

UNDERSTANDING POWER DISTANCE AND SERVICE DELIVERY IN PUBLIC SECTOR OF PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Power distance represents the respect that hierarchical positions are accorded within an organization. Low power distance culture incubates an efficient rule-based administrative system in the public sector, where focus lies on serving the citizens of a country. This paper attempts to understand the role of power distance and service delivery in the public sector of Pakistan. A sample of 11 experienced respondents was selected from various public sector organizations for their views on the subject. The qualitative study conducted for this paper reveals that Pakistan's public sector is in a state of transition. The high power distance management style, a part of Pakistan's colonial inheritance, is slowly shifting to a low power distance management style driven by recent administrative reforms. As a result, low power distance culture is getting firmly entrenched in the public sector while displaying positive results measured by a marked improvement in public service delivery.

KEYWORDS: Power distance; Culture; Service delivery, Public sector, Employee behavior

1.INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the complexity and scope of government functions and related services have experienced an exponential shift as international mobility of goods, capital and people increases (Gordhan, 2007). The public sector comprises of one or more legal bodies which operate as a single integrated operational entity with the primary aim of delivering social benefits to society. In general, public sector gives rise to products and services that are geared toward achieving the well-being of citizens rather than generating profits (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2005; CIPFA, 2013). Moreover, organizational culture and climate have a bearing upon both work attitude and service delivery (Aarons & Sawitzky, 2006; Lalwani&Forcum, 2016). Power distance ranks among the six cultural dimensions that characterize how culture impacts the behavior of its members (Hofstede, 1980, 2001, Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). In view of this, power distance is embraced widely in the public sector for the delivery of quality public service (Carl *et al.*, 2004).

In a high power distance organizational culture, senior officials expect deference from their subordinates based on their seniority, not their qualification or professional competence (Khatri, 2009; Shareef *et al.*, 2016). Power distance reflects the degree to which subordinates are likely to respect hierarchical positions, depend on their superiors, and fear to express a difference of opinion (Islam, 2004; Tian & Peterson, 2016). Power distance also alludes to whether an organization permits its employees to offer their critique or their opinions without fear of negative consequence (Kaiman, 2013).

This can influence an organization's performance as leadership style can determine employee motivation at junior levels, and as a result, shape the power distance within the organization (Memon, 2014).

The operational environment of Pakistan's public sector follows a rule-based organizational structure with clearly delineated administrative power (Ermasova *et al.*, 2015). The strict regimentation of regulatory functions for public service delivery within this structure is designed to reduce power distance (Bhatti *et al.*, 2011). Additionally, these regulatory functions are based on a vast compendium of laws, operating procedures, rules and regulations to govern every aspect of the civil service. This

regulatory framework determines certain cadre appointments of 'appropriate officers' at the junior level (ESTACODE). It also delegates to them crucial administrative powers like initial assessments of official matters for reporting to their seniors (Civil Service Rules, 1973).

Government organizations in Pakistan espouse many characteristics of the high-power distance and collectivist culture bequeathed by their colonial legacy (Singh, 2009). Pakistan's Power Distance Index (PDI) is measured at a rather high 55 (Hofstede, 2001). Since its inception, Pakistani Government has assumed a paternalistic style of management. Along with centralized authority, there exist various hierarchical levels, a large number of supervisory staff, and a pervasive acceptance that power has its privileges. Moreover, there is an expectation of inequality and there lies a communication gap between the senior officers and the subordinate employees (Singh, 2009). These characteristics are all reflective of a relationship-based organization with high power distance rather than a rule-based low-power distance organization (House *et al.*, 2004). In high power distance countries like Pakistan, power lies in the hands of the superiors, leadership style is authoritative, and collective decision-making is rare. This creates a challenge in providing efficient service delivery (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Likewise, an increase in power distance can adversely affect service delivery by alienation and lack of empowerment among employees (Siebert *et al.*, 2011; Daniels & Greguras, 2014). Notably, there is a dearth of research on power distance and its influence on organizational processes, outcomes and service delivery especially in context to public sector of Pakistan (Islam, 2004; Mahmood, 2015; Ahmad & Allen, 2015; Shareef *et al.*, 2016). The purpose of this study is to understand the role of power distance and service delivery in public sector of Pakistan.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Power Distance in organizational Culture

The six cultural dimensions are identified as Power Distance, Individualism/Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity/Femininity, Long-term Orientation and Indulgence vs Restraint (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). They represent a framework of cross-cultural communication that explains the effect of culture on the values of its members and demonstrates how these values are reflected in their behavior (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Power Distance represents the degree to which individuals, groups, or societies accept inequalities in power, status and wealth as unavoidable, legitimate or functional (Hofstede, 1980). Schwartz (1992) identifies high-power distance as 'hierarchy' and low-power distance as 'egalitarianism'. In a high-power distance organizational culture subordinates tend to be submissive and accept the hierarchical order and hence demand no justification for inequalities of power (Hofstede, 2001).

Power distance has a profound effect on employee attitude, behavior and performance in the ambit of decision-making and service delivery (Velo, 2011). As attitude relates to negative or positive emotions towards something, such an inequity of power may disturb an employee's behavior on the job (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Lipsky (2010) also lists power distance as an obstacle to organizational progress owing to a lack of participation in the decision-making process by the employees. Khatri (2009) argues that subordinates in a high-power distance culture mostly look to their seniors for decision-making, are hesitant to take decisions themselves, and in fact prefer to take definitive orders from their superiors. Asian cultures usually favor high-power distance management styles in comparison to the West (Hofstede 1983, Hofstede *et al.*, 2004).

2.2 Power Distance and Public Sector Organizations

According to Islam (2004), a high-power distance administrative set-up in public sector organizations suffers from poor communication between employees and their superiors. This may potentially give birth to problems such as the infiltration of interest groups within the organization, or misuse of power based on ethnicity and caste, etc. High-power distance in public sector organizations results in weaker employee motivation with reduced incentive to aid others (Winterich *et al.*, 2014). In view of the growing need for improvement in services, collaborations between corporate and

government sectors is essential. A lack of commitment owing to power distance can lead to loss of organizational competitiveness, thus damaging national economy (Fawcett et.al, 2006).

In most organizations leadership style is mostly autocratic, leading to rigid bureaucratic systems (Khilji, 2004). In the survey conducted by Hofstede in 1984, Pakistan was observed to be a high-power distance, collectivist, patriarchal, and risk-averse country (Bashir *et al.*, 2012). Government organizations in Pakistan assume most of the characteristics of a high-power distance collectivist culture conferred upon them by their colonial past (Singh, 2009). Colonial legacy, among other things, denotes the use of money, power, and status to widen the gap between the elite and the general public (Khilji, 1999b).

2.3 Public Service Delivery with respect to Power Distance

People today are more cognizant of their social and legal rights. They are aware of the public services due to them and thus have higher expectations (Winterich et al., 2014; Tian & Peterson, 2016). As a fundamental obligation of the government and public institutions, public service ought to provide services that can raise the wellbeing and livelihood of the general public. To achieve this core objective, government institutions require an efficient organizational structure, qualified human capital/public-servants and low power distance (Whitaker, 1980; Winterich et al., 2014). Tamrakar (2010) explains that public services should be in-line with the needs and wants of customers rather than being fixed on what providers can offer. In most developing countries public service delivery is ineffectual, tedious, costly, bureaucratic and fraudulent. In fact, “in general, public servants have not acted as servants of people but rather as masters without any sense of accountability and transparency”, thus the level of service delivery is lowered (Tamrakar, 2010, p.2).

As stated earlier, power distance alludes to distribution of power which grants managers unlimited power in order to control their subordinates, which in turn creates a communication gap between them. Islam (2004) stresses that mistrust of subordinates may lead to micro-management by senior officials in a high-power distance culture. This occupies them with minutiae and can ultimately lead to inefficiency in tackling the unethical behavior of their subordinates towards the public, etc. (Hauff & Richter, 2014). In order to enhance public service delivery, traditional public sector management practices need to be modernized, restructured, updated and simplified to achieve global competitiveness (Heaver, 1992; Kirkman et al., 2006; Schaubroeck et al., 2007; Siebert et al., 2011). McFarlin and Coget (2013) consider empowerment a significant tool for enhancing employee satisfaction. Leadership that enables, encourages and supports employee effort leads to employee satisfaction and ultimately to high service delivery (Gong *et al.*, 2009; Focket *et al.*, 2013).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study institutes the first phase of a larger study, starting with qualitative (case study) research. Qualitative research approach has been applied to study and understand the opinions and experiences of respondents on the issue under reference. It was assured that no information is provided, nor any opinions shared beforehand about possible answers. A semi-structured interviewing technique was adopted, and the respondents were asked to express their own thoughts on the question presented. As stressed by Berg (2007) and Bhatti et al. (2016), standardized interviews based on formally structured questions were posed to the officials. The officials were also asked some probing questions. The questions focused on the key themes - Power Distance in an organizational Culture, Power Distance in Public Sector Organizations and Public Service Delivery and Power Distance.

3.1 Research Participants

Eleven experienced senior officers from the Pakistan public sector were selected for the present study. Selection of respondents and their positions was made through a purposive approach for gaining insight into power distance within the organizational culture in Pakistan's public sector. Respondents were full-time employees in basic pay scales ranging from 14 to 21, having public sector experience of

11 to 29 years and good exposure to various administrative and operational facets of the public sector. The details for the respondents are shown in Table-1.

Table 1. Respondents Profile

Respondents	Gender	Title	Age	Experience
Respondent 1	Female	Senior policy making officer	58	29 years
Respondent 2	Male	Senior Executive (Enforcement)	56	27 years
Respondent 3	Male	Director (Operations)	49	22 years
Respondent 4	Male	Senior official (Trade Facilitation)	51	24 years
Respondent 5	Male	Senior Executive (Audit)	52	25 years
Respondent 6	Female	Senior Director (Adjudication)	51	24 years
Respondent 7	Male	Middle Management Official	52	23 years
Respondent 8	Male	Senior Field Officer (Operations)	52	22 years
Respondent 9	Male	Junior Official (Administration)	56	27 years
Respondent 10	Male	Junior Official (Enforcement)	35	14 years
Respondent 11	Female	Office Assistant (Administration)	33	11 years

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers conducted in-depth personal interviews. The questions posed to respondents contained essential questions, probing questions and throw-away questions. The interviews lasted approximately 40-50 minutes. All the interviews were audio taped and written in the form of notes with the permission of respondents as recommended by Miles & Huberman Guidelines (1994) and Bhatti *et al.*, (2016). All respondents were encouraged to express their opinion on the issue freely. Three females and eight males were interviewed as shown in Table-1.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The current section covers the results reported in view of the exploratory study. The following themes were revealed from the interviews:

4.1 Understanding Power Distance in an Organizational culture

Several explanations were presented by the respondents to reveal their understanding of power distance as well as power distance in an organizational culture. Respondent 1 explained that power distance relates to the inequality that exists in a society. In fact, “power distance befalls when individuals in a society or a workplace accept or expect that there is unequal distribution of power”. Respondent 3, 4, 5 and 9 argued that the culture of Pakistan is collectivist due to its colonial legacy.

The studies conducted in the Western-world affirm that countries or societies with a collectivist culture showcase a deeply rooted power distance. The same is observed in Pakistan as the effects of power distance can be felt in our national and organizational culture. Moreover, power distance is the way in which power is disseminated and subordinates agree that power is shared unfairly. Respondents 2, 6, 8 and 11 stressed that; “power distance is associated with the social acceptance of unequal sharing of the power”. Any culture that stimulates power distance leads to lack of ownership, communication, motivation, commitment, sense of responsibility amongst people/individuals/employees and inequality. Respondent 10 avowed that “power distance is the unequal distribution of power and authority. Importantly, organizational culture with high power distance is responsible for a communication gap between superiors and their subordinates because it is hard for the subordinates to air their views”. In

addition, power distance in an organizational culture leads to corruption, fraud, deviant behavior, etc. It is evident that all respondents agreed that power distance is the acceptance of unequal distribution of power and that culture plays a significant role in shaping the behavior of people. They also agreed that societies with a high power distance culture show great veneration for higher authorities as compared to societies where power distance is low.

4.2 Power Distance and Public Sector Organizations

Respondent 1 was of the view that power distance does exist in the public sector of Pakistan. However, recent years have witnessed a shrinking trend of power distance in all governmental institutions regardless of the collectivist national culture. This reduction is due to the change in the legislative policies and regulations since the mission is to improve efficiency and reduce delays and lags in public service delivery. Respondents 2, 3 and 5 also acknowledged that the administrative reforms in the public sector have resulted in reducing power distance. They affirmed that; “Pakistan being a developing country faces a major challenge in achieving its 2025 and CPEC development goals. The achievement of these goals are closely related to the effective delivery of public services and plummeting of power distance culture. However, more efforts are to be made in order to change the overall mindset, attitude and approach of public servants towards power distance”. Respondents 4, 6, 7 and 11 were of the view that power distance still prevails in the public sector of Pakistan. They stressed that power distance exists between senior and junior public officials despite their delineated roles. They also stated that personal leadership style at senior level could occasionally change the magnitude of power distance as well impact the productivity of subordinates in public service delivery. Therefore, more effort could be made to change the deep-rooted colonial mind set and administration approach. Respondent 8 affirmed that power distance does exist in public organizations but has also reduced as compared to the past. As one of the current examples for such a change is Pakistan Customs where in the last 10 years power distance culture has been curtailed considerably and public service delivery has improved exponentially. In general, all respondents affirmed that power distance does exist in that public sector of Pakistan, yet, has reduced considerably over the last few years.

4.3 Public Service Delivery and Power Distance

One of the key responsibilities of the government and government institutions is to deliver services that can improve the wellbeing of the general public. Respondent 1 stated that the objective of the public institutions is to cater to the needs of the people rather than what providers are able to offer or deliver. Power distance leads to excessive bureaucracy, administrative hierarchies, nepotism, corruption, repellant working environment and poor work ethics. In general, these challenging issues majorly influence public service delivery. However, in view of the ongoing process of reform, “the Government of Pakistan has formed a *“National Commission for Government Reforms”*, aiming to analyze and assess the size and structure of the government, the processes and procedures in practice, the governing rules and regulations, the current level of institutional capacity and the state of the public service delivery”. The public sector institutions like Pakistan Customs and Federal board of Revenue may take only a few short years to adopt low power distance culture and be capable of delivering quality public service. Respondents 2, 3, 4, and 6 stressed that public sector organizations of Pakistan are under immense pressure to increase efficiency by providing improved and integrated services. For Pakistan, the main driver for change is its people and change can be only achieved through economic efficiency, equity, justice, security, enforcement of laws and regulations, and sustainable public service delivery. High power distance exists in public organizations of Pakistan and has a direct impact on overall public service delivery. Yet the reforms undertaken by the Government are focused to lower power distance and improve service delivery. Respondents 5, 7, 9 and 11 affirmed that power distance has a direct impact on public service delivery. However, the last few years have witnessed a key change in the overall governmental approach towards public service delivery. Initiatives like “e-Khidmat Center” is an active example of achieving excellence in public service delivery and depressing power distance.

5. CONCLUSION

From the results of the study, it is evident that low power distance culture can lead to effective public service delivery. The information age of today has equipped the general public to be more aware and knowledgeable about their legal and social rights. The government and public institutions need to deliver services that can raise the wellbeing and livelihood of the people. Pakistan, which embraces several facets of the high-power distance and collectivist culture along with the presence of rule-based ethos in the public sector organizations, is experiencing an ongoing transformation. This study clearly highlights that the recent administrative reforms in the government and public sector institutions are displaying promising results. In the past few years, high power distance culture has reduced significantly and public service delivery has modernized appreciably. The study also contributes to the existing body of knowledge on power distance and service delivery in the context of Pakistan. The study is significant as the shift in power distance can be utilized to revolutionize management practices in the public sector. The study may therefore help senior managers of both the public and private sector to develop a greater insight into the dynamics of power distance. This would enable them to align their management and leadership styles for achieving the organization's objectives.

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