organizational politics; academic procrastination; academic climate; faculty guidance

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Introduction

Higher education institutions in the 21st century face significant social, economic, and technological challenges that change the educational experience of students (Neier & Zayer, 2015; Stensaker, 2018). This, together with psychological aspects, characterize the entering institution for higher education for many adolescents (Wilcox et al., 2005). The success of such a personal journey of transition to an academic institution depends on the important roles of different sources: social support from peers, tutors and parents (Tao et al., 2000), and students' own motivation (Busse, 2013) and emotions (Ashwin & Trigwell, 2012). Alongside the extensive literature that deals with students' experience in academia, the present research introduces an additional aspect by focusing on their perceptions of organizational politics in the academic environment. We examine the extent to which students' perception of organizational politics play a significant role in their experience in academic life. The study examines potential predictors of perceptions of organizational politics, and focuses on their implications.

Organizational politics

Organizational politics are an inherent aspect of organizational life. They have been the topic of significant research for more than thirty years (Landells & Albrecht, 2017; Mayes & Allen, 1977). Organizational politics are often defined as a dynamic process of using influence to achieve personal goals that may be contrary to the interests of the organization or work unit (Mayes & Allen, 1977). Organizational politics are generally subtle, informal micro-processes enacted in contrast to the ideal of a rational, centrally-managed organization (Davey, 2008). People use these processes to attain goals that could not be achieved through other means (Kapoutsis, 2016). Examples include withholding information from coworkers, failing to enforce policies and procedures appropriately, using flattery to secure favors, ingratiation, shifting blame, maligning others to improve one's own standing, self-promotion, and management styles intended to impress others (Harris et al., 2007).

Perceptions of organizational politics in academic organizations

The existence of organizational politics is a situational indicator reflected in personal interpretation of the organizational climate (Witt et al.,

2002). People tend to act on their perceptions of reality rather than on objective reality (Lewin, 1936). Thus, it is important to consider the interpretation and misinterpretation of actions in any study of political behavior (Ferris et al., 2017). Indeed, research in this field generally focuses on people's perceptions of politics within an organization. Perceptions of organizational politics (POP) represent the degree to which individuals perceive the actions of organizational members as being self-interested, unjust, unfair, or directed toward furthering their own goals without regard for the well-being of others or on behalf of an organization (Ferris et al., 1996; Kacmar & Baron, 1999). POPs are a personal mechanism used to explain the phenomenon. Thus, an organization may be perceived as political by some members and not by others. Perceptions of organizational politics have been studied in a variety of types of institutions, including those in the public sector (Vigoda, 2001; Vigoda & Meisler, 2010), the private sector (Valle et al., 2003), and global virtual organizations (Elron & Vigoda-Gadot, 2006). Interestingly, one type of ubiquitous organization which has seen virtually no research on POP is the academic institution. Little is known about the impact on students' attitudes and behaviors of an academic environment that students characterize as political. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, there have been no previous studies identifying the factors that explain the variance in students' perceptions of organizational politics.

We argue that the extent to which students perceive their environment as political will affect their educational experience. For example, a student might feel that personal assessments in the department are not based on effort and achievement, but the impression made on the management. In this case, it is reasonable to assume that this student will be less motivated to make that effort.

The present study will attempt to elucidate the phenomenon of POPs in an academic context, their causes and possible outcomes (*see* Figure 1). First, however, it is important to address the literature that describes how the mechanism of political perception works in organizations. This study can contribute to the field in two ways. First, it provides evidence of the significance of POP among students in the academic sector, a topic which has received insufficient attention. Second, it offers insight into factors that explain students' academic procrastination. Understanding POP as a mechanism of procrastination may contribute to the means of addressing this problem.

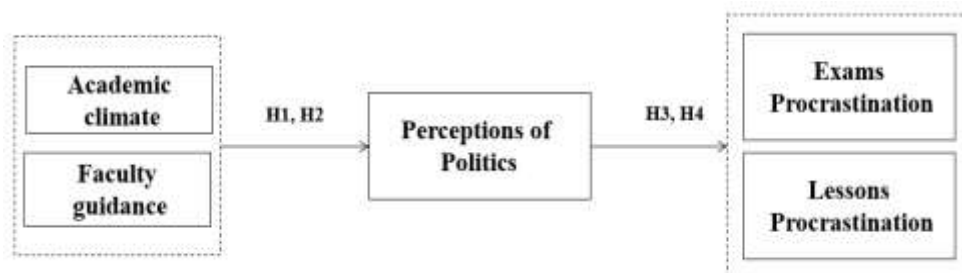


Figure 1. The research model

Predictors of POP

Researchers have examined situational factors that are antecedents, causes, and predictors of POP (Ferris et al., 1989; Vigoda, 2001). One type of factor relates to organizational structure, such as the degree of autonomy members enjoy, hierarchy, and effectiveness of formal communications. For example, employees who are at lower levels in the organizational hierarchy are less involved in decision-making and have less control. A second factor relates to personal influences, such as members' skills, educational level, or minority status. Employees with low-level skills and low job autonomy are more dependent on others and therefore perceive their environment as political (Ferris et al., 2016). A third is the impact of work and effort on career development, promotion, feedback, and distribution of rewards (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992; Ferris et al., 2016). O'Connor and Morrison (2001) examined situational variables of POP and found that the most powerful predictor of POP was institutional climate, accounting for 39% of the variance in perceptions of political activity. Institutional climate refers to characteristics that describe an organization. Given the strong impact of institutional climate on POP (O'Connor & Morrison, 2001), any study of POP in an academic setting must consider the institutional climate. The institutional climate of a college or university is determined by the programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences with which students interact on campus (Chi et al., 2017). Two important factors that affect POP in academic institutions are the academic climate and faculty guidance (Heng, 2014).

Academic climate

The academic climate represents one significant dimension of the overall institutional climate. Academic climate has been defined as the

perceptions of behaviors by teachers and students that place a high value on academic achievement and that motivate students to focus on learning (MacNeil et al., 2009). Several specific factors have consistently been ascribed to the academic climate, including academic expectations, student morale, teacher morale, and student motivation (Urick & Bowers, 2011). The academic climate also includes teachers' emphasis on grades versus effort, and a focus on competition as opposed to collaboration in the classroom (Wilkins & Kuperminc, 2010).

Positive academic climate is characteristic of high-performing schools at all grade levels (Urick & Bowers, 2011). Students who attend an institution that emphasizes spending significant time studying and doing academic work tend to report greater educational gains (Reason et al., 2006). On the other hand, when students feel that they are not receiving support or assistance from their institution, their motivation diminishes, and this is reflected in declining achievements. In such a climate, students might attribute dissatisfaction with their achievements or the progress of their studies to external factors, such as organizational politics.

Faculty guidance

Chi et al. (2017) define faculty guidance as the advice and feedback teachers provide in academic interactions with students with the intention of improving students' performance. Faculty guidance affects the class climate and can positively or negatively influence student learning and development (Heng, 2014). Improvement in students' confidence, motivation, responsibility, and persistence are more strongly influenced by faculty guidance and teaching practices than by the students' background characteristics (Colbeck et al., 2001). When faculty create an environment that emphasizes effective educational practices and encourages students to be active participants in their learning, the students tend to perceive greater gains from their experience (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Heng (2014) found that faculty advice and feedback have a strong and positive influence on students' academic achievement. In contrast, students who do not receive supportive faculty guidance might be expected to feel some level of uncertainty and to be less engaged in active and collaborative learning activities.

We predict that students who have positive perceptions of the academic climate and faculty guidance will perceive their academic environment as less political (*see* Figure 1). Therefore:

Hypothesis 1: The academic climate will have a negative correlation with perceptions of organizational politics.

Hypothesis 2: Faculty guidance will have a negative correlation with perceptions of organizational politics.

Just as individual employees in an organization may have differing perceptions of organizational politics, students might also vary in the degree to which they perceive their academic environment as being political. Moreover, these perceptions can affect students' cognitive and behavioral outcomes.

Outcomes of POP

In a work environment, POP may influence employee behavior and supervisor interpretation of that behavior (Witt et al., 2002). The outcomes of POP may be positive or negative (Harris et al., 2007), though empirical studies mostly emphasize the negative consequences of these perceptions. Many studies have identified negative impacts of POP on employees' performance (Conner 2006; Cropanzano et al., 1997; Valle & Perrewe, 2000) and attitudes (Chang et al., 2009; Vigoda & Meisler, 2010). Dissatisfied employees who are pessimistic about their opportunities for promotion may use organizational politics as a excuse to justify their current position and lack of advancement (Gandz & Murray, 1980), which may negatively impact their motivation. The current study also considers one potential outcome of POP that is relevant to the academic context: procrastination.

Procrastination is one manifestation of volitional problems (Dewitte & Lens, 2000). Procrastination is generally defined as a failure of self-regulation in achieving goals, resulting in a delay (Steel, 2007). When students procrastinate, they distract from academic duties in favor of other activities, returning to academics at a later time (Hensley, 2016). Characteristics of procrastination are patterns of postponing and unnecessarily delaying tasks that are considered important or indispensable, resulting in failure to complete those tasks. Procrastination may be assessed in various ways: by an individual's subjective perception of delaying beyond what is expected and desirable, as well as by objective measures of compliance with the commitment's specified time (Deniz et al., 2009).

Academic procrastination as an outcome of POP

The tendency to delay or suspend completion of academic tasks is common in academic environments (Jayakumar et al., 2016; O'Brien, 2002; Sirin, 2011; Steel, 2007). A recent study found that while approximately 20% of the population as a whole admits to procrastinating, a full 70% of students say they have patterns of delaying the completion of tasks (Hussain & Sultan, 2010). This habit becomes difficult to change, and procrastination tends to increase the longer an individual remains in an academic environment (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). It is reasonable to assume that students who believe that they are not treated fairly in a college, or who perceive that a group of other students has certain privileges, might have decreased motivation. At the employee level, the decline in motivation is reflected by low commitment, turnover, and absenteeism (Gibson et al., 2011). At a student level, lack of motivation will be expressed as a tendency to put less effort into academic assignments (DiPerna & Elliott, 1999). In other words, it seems logical to expect that if students perceive their environment as political, their level of procrastination may increase.

Therefore, we assume that procrastination is one possible negative outcome of POP in an academic environment (*see* Figure 1).

Hypothesis 3: Perceptions of organizational politics will have a positive correlation with procrastination of studying for exams.

Hypothesis 4: Perceptions of organizational politics will have a positive correlation with procrastination of completing assignments.

Methods

Participants

The study is based on quantitative data collected among students at one college. The tool was an anonymous online survey. The sample included 290 students. Women comprised 72.9% of the participants. The average age was 29.07 years (SD=8.04). Of the surveyed students, 26.8% were in the first year of a bachelor's degree program, 24.7% were in the second year, 28.2% were in the third year, 7.9% were in the fourth year, and 12.4% were studying in a master's degree program (*see* Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of categorical variables

Descriptive Statistics	%
Sample	N = 290
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	27.1%
Female	72.9%
<i>Year of studying</i>	
First year (BA)	26.8%
Second year (BA)	24.7%
Third year (BA)	28.2%
Fourth year (BA)	7.9%
MA	12.4%

Measures

Perceptions of Academic Politics. The study was based on Ferris et al. (1989) definition of POP as the degree to which respondents view their work environment as political, and therefore unjust and unfair. We used a 12-item scale proposed by Kacmar and Ferris (1991), the Perceptions of Organizational Politics Scale (POPS), adapted for an academic environment. The original scale includes three dimensions: general political behavior, going along to get ahead, and pay and promotion. Nye and Witt (1993) conducted exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses to evaluate this three-dimensional model of perceptions of organizational politics. The results of their principal components analysis with an orthogonal rotation indicated that the 12-item POP scale was unidimensional, as opposed to the three-dimensional model proposed by Kacmar and Ferris (1991). Therefore, following Nye and Witt (1993), we used a scale as a unidimensional variable. Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they agree with each of the statements on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale has been used in several studies and has been shown to be a valid measure of values (Valle et al., 2003; Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2010).

Academic Procrastination Questionnaire. We used a section of a procrastination questionnaire developed by Milgram et al. (1988) concerning academic procrastination. The Hebrew version of this questionnaire was taken from Tenne (1997). In the current study, we used 19 items concerning preparation for exams and for class assignments. The third dimension, writing papers, was not used since some of the participants were first year students, and their academic duties do not include writing papers. Participants were requested

to indicate how often they tend to engage in various actions or how accurately various statements describe them. Scores ranged from 1 (low procrastination/low blame) to 5 (high procrastination/high blame).

Institutional Climate. Two aspects of independent factors of institutional climate were considered: academic climate and faculty guidance. Academic climate was measured using five items from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), such as: “The school encourages cooperation and interactions among students” and “The school advocates positive attitudes toward learning”. Faculty guidance was tested using four items from NSSE, such as: “Faculty members set high expectations for students” and “Faculty members provide prompt feedback on my performance”. Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they agree with the statements on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale has been used in several studies and has been shown to be a valid measure of values (Chi et al., 2017; Payne et al., 2005).

Control variables

Beyond the effects of the independent variables, we controlled for variables that could be related to POP. Specifically, we controlled for the effects of gender, year of studies, and socioeconomic status. The reason for controlling for these variables is based on the literature arguing for their potential effect on POP. For example, Ferris et al. (1996) report a significant effect for gender on POP; showing that women were less likely than men to perceive their work environment as political. Other studies have suggested that organizational tenure impacts POP (Bedeian et al., 1992; Ferris et al., 1996). We assume that the variable of organizational tenure is similar to the variable representing years of study, in the context of students in an academic environment.

Procedure

We recruited potential participants by means of convenience sampling. At the beginning of the study, participants were asked to confirm informed consent for participation in the study. We ensured the complete confidentiality of data and identity of the participants, as part of the requirements of the ethics committee.

Data analysis

Multiple fit indices were used to assess the adequacy of the research model (Figure 1): goodness-of-fit index (GFI), the comparative-fit-index (CFI), and the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA). GFI values range from 0 to 1.00, where values greater than .95 indicate good fit and values greater than .90 are considered satisfactory (Hoyle, 1995). It is generally suggested that CFI should exceed .90 or even .95 for the model to be considered a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Similarly, a value of .06 or less for the RMSEA reflects a good fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

Results

Means, Standard Deviations and inter-correlations of the variables in the study are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations and inter-correlations of the variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	(α)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Perceptions of Organizational Politics	2.47	.49	.68						
2. Academic climate	3.56	.66	.75	-.29**					
3. Faculty guidance	3.33	.63	.58	-.27**	.59**				
4. Procrastination on exams	3.16	.74	.81	.14*	-.05	-.09			
5. Procrastination on assignments	2.92	.64	.80	.15**	-.05	-.05	.77**		
6. Year of studying	2.67	1.56	--	.05	-.10	.10	-.04	.05	
7. Age	29.12	8.15	--	.12*	-.07	.05	-.12*	-.07	.42**

Note: **p < .01; *p < .05

Structural equations modelling (SEM) with the AMOS 23 (Arbuckle, 2010) software package, was used to test the research model (Figure 1). Results are given in Figure 2. The advantage of testing the path model using SEM is that it enables simultaneous testing of two sets of relationships (in this case: antecedents - perceptions and perceptions - outcomes).



Note: **p < .01; *p < .05

Figure 2. SEM path model results

Because of the many possible paths contained within the model, presenting the results via a diagram proves to be quite difficult to read. Therefore, for presentation purposes only, the SEM results are also displayed in two separate tables. Table 2 presents regression weights for the predictors of the attitude components. Table 3 shows the regression weights for the predictions of the work-related outcomes. All of the possible relationships between antecedents and resistance components, and between resistance components and work-related outcomes, were tested. The model shows acceptable fit to data (CMIN/*df*=1.68; GFI=.98; CFI=.98; RMSEA=.05).

Table 2. SEM results for paths antecedents to resistance components (N=291)

Variable	Perceptions of organizational politics (β)
Control	
Year of Studying	.06
Gender (female)	.07
Academic climate	-.19**
Faculty guidance	-.17*
R ²	.11

Note: **p < .01; *p < .05

Table 3. SEM results for paths from perceptions of academic politics to procrastination (exams and assignments) (N=291)

Variable	Exams Procrastination (β)	Assignments Procrastination (β)
Perceptions of organizational politics	.14*	.17**
Year of Studying	.03	-.05
Gender (female)	-.12*	-.14*
R ²	.03	.05

Note: **p < .01; *p < .05

Hypotheses 1 and 2, which postulate that academic climate and faculty guidance will be negatively correlated with students' perceptions of academic politics, were supported. The lower a student's score on the academic climate and faculty guidance scale, the more likely that student was to perceive the academic environment as political. Hypotheses 3 and 4 predict that the extent to which a student perceives the academic environment as political will affect academic procrastination. In particular, POP are predicted to be associated with procrastination on both exams and assignments. These two hypotheses were also supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to test the extent to which POP are reflected in the academic environment. Building on extensive research that has shown the significant impact of POP on employees' attitudes and behaviors (Chang et al., 2009; Miller et al., 2009), we explore the question of whether these perceptions would have a similar meaning in the academic environment. Specifically, we focus on students' POP in an academic institution, in order to clarify the factors that explain these perceptions and assess their outcomes.

Our hypotheses that academic climate and faculty guidance are related to students' perceptions of organizational politics in academy were supported. The results indicate the significance of organizational characteristics in individuals' perceptions of political behavior in academic institutions. Specifically, the findings suggest that interacting with students and providing them with academic advice and feedback on their performance reduces the extent to which students perceive their academic environment as being political. Our research supports findings from previous studies regarding the impact of organizational characteristics (as structure) on perceptions of organizational politics (Ferris et al., 2016; O'Connor & Morrison, 2001). It seems that organizational politics is a phenomenon that exists not only in public or private organizations (Valle et al., 2003; Vigoda & Meisler, 2010). It is possible that this is a universal phenomenon, which takes place in every organization and is relevant to all types of populations, including students in academic institutions or perhaps even children in schools. This study was conducted at the college level. It is possible that exposure to organizational politics takes place at an earlier stage of education. This could be examined in future studies, by exploring POP in high schools or even younger grade levels.

In addition, the research findings emphasize the significant meaning of organizational culture. The results demonstrate that an academic institution's staff (senior and junior) is not the only population influenced by an organizational culture, by learning organizational norms and values, and by developing a certain organizational identity. Our findings can be said to be aligned with previous studies suggesting that students are influenced by the organizational culture of the academic institution in which they study. This thought can attract the attention of principals or decision-makers in various academic institutions who are interested in recruiting and developing students. This study focused on two factors representing institutional climate (academic

climate and faculty guidance); future studies may explore how other organizational mechanisms such as organizational structure or organizational culture impact individuals' perceptions.

Further, the findings demonstrate that students' POP are related to academic procrastination. The results support the notion that POP have a clearly negative influence on students' attitudes and behavior, in the present case - in the realm of academic procrastination. The impact of POP includes student motivation toward work (Urlick & Bowers, 2011) and students' academic achievements (Heng, 2014), but may not be limited to these outcomes. As stated before, we believe that the motivation decreases in students who are not sure they are treated fairly, and thus they procrastinate. Perceptions of organizational politics represent the degree to which individuals perceive the actions of organizational members as being self-interested, unjust, unfair, or directed toward furthering their own goals without regard for the well-being of others in the organization. In such a case, completing tasks on time may be irrelevant and may even seem pointless, because it does not seem to contribute to success.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The main limitation of the present study concerns the fact that the data is based on self-reporting. This could lead to exaggeration of the strength of relationships, due to common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

The second limitation is related to the measurement of perceptions of politics. This study adapted the POPS, which identifies employees' perceptions of political behavior, but we recommend the development of a new scale focused solely on higher-education-related matters that could be perceived by students as political, such as those relating to campus programs, policies, faculty, peers and other educational experiences. Some of the interactions in academic institutions may involve strategies or behaviors that could be perceived as political by students, such as preference for certain academic departments over others, or preferences for students who are involved in the student union. Future studies may shed a new light on different organizational behaviors that can be defined as political.

Conclusions

In order to understand students' experience in an academic environment, this article argues for greater attention to their perceptions of

organizational politics. The topic of organizational politics continues to attract interest both in the field and in academic research, with the aim of better understanding the determinants and consequences of political behavior in organizations. The current study focuses on understanding how students' perceptions of illegitimate, self-serving political activities (perceptions of organizational politics) influence individual-level work attitudes and behaviors.

The academic institute represents a mechanism of socialization, providing an arena in which students - perhaps for the first time in their lives - are exposed to, and must deal with organizational politics. Of course, as with any socialization process, this can have negative and positive consequences. On the one hand, students' negative experiences with organizational politics in academics might affect their expectations in their future workplaces. For example, a student experiencing favoritism in his/her faculty might expect a similar phenomenon in the workplace. Similarly, the presence of groups of students who always 'get their way' and are not challenged by other students or faculty might create an expectation that forming coalitions is an inherent part of organizational dynamics. On the other hand, for some students this may be an opportunity to develop or strengthen their political skills. These represent the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives (Ferris et al., 2005, p. 127).

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