
A Research on Authority Relations in Organizations

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate employees' general attitude against the authority. It has been voiced for a few decades that management has been much more participative and employees have been more autonomous. This paper will discuss employees' reaction to authority in-between obedience and self-determination. For this aim, 46 employees from 5 different organizations were interviewed to get data and then it was analyzed. Results show that employees working in public sector obey much more to the authority. And high-skilled work force is more autonomous than low-skilled ones.

Key Words: Authority relations, organizations, authoritarianism.

Introduction

One of the main issues of organizational life is authority relations and almost all of the managerial accounts are somewhat linked to this issue. Even it is viewed and analyzed from different perspectives, we generally see a consensual simple definition for the concept of authority when we glance at management and organization text books; "it's the right to give order" (Hatch, 1997; Daft, 1998, 2000). Though it sounds like a very ordinary statement; its "deconstruction" helps us to see a different phenomenon. The meaning of the phrase "giving order" mainly refers to the "act of command". On the other hand, it includes a second connotation transcending the primary meaning: it is the desire to give "order" that aims to overcome chaos, complexity and disorder. The will behind implementing authority rises on this desire. It seems that the homophony and overlap on the act of "giving order" makes visible the main controversial part of authority relations in the organizational environments which correspondingly positions processes and people in between two main polar.

On the one hand, an authority structure is usually seen to be a fundamental organizational answer to systemic needs for control and coordination; on the other hand, authority-obedience relations carry with them axiomatic possibilities of subjugation, loss of freedom and loss of self-direction (Limerick, 1976: 56; Barker, 2005). This represents one of the old tensions in organizational processes. And this paper aims to interrogate this issue from the view point of employees who do not have but controlled by authority.

People of our age are called as "organizational man" that refers to the reality in which human life is surrounded by organizations (Presthuis, 1962; Whyte, 1956). This reality is associated with an historical period goes at least one century back. However, the last quarter of this period is generally characterized by some differentiated conditions that have eventually changed the nature of "organizational order" in which authority relations portray a different mode of being. What makes the new mode different from the former one basically lies under qualities of work, scope of competition and structural positions hold by both superiors and subordinates. It is believed that, since the last quarter of the 20th century, strict role differentiations and close control of superiors (who holds the authority) over subordinates (who are controlled by authority) have tended to be moderate so that subordinates are encouraged to involve in processes which, in turn, raises "participation and autonomy". It can be seen as a result of fact that authority relations created by solid hierarchical structures have been incompatible with *zeitgeist*.

Thus, in terms of the tension between control and freedom it can be read in many texts that, during the last few decades, game has developed in favor of the freedom. In other words, non-authority employees of recent times have been identified as much more free and autonomous. This implies that as long as participative management get stronger, authoritarian approaches and accordingly control and conformity more likely lose land. Namely, "organizational order" now corresponds to a new reality and, in turn, it entails a different authority mode enabling subordinates to participate much and to conform less. However, it still seems a matter of debate and claims on this direction don't sound too much realistic. Because, in general, the move towards participation in the workplace has shown greater diffusion at the level of principle

than of practice (Romme, 1997; Stewart and Manz, 1995; Wall, 1982). The purpose of this paper is, in a sense, taking authority relations under consideration to develop an insight about the attitudes of employees against the authority within the organization.

Thus, this study will attempt to answer the following questions; i) how employees react to authority; ii) to what extent they feel freedom to act autonomously and to what extent they obey or resist to authority? These questions will help us to understand and analyze the behavioral reactions of employees against authority and to reach some abstraction about authority relations.

Authoritarianism and Organizational Authority

Authority is, as a phenomenon, of course undetachable part of human life; since all ordered systems are in need of authority. But its reputation, as an academic issue, has expanded in the last century. It should be because of disappointments of modernity experienced in the first half of 20th Century, such as, world wars, genocides, colonization and so on. Most of these disappointments have been interpreted as the results of destructive authoritarianism (Fromm, 1973, 1942; Milgram, 1974; Adorno, 1950) and in the following period it has kept attracting attention by many studies (Weber, 1978; Mendel, 2002, 2005; Kojève, 2007; Sennett, 1993).

Authority penetrated to management literature especially after Max Weber. But practically hierarchical structures can not be thought without authority. Even a number of authors have pointed at certain benefits of the authoritarian system (Romme, 1997; Carley, 1992; Jaques, 1990) some studies in the past demonized the bureaucratic authoritarianism (Bauman, 1989; Fromm, 1973). As it is stated by Bakunin, founder of the anarchist movement, all exercise of authority perverts and all submissiveness to authority humiliates (quoted by Limerick, 1976: 56). And that's why bureaucratic organizations, for some authors, are the source of this kind of submissiveness and humiliation. One of them was Erich Fromm who psychologically examined the impacts of authoritarianism in destructiveness and discredit bureaucracies as one of the entities creating authoritarian personalities:

Roughly equivalent to the sadomasochistic character, in a social rather than a political sense, is the bureaucratic character. In the bureaucratic system every person controls the one below him and is controlled by the one above. Both sadistic and masochistic impulses can be fulfilled in such a system. Those below, the bureaucratic character will hold in contempt, those above, he will admire and fear. One only has to look at the facial expression and the voice of a certain type of bureaucrat criticizing his subordinate, or frowning when he is a minute late, or insisting on behavior that at least symbolically expresses that during office hours he "belongs" to the superior (Fromm, 1973: 294-295).

However, when human being reached the last quarter of the 20th Century some authors (Drucker, 1970, 1993; Toffler, 1971) heralded the end of demonic bureaucracies. In late twentieth century, like many things and bureaucracy, authority has been an issue of inquiry stems from dramatic changes in social, economic and politic accounts. This new era is defined with different names; such as postmodernity (Kumar, 1978; Harvey, 1990), new economy (Gershuny and Miles, 1983), second industrial divide (Piore and Sabel, 1984), post-industrial society (Bell, 1973), information society (Masuda, 1981), knowledge society (Stehr, 1994) etc. Some theorists claim that "post-conditions" have changed the management paradigm and practices that makes bureaucratic administration obsolete. Particularly effects of flexibilization and shift in economy have let to some changes in the employment of managerial power.

When they were discussing the postmodernism, for example, some authors (Rosenau, 1992; Barthes, 1977) declared the death of author/authority. Of course, this is an overstatement and does not refer to the inexistence of authority. Instead, a new mode of authority that is less effective than it once was (Pfeffer, 1997). So new tendency in how work is organized involves a shift to participative and cooperative way in the workplace (Romme, 1997) which is found inevitable because the issues faced tend to be too complex and interdependent to be solved by a few people in authority (McLagan and Nel, 1995). And participation is based on self-determination, which involves the power to act autonomously (Dahl, 1989; Emery, 1980).

If we accept all those true, we normally see much less authoritarianism in the organizations. However as it is stated before this exist as a "discourse" more than a practice (Romme, 1997). Thus, this study attempts to interrogate this issue, whether new management is less suppressive and employees are more autonomous.

Methodology

Sample

Since the business environment is heterogeneous and includes several different types of organizations, I attempted to contact at least one organization from each sector. In this respect, four main fields had to be considered; public, private, service, manufacturing. In other words, to be able to see differences and make some abstractions sample was planned to include employees from public and private ownerships and also from service and manufacturing industry. For the first step, organizations were selected by the reliance on availability. And five organizations were agreed to contribute for the research: three from private and two from public sector. However, organizations just represent the first step and the basic components of the sample are real employees, especially if it is a research on authority. And then employees were selected among those working under management. To do this most correctly, the manager (human resource manager, director, group manager, coordinator or whoever else is in cooperation with us) to whom research team was in contact was requested to provide staff list from which employees working at the middle or lower level of management were selected randomly. Totally, 46 interviewees participated in the research. From each of three organizations 10 employees were interviewed; and from the each of other two ones, eight employees were involved.

Procedure

A number of organizations were personally contacted. And they were asked if they would like to participate in the research. To make sure them, first draft of the research plan was sent them via e-mail. And a meeting was arranged with those who were eager to take part in the research at an agreed date. After we visited organizations employees were selected randomly among those who were enthusiastic to participate. To conduct the interviews, organizations provided a private office which enabled a free conversation with the participants.

Instrument

Research was framed within a qualitative design. A semi-structured interview was conducted to gather the primary data. It was composed of two distinct parts, i) demographic questions, ii) interrogation related to reactions against authority. Interviews were arranged between April and June, 2014. Apart from the demographic questions, six questions were asked to interviewees and they were framed, to some extent, in reflective forms. However, when the conversation gets deepened, some new questions reproduced and they provided additional data. Most of them were stated to ask about attitudes towards the authority. Each interview averagely lasted 30-35 minutes

Results

Demographic data

Interviews provided data from totally 46 employees working in five different organizations located and operating in Ankara, the capital city of Turkey. Two organizations are from public sector; of those one is in production (food industry) and the other one is in service (finance). On the other hand, three organizations operate in private sector. One of them is in software sector, one is in health industry and the last one is in communication. Besides white-collar employees, the blue-collar workers were also interviewed to more likely make some comparisons. Blue-collar workers were from each sector, one public (food industry) and one private (communication).

Data obtained by all these interviews were analyzed and the attitudes on authority were basically categorized in seven groups. But they were reduced to four groups at the end, since three of the groups, to a large extent, had similarities with one of the others, that's why they were combined. Thus, based on the reaction against authority participants were typified, from the conformist end to the participative end, in four groups: obedient, silent, recommender, and objector.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of demographic data

n = 46	%
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Gender

Male	33	71,7
Female	13	28,3

Age Group

18-24	6	13
25-34	15	32,6
35-44	16	34,8
45-54	5	10,9
55-...	4	8,7

Education

Elementary	3	6,5
Secondary	9	19,6
Tertiary	34	77,9

Job type

Office worker	24	52,2
Technical support	7	15,2
Production labor	9	19,6
Coordinator	6	13

Obedient

The data provided by respondents reveals that some of the employees totally conform to the authority. They can be identified as "authoritarian". The term defines not only people dominating the others but also those who voluntarily accept authoritarian control by others. In psychology they are diagnosed as sadomasochistic (Fromm, 1973, 1942).

Fromm asserts that these people "quite regularly show a marked dependence on powers outside themselves, on other people, or institutions, or nature. They tend not to assert themselves, not to do what they want, but to submit to the factual or alleged orders of these outside forces" (Fromm, 1942: 122). A few responses enabled to conclude that there are some employees showed the signs of this kind of personalities. P4 is one of them. He is working in the food industry as a production worker. He is in late thirties and has secondary level education.

One of the questions directed was that; "If you think differently than your supervisor in doing things, do you express your ideas?". P4 responded this questions with only a few words; "Its not necessary.". When he was asked a more detailed explanation he continued with a common cliché, "He is more educated than me. He knows what he has to...". Adorno (1950) believes that authoritarian personalities apply to stereotyping so often due to the lack of self-confidence and anti-intellectualism.

Another one, O2 working as an officer in the public bureau answered this question like the following: "I do what I am ordered, if something goes wrong I don't want to be in trouble". And this is also another sign of the authoritarian tendency and we remember here again what Bauman said (1989) on the reality of bureaucracies which enforces the authoritarian personality by creating a hierarchical mechanism to "obliterate the responsibility". And also another characteristic of this group of people is not to counteract even against the oppressive behaviors. It includes even not thinking about complaining to the upper levels of management.

Silent

Second category defined within this research is the group who don't prefer to show a manifest reaction. It's concluded that those employees are not actually content with some decisions made by their supervisors. And what they have in common

is that they have not been working in the current organization since a long time. One of them is O14. She is a sales representative and working for two years in this organization.

Same question about expressing personal ideas was asked and she answered this question that she “doesn’t want to ‘intervene’ in making decisions and taking them in practice”. What we literally named as “participation” turned into “intervention” in her language. This indicates that they are prone to think that “intervention” is an unnecessarily big reaction. Instead they prefer not to react or keeping silent. But this should be indeed a kind of obedience or for an optimist interpretation it’s just “inaction”. Or even it can not be seen as a passive resistance.

To be able to make sure why they thought so, they were asked how they deal with the inconsistency if they do not “intervene” though they are not happy. How they answered this question put them in a position which includes some cues inspire us to separate them from the obedient ones. One of them is working as a coordinator in an office job. Basically, he is an office worker but as he is appointed at a kind of leading position responsible of seven people with whom he works together, he is titled as “coordinator”. He responded this question as follow: *“Actually there is no inconsistency. It’s not true that there is no reaction. To be silent is a reaction. If you don’t contribute verbally what is being done, this shows that you are not in the same route. And also we don’t have to forget that when we are silent our body language talks”*.

Another reason of silence was also explained with the insensitivity of the management. One of the respondents states that his words are carefully listened but no action is taken by his supervisors. That’s why he prefers not to say anything but to show his dissent. It is concluded that employees in this group reluctantly perform what they are asked. But they work in a context in which silence is interpreted as disapproval or a kind of “soft opposition”. And also, to a large extent, verbal reactions are substituted by body language to show discontent with the management.

Recommender

Depending on the data obtained from interviewees, it is found out that some respondents take place in a category which can be defined “recommender”. This group of employees’ relations to authority seems to be at a moderate level of resistance. In other words, they generally prefer “participating” the processes or show of their opposition in the form of recommendation.

They believe that it’s a kind of contradiction and a refuse of “absolute authority”. Since they prefer to exhibit a sensitivity not to create a conflict, they attempt to show their reactions in the form of recommendation. When they are ordered to do something they turn with an alternative solution. And they believe that this is a sort of “emasculatation” of the “hard authority”. If, especially, the recommended step brings the success power imposed by authority starts to soften.

One of the questions asked to the respondents was that; “Are you always in congruence with your supervisor?” A number of employees answered this question in almost same direction. It can be coded that they are of course not always in congruence... And even most of time they are in the opposite edges. But they (subordinates) manage to package their disobedience in a more acceptable and agreeable way.

Objector

Objectors take the other polar opposite the obedient one. They represent the most contradictory position against authority and they can easily stand against domination. Existence of this group is especially felt in the private organization operating in health care industry. It might be because of the sensitivity of the service and the target customers that it seems a democratic culture can grow there easily.

One of the questions asked to interviewees was that; “Do you obey to the orders of your supervisors, even if you somewhat guess following the order creates bad results?” Interviewees, which are then coded in high level of objection group, emphasize the words “definitely not” when they are answering the question. They rationalize why they can easily stand against authority with the quality of work and also qualification of job holders. They perform a job which requires high level of expertise and participation to be able to manage to make critical decisions.

And also it seems, in private software company, that an anti-authoritarian work climate has been alive. Even there may be some conflicts, everyone interviewed both superior and subordinate believe that works should be operated in a democratic and participatory way. A fact supporting this belief was the “unbearable lightness” of the hierarchical levels. Superior and subordinate employees work in the same office together that shows no privileges for superior in terms of

physical conditions. On the other hand even they formally hold different hierarchical levels, both superior and subordinate, who were interviewed sequentially, it seems this status difference exist nominally.

Conclusion

Present research is planned to investigate and develop an insight, at least at a minimal scale, if the resonating claim is true that in the recent times work force's attitude against authority is developing in favor of the freedom. In other words, employees' relations to authority are taken under consideration moving from the claim that anti-authoritarian behavior is growing in business life. This means that authority relations shifted from obedience- like it happened during the sovereignty of bureaucratic periods- to the participation and freedom. So, moving from this point, where employees stand in-between obedience and freedom in their relation to their superiors is interrogated.

It is not easy to exactly set the position of employees in this line and to generalize what has been found out with this study. Because, this research was conducted on a quite limited scale. Even though the heterogeneity of the sample is regarded to reach more reliable results, it is not enough to generalize the findings obtained from only five organizations. And also as it is emphasized by some authors that there should be of course a relation between authority structure and management subsystem (Katz and Kahn, 1966) or generally social system (Limerick, 1976). Present paper omitted this fact. Despite these limitations, it is possible to argue some points in developing an insight.

First of all, it is quite easily concluded that in public organizations, both production and service, authoritarian spirit seems stronger in comparison to the private ones. This may stem from a few reasons. First, even the public sector is being restructured for some years in recent times; it still stands on bureaucratic ruins. And it is specified by some authors (Bauman, 1989; Fromm, 1973) that bureaucracy creates a climate which is ideal for keeping alive the authoritarian nature. Second, in contrast to the private sector, public sector does not still work with performance principle. In other words, the most useful principal is to be in good relation to the management. This motivation most often prevents people to voice opposition against the authority.

Another point is about differences between white-collar and blue-collar workers. It is not a big deal to predict the role of qualification in determining the attitudes in relation to authority. Employees who have competent skills are more confident and feel of freedom to be in opposition to the superiors. And this research provided similar results about them. However, even semi-skilled or unskilled worker could be participative and free when they develop an informal relation to the superiors. One of the production worker told that he had an informal relation to foreman, that's why he could freely talk and they generally decide together.

Some unexpected results should also be specified. An office worker provided some information that his supervisor is flexible in defining the operational steps to be followed. However, he says, it is not because of manager's participative and democratic approach; it is because supervisor don't want to be blamed if something goes wrong. That's why he loosely determines the way and steps of the work to be done.

And finally, stating the main questions again is it possible to confirm the claim that since the last quarter of the 20th century participative management has been in power and that is why employees' attitudes in authority relations are generally towards self-determination and freedom? Depending on the data obtained with this research, it is not possible to exactly confirm this claim. However, findings provide some signs that yes, especially in "knowledge" businesses, where personal expertise and qualification are so high, employees do not let to be suppressed by a strong authority. And they don't like to obey totally to their superiors. However, in public sector and especially blue-collar workers exhibit, to a greater extent, obedience to the authority. Because, career advancement is mostly determined by the extent of congruence to the authority.

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