

Administrative Gatekeeping and Informal Hierarchies: Exploring Role Ambiguity and Power Dynamics Between Head Office and Peripheral Staff in the Public Sector

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Abstract: The tendency of junior employees at head offices to unduly influence senior personnel stationed in district or local offices is one of the emerging phenomena of administrative gatekeeping and informal hierarchies within public sector organizations that is examined in this article. The study identifies and examines the organizational culture and behavioural patterns that permit administrative intermediaries, typically clerks or junior officers, to function as de facto supervisors. Despite being structurally inferior, these actors wield informal power by controlling central submission procedures, information flows, and reporting systems. This study examines how role ambiguity, bureaucratic centralization, and administrative overreach create the conditions for this kind of unofficial power accumulation using a conceptual approach backed by current public administration theory and organizational behaviour literature. Role theory, bureaucratic theory, and current understandings of organizational power and control mechanisms serve as the foundation for this article. The results indicate that junior employees can influence operational procedures in ways that defy formal hierarchies due to a lack of clear role definitions, centralized reporting lines, and insufficient accountability frameworks. This conduct not only irritates seasoned staff locally, but it also runs the risk of compromising institutional effectiveness, morale, and accountability. The study recommends that formal oversight procedures be strengthened, role definitions be made clearer, and reporting structures be reevaluated. It ends with suggestions for enhancing coordination and professionalism at all levels of government without sacrificing administrative goals or hierarchy.

Keywords: Role Ambiguity, Administrative Power, Informal Hierarchy, Public Sector Dynamics, Gatekeeping.

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I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Head office staff and employees in regional or local branches frequently clash in large bureaucratic public organizations, especially in decentralized systems. The informal authority wielded by junior administrative staff at head offices, who, despite having lower formal ranks, frequently dictate information requirements and reporting timelines to more senior personnel in peripheral offices, is one topic that has received little attention. Although these dynamics appear to be routine coordination or administrative consolidation, they are actually a reflection of deeper behavioural and structural dysfunctions, such as skewed power asymmetries, administrative gatekeeping, and role ambiguity (Mafunisa & Sebola, 2021).

According to recent data from the South African public sector, junior employees frequently take advantage of their close proximity to centralized systems, decision-makers, and reporting portals to exercise unjustified authority, even though head offices' primary duties include providing administrative support, policy guidance, and strategic oversight (Dipholo & Mokgele, 2022). Regardless of the position or level of experience of the report creators, these workers, who are usually found in administrative support or data collection positions, act as unofficial gatekeepers, keeping an eye on compliance, returning reports, and requesting changes. These employees frequently work in a "middle management vacuum," where supervisory oversight is lacking and accountability procedures are either irregular or out of step with the organizational structure (Mello & Phago, 2021).

Information gatekeeping is an increasingly prevalent type of bureaucratic micromanagement that threatens the independence of local and regional professionals, according to empirical research. For instance, Kgomo and Mavundla (2023) discovered that when head office administrative clerks demand several resubmissions of standardized documents, often changing formats without consultation or justification, local government departments in Limpopo frequently encounter conflict. Despite being informal, these practices have the potential to demoralize technically skilled professionals working in the field, waste organizational resources, and delay the delivery of services.

Crucially, control over communication channels, reporting deadlines, and final data consolidation procedures, rather than formal delegation or supervisory roles, are the sources of this informal power dynamic. According to Sebola (2020), South African public administration is plagued by "upward compliance cultures," in which information only moves vertically and needs to pass through administrative bottlenecks before it can be used by decision-makers. Junior employees in these cultures unwittingly take on the role of gatekeepers for the organization, particularly when job descriptions are vague or supervision is dispersed among several levels. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyse the conflicts between formal hierarchy and informal authority by looking at the institutional, structural, and behavioural factors that allow for these abnormalities. It is situated within broader debates on public service professionalisation, decentralised governance, and organisational behaviour in African bureaucracies.

➤ *Research Objectives*

- To examine the nature and causes of administrative gatekeeping in the public sector
- To analyse how role ambiguity contributes to informal hierarchies
- To understand the implications of such dynamics for service delivery and internal coherence

➤ *Research Question*

How does administrative gatekeeping by junior head office staff shape power relations and role clarity between central and peripheral offices in the public sector?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Themes like bureaucratic inflexibility, ineffective service delivery, and accountability deficiencies in hierarchical systems have all been covered in great detail in the literature on public administration (Van der Walddt, 2021). Classical theorists such as Max Weber (1947) described a bureaucratic model with clearly defined positions, roles, and chains of command that is based on rational-legal authority. But modern public institutions frequently operate in hybrid organizational cultures where formal hierarchy and informal power structures coexist, especially in postcolonial and decentralized contexts like South Africa (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020).

Role ambiguity is a recurring problem in these settings, resulting from overlapping or unclear job expectations that cause interpersonal conflict and functional confusion (Tang & Vandenberghe, 2021). When junior administrative staff members in head offices take on de facto supervisory duties over senior field personnel, role ambiguity becomes especially problematic. Lack of procedural clarity, particularly with regard to reporting, data validation, and document submission, leads to the emergence of these informal hierarchies. According to Naidoo and De Visser (2022), many South African provincial departments are experiencing intra-organizational conflict as a result of misaligned authority structures and hazy administrative mandates.

Further compounding the issue is the increasing reliance on compliance-based performance frameworks, where bureaucrats are judged more on paperwork than practical service delivery (Van der Voet & Van de Walle, 2022). As such, junior staff tasked with compiling or vetting reports acquire gatekeeping functions, wielding procedural authority over those formally senior to them. Miller and Whitford (2019) observe that such "compliance clerks" often become critical actors in performance auditing, even when they lack policy or operational expertise.

Research on information gatekeeping provides more context. Control over information access, what is forwarded, delayed, or blocked, confers disproportionate influence, as emphasized by Shoemaker and Vos (2021). These gatekeepers frequently serve as filters for information, reports, and compliance paperwork in the public sector, particularly in sizable ministries or departments. Head office clerks, who were neither line managers nor policy experts but functioned as procedural checkpoints within centralized reporting systems, repeatedly raised "non-compliance flags" against district-level managers in Limpopo, according to cases reported by Mpehle and Sebola (2023).

Furthermore, studies of organizational culture show that environments with fragmented administrative norms and inadequate supervisory oversight are conducive to the growth of informal hierarchies. According to Dipholo and Mokgele (2022), the South African public sector's administrative culture has become extremely centralized, with upward reporting frequently being valued more highly than horizontal coordination or field-level innovation. Under such systems, key information portals may be managed by junior employees at head offices with little oversight, making them both powerful and invisible. A significant empirical gap still exists in linking these themes, administrative gatekeeping, role ambiguity, and informal power, to the day-to-day activities of public sector organizations. Few studies have explicitly examined how junior employees stationed at head offices gain influence by mastering reporting channels and procedural procedures. This article contributes to that gap by examining the interplay between formal authority and informal power in decentralised public bureaucracies in South Africa.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article critically examines the rise of administrative gatekeeping and informal hierarchies in the public sector using three interconnected theoretical stances. These frameworks give us conceptual tools to understand how senior field personnel are disproportionately influenced by junior administrative staff at head offices, and how these patterns differ from formal organizational design.

A. Role Theory

Role theory, which was initially created by Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal in 1964, examines how expectations surrounding professional roles are formed, comprehended, and performed inside organizations. According to the theory, people suffer from role stress when they are faced with ambiguous, contradictory, or overlapping role expectations. This can lead to poor performance, increased conflict, and deviations from official duties. According to this study, junior administrative employees at head offices frequently perform ill-defined tasks, such as organizing submissions or compiling information, but they lack clear supervisory authority. Because of this role ambiguity, administrative clerks may overreach and serve as *de facto* supervisors to senior operational staff at the local or regional level (Tang & Vandenberghe, 2021). Role theory is still relevant in public sector settings with decentralized operations, unclear reporting structures, and poor communication, according to recent studies. For instance, Mashigo and Sibanda (2022) discovered that South African provincial government departments frequently neglect to clearly define the roles of technical and administrative personnel, which results in task duplication and a lack of clarity regarding authority. Informal hierarchies can flourish under these circumstances.

B. Bureaucratic Theory

Understanding formal organizational structure and authority in the public sector is still based on Max Weber's 1947 Bureaucratic Theory. According to Weber, bureaucracies are based on clearly defined roles and responsibilities, rule-based processes, and hierarchical authority. Legal-rational legitimacy, not character attributes or unofficial influence, is the source of authority. However, it indicates a breakdown in bureaucratic oversight and rationality when junior staff start using power that is inconsistent with their official position. The prevalence of compliance culture, politicized appointments, and the decline in managerial accountability are examples of such breakdowns in many South African public institutions (Dipholo & Mokgele, 2022). Bureaucratic roles become blurred, and informal practices take root, particularly in administrative domains. When junior head office staff gain procedural control over senior field staff, it represents a deviation from Weberian ideals, indicating an institutional drift towards informal power practices.

C. Power Dynamics Theory

The Bases of Social Power by French and Raven (1959), which were later expanded upon in organizational contexts by researchers such as Yukl (2017), provide a

multifaceted perspective on the dynamics of power dynamics in professional relationships. Formal authority is the source of legitimate power, but people without formal rank can still have a big impact thanks to informational, referent, and expert power. Junior head office employees gain informational power, which grants them gatekeeping authority over formally higher-ranking employees, by managing the flow of reports, establishing submission deadlines, or establishing formatting guidelines. The risks of these power imbalances in the public sector are highlighted by recent studies. According to Sebola and Mokgopo (2023), junior clerks in administrative positions frequently sway decisions by selectively elevating problems, filtering data, or postponing submissions; this shapes institutional outcomes without accountability. Systems with strict reporting lines and onerous documentation requirements exacerbate these dynamics, turning information into a currency of control rather than a means of providing services. This article offers a strong conceptual framework for examining the emergence, persistence, and effects of informal authority on institutional functioning in the public sector by combining Role Theory, Bureaucratic Theory, and Power Dynamics Theory. It also clarifies why these practices are structurally corrosive over time, even though they may be functionally convenient for some.

IV. METHODOLOGY

In order to identify the behavioural and institutional factors that support administrative gatekeeping and informal hierarchies in the public sector, this article employs a conceptual and reflective analytical methodology. The study synthesizes professional insights, documentary analysis, and scholarly literature to produce a theoretically grounded interpretation of bureaucratic dynamics instead of depending on direct empirical data from human subjects, which would require ethical clearance.

A. Conceptual Design

The conceptual approach is based on well-established traditions in public administration and organizational studies, where under-theorized or context-specific administrative phenomena are explored through reflective inquiry (Osborne, 2020). This approach works especially well for studying the "invisible mechanisms" of bureaucracy, like role ambiguity and information gatekeeping, which are ignored in formal reporting structures but have significant operational implications (Van der Walddt, 2021). Propositions and insights based on system-level patterns and policy-practice disjuncture's can be developed using this method.

B. Data Sources and Scope

The author's professional observations in the South African public sector, specifically those pertaining to administrative coordination, report submission cycles, and inter-office communications, served as the basis for this article. A focused examination of internal public service records supports these findings, including:

- Organograms and structural charts
- Internal circulars and memos

- Standard operating procedures (SOPs)
- Report templates and workflow charts

The structure of responsibilities and the locations of power consolidation at administrative levels, particularly outside of official authority channels, were ascertained through the analysis of these documents. This analysis does not contain any personally identifiable information or sensitive institutional data.

Furthermore, the article incorporates secondary data from policy papers, case studies, and peer-reviewed academic literature on:

- Role ambiguity in the public service
- Administrative control and compliance mechanisms
- Bureaucratic coordination failures in decentralised systems

This triangulation of sources helps ensure validity and contextual reliability, consistent with qualitative standards for conceptual analysis (Bowen, 2009).

C. Justification for Ethical Exemption

For this study, no focus groups, surveys, or interviews were held. According to guidelines for theoretical and policy-oriented research, the study is exempt from institutional ethical clearance due to the use of non-human sources, publicly available literature, and anonymized internal documentation (Du Toit & Manganyi, 2022).

Furthermore, no specific people, agencies, or private government operations are mentioned or evaluated in the study. Its goal is to diagnose and explain system-wide organizational trends, not to look into the actions of specific actors.

V. RESULTS

Three major themes emerged from the conceptual and documentary study of administrative procedures in public sector organizations, especially in decentralized bureaucracies like those in South Africa. Systemic patterns in organizational behaviour that erode professional authority at subnational levels, impede operational efficiency, and reinforce informal hierarchies are reflected in these themes.

A. Informal Oversight by Administrative Staff

The informal supervisory behaviour of junior administrative staff at head offices is one of the most obvious trends. These people frequently serve as gatekeepers in the processing of official submissions from district and regional offices, despite having clerical or administrative coordination responsibilities. Regardless of the seniority of the original authors, they gain procedural leverage by controlling document formats, submission portals, and deadlines. This gives them the ability to escalate non-compliance, demand amendments, or send back reports. In provincial departments, where centralizing reporting systems is preferred over decentralized decision-making, this practice is especially common (Mpehle & Sebola, 2023). For example, junior head office clerks occasionally

return reports submitted by senior program managers or field specialists more than once, not because they contain substantive errors but rather because of formatting or procedural compliance issues. Through regular interactions, the emergent informal oversight role is institutionalized, resulting in a parallel authority structure that obfuscates the distinctions between functional hierarchy and authority (Naidoo & De Visser, 2022).

B. Role Ambiguity and Frustration

The problem of role ambiguity, which shows up as uncertainty about job boundaries, authority levels, and reporting relationships, is closely related to the aforementioned. Having to "negotiate approval" with junior employees who were never formally assigned to oversight roles is a source of frustration for field-based employees, who are frequently in technical, managerial, or operational roles. These conflicts result from the informal expansion of administrative support duties into de facto supervisory responsibilities, such as data collection and procedural verification.

Long-term role ambiguity lowers morale, increases interdepartmental friction, and results in low job satisfaction, according to Tang and Vandenberghe (2021). Employees in peripheral offices feel undercut and micromanaged in this situation, particularly when they are required to frequently defend or explain standard operational choices to junior officials who are ignorant of the background. Mashigo and Sibanda (2022) also found that overlapping mandates and unstructured workflows in provincial departments often create confusion between administrative and functional responsibilities, leading to unnecessary duplication and resentment. The absence of clearly defined boundaries in administrative hierarchies thus becomes a source of inefficiency, disrupting task completion timelines and impeding autonomous decision-making at the district level.

C. Centralised Information Control as Power

The third theme emphasizes how effective information control is in hierarchical bureaucracies. Those in charge of the platforms that information flows through, like submission portals, audit dashboards, or consolidation templates, acquire informal power that can compete with official authority in highly centralized reporting systems. Junior employees have disproportionate control over what information is viewed, when it is viewed, and in what format because they frequently act as a bridge between senior decision-makers and peripheral offices. According to Shoemaker and Vos (2021), gatekeeping functions are effective because they regulate timeliness and visibility. In the public sector, this means that by imposing arbitrary reporting standards, selectively elevating issues, or withholding or returning reports, junior administrative staff can postpone the implementation of district-level programs. Van der Voet and Van de Walle (2022) argue that such procedural bottlenecks erode trust and contribute to administrative inertia, especially when oversight mechanisms are not aligned with performance-based principles. These behaviours impact organizational morale

and internal communication patterns in addition to workflow and compliance. Institutional cohesion may be further weakened if senior professionals start to disengage or avoid systems entirely. According to Dipholo and Mokgele (2022), hidden hierarchies are made possible by information asymmetry in central bureaucracies, which skew accountability and reduce the efficacy of decentralized governance systems.

VI. DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that informal hierarchies in public sector organizations are not isolated behavioural problems or anomalies, but rather are systematically strengthened by poor organizational design, lax administrative standards, and unclear authority structures. Although Weber (1947) notes that public service structures are formally governed by hierarchical rules and standardized job functions, the reality of contemporary bureaucracies, particularly in decentralized systems like South Africa's, demonstrates that authority can manifest itself in ways that defy the formal chain of command. Junior head office employees' informal supervision is a reflection of a larger structural gatekeeping problem, in which supervisory functions replace administrative ones as a result of centralized control over reporting systems, ambiguous task distribution, and a lack of supervision (Mpehle & Sebola, 2023; Tang & Vandenberghe, 2021). Compliance-driven performance cultures that reward document control over substantive decision-making unwittingly legitimize these practices (Van der Voet & Van de Walle, 2022). Consequently, those located near central systems or data consolidation units gain informational power that allows them to reject, delay, or alter inputs from line functionaries, often without being held accountable.

This discussion, which draws on role theory, emphasizes how behavioural conflict and discontent are caused by ambiguous or overlapping job roles. Junior employees often take on an expansive view of their duties because they are unsure of the boundaries between administrative coordination and quality control. This can cause conflict with more seasoned field officers who may view such actions as interference. This result is consistent with previous research by Mashigo and Sibanda (2022), who contend that role ambiguity in provincial bureaucracies leads to conflict, mistrust, and duplication. Furthermore, we can understand these interactions as forms of informal power assertion rather than just administrative friction thanks to Power Dynamics Theory. Regardless of rank, control over information, resources, and communication channels can lead to power, according to French and Raven's (1959) model. In this study, junior staff at head offices leverage access to central platforms and procedural templates to assert authority, making them powerful actors in the bureaucratic ecosystem. This undermines Weberian ideals of rational-legal authority, where power is supposed to correspond with position, qualifications, and accountability.

The performance of the public sector is significantly impacted by these dynamics. Professionals at the district level, particularly those with technical knowledge or seniority, suffer from a loss of authority, which deters initiative and saps motivation. According to Dipholo and Mokgele (2022), decentralized employees start to disengage from innovation when they feel like administrative middlemen are micromanaging them, which results in inefficiencies and delays in service. The administrative culture becomes overly compliance-focused, risk-averse, and bureaucratically inflexible, which lowers employee satisfaction and policy responsiveness.

Furthermore, there are implications for professionalism and equity from this misalignment between formal and informal hierarchies. Given that their contributions will be filtered through a number of non-technical criteria, high performers may steer clear of or leave decentralized roles. Over time, this may strengthen field office capabilities, strengthen centralised elitism, and prolong the very inefficiencies that coordination structures are designed to address. Clear role definition, submission and compliance system reform, and capacity building that empowers rather than de-empowers field-level professionals are all necessary to address these problems. More importantly, reforms need to acknowledge that the primary facilitator of these dysfunctional power dynamics is structural design, not just individual behaviour.

VII. CONCLUSION

The development of informal hierarchies and administrative gatekeeping in the public sector has been critically examined in this article, with an emphasis on the relationships between senior peripheral staff and junior head office staff. The study showed through a conceptual and documentary analysis that these hierarchies are the result of structural ambiguities, centralized control mechanisms, and role misalignment within bureaucratic systems rather than intentional insubordination or individual misconduct. Role ambiguity, where administrative tasks intended to facilitate workflow gradually morph into supervisory practices, is the root of the issue. At head offices, junior administrative staff frequently oversee reporting platforms, enforce formatting guidelines, and regulate submission deadlines. These functions, though operational in nature, give rise to informal authority that undermines the legitimacy and autonomy of experienced professionals in district or regional offices. The resulting dynamics erode trust, create procedural bottlenecks, and weaken the effectiveness of decentralised service delivery.

Recalibrating bureaucratic culture and structure is necessary to meet this challenge. Job descriptions at public institutions need to be updated to make a clear distinction between roles related to coordination, compliance, and oversight. Decentralization of some administrative tasks is also necessary to eliminate bottlenecks and give functional line managers back control. Initiatives to increase capacity must also focus on administrative staff, making sure they are

aware of the limits of professional authority and how informal power affects institutional integrity.

Future research can expand on these insights through empirical investigations, even though this study used a conceptual methodology based on professional observation and document analysis. In-depth qualitative studies, such as interviews, ethnographies, or comparative case analyses across different departments, would help illuminate the lived experiences of both central and peripheral staff and offer actionable strategies for improving organisational coherence in the public service. Overall, the paper advances knowledge about the intersections of professionalism, power, and administrative design in public bureaucracies, and how seemingly insignificant procedural roles can have significant effects on authority, morale, and service delivery.

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