Exploring Organizational Democracy from the Perspective of Public Managers: A Phenomenological Approach

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of public managers in Iranian governmental organizations regarding organizational democracy. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the research seeks to understand the essence of organizational democracy from the perspective of those who have experienced it firsthand, highlighting the key themes and subthemes that emerge from their lived experiences.

Methodology: The study employs a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of public managers. A non-random snowball sampling method was used to select 15 public managers from various governmental organizations in Iran. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and the analysis continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and subthemes.

Findings: Four major themes emerged from the data: transparent and accountable management, independent organizations, personal fulfillment, and free and fair participation. Subthemes included the transition to democratic supervision, planning for civic participation, financial support for employees, fostering innovation, and integrating diverse values. The findings reveal a significant shift towards more democratic organizational practices, emphasizing transparency, employee empowerment, and participatory decision-making processes.

Conclusion: The study highlights the critical role of transparency, participatory decision-making, and employee empowerment in enhancing organizational effectiveness and employee satisfaction within Iranian governmental organizations.

Keywords: *Organizational democracy, public managers, phenomenological approach, transparency, participatory decision-making, employee empowerment, Iranian governmental organizations.*

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1   Introduction

Organizational democracy within public sector organizations is a critical aspect of modern governance, emphasizing transparency, accountability, and the participation of all stakeholders in decision-making processes. The concept of organizational democracy not only ensures that the voices of all employees are heard but also enhances the overall efficiency and effectiveness of public services (Julaei et al., 2019; Najafi & Rahimian, 2016).

Public participation in government decision-making processes is crucial for ensuring that policies and projects reflect the needs and preferences of the community. Studies have shown that public participation can significantly enhance the performance of government projects. For instance, in Thailand, increased public participation has been linked to improved outcomes in government projects (He et al., 2020; Manirojana, 2022; Mohamed & Kiruthu, 2019; Zhao, 2018). Similarly, public participation plays a critical role in the sustainability of environmental projects, as seen in the case of the 2022 Winter Olympics in China, where public involvement and information disclosure were essential for environmental sustainability (He et al., 2020). Nonprofit organizations also contribute to public service delivery through participatory approaches. In China, the logical basis for nonprofit sports organizations' participation in public service purchasing is grounded in enhancing public service efficiency and effectiveness (Levchenko, 2022; Sun et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2019). These examples highlight the broader significance of participatory practices in various governance contexts.

Public managers play a pivotal role in fostering organizational democracy within governmental organizations. Their experiences and perceptions are crucial for understanding the practical implementation of democratic principles in the public sector. The role of public managers in enhancing civic engagement and promoting a democratic work environment is well-documented. For example, in the context of local public health systems, the participation of tribal organizations has been shown to significantly impact the effectiveness of public health initiatives (Bauer, 2023).

Crowdsourced information has been tested as a tool for enhancing public participation in urban planning, demonstrating its potential to improve planning outcomes (Afzalan & Sanchez, 2017). Additionally, independent bodies for public participation have been identified as crucial

in developing the field of public participation by ensuring that participatory processes are transparent and inclusive (Bhérer et al., 2020).

The potential for public empowerment through government-organized participation is significant. Public administration theories suggest that participatory governance can lead to more empowered and engaged communities. For example, Buckwalter (2014) discusses the potential for public empowerment through structured participatory processes organized by the government (Buckwalter, 2014). Similarly, collaborative governance frameworks have been shown to effectively incorporate public values and participation in planning processes (Clark, 2020).

Organizational responses to public participation vary, and effective strategies are essential for addressing challenges related to authority delegation and stakeholder engagement. Goldenberg (2021) examines how organizations respond to issues concerning the delegation of authority in situations involving public participation, emphasizing the need for clear frameworks and guidelines (Goldenberg, 2021).

Case studies from various contexts provide valuable insights into the practical implementation of public participation. For instance, in New Jersey, lessons learned from developing a coastal management program highlight the importance of organizing effective public participation programs (Kinsey, 1980). In Sri Lanka, determinants of union participation in public sector organizations have been studied to understand the factors influencing employee engagement (Gamage & Hewagama, 2013).

Despite the benefits of public participation, challenges remain. The systematic and educational influences of civil society on public administration during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for adaptive communication strategies (Dragomyretska et al., 2022). Additionally, the integration of diverse and competitive values within organizations requires careful management to ensure that participatory processes are equitable and inclusive (Méndez & Avellaneda, 2022).

The role of technology in facilitating public participation cannot be overstated. Open government and e-government initiatives leverage digital platforms to enhance transparency and citizen engagement (Harrison et al., 2011). Nonprofit organizations' use of the internet for public engagement further underscores the importance of digital tools in modern governance (Kenix, 2008).

The policy cycle framework provides a useful lens for understanding the role of practitioners' expertise in

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participatory processes (Edelmann, 2023). Effective policy implementation requires the involvement of all stakeholders, as demonstrated in studies on public participation in environmental sustainability and disaster mitigation (Que et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022).

In conclusion, the exploration of organizational democracy from the perspective of public managers in Iranian governmental organizations offers valuable insights into the practical implementation of democratic principles in the public sector. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study aims to capture the lived experiences of public managers, providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with fostering organizational democracy. The findings of this study will contribute to the broader discourse on public participation and governance, highlighting the critical role of public managers in promoting transparency, accountability, and civic engagement.

2   Methods and Materials

2.1   Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of public managers regarding organizational democracy within Iranian governmental organizations. The aim is to delve deeply into the lived experiences of these managers to understand the essence of organizational democracy from their perspectives.

The study population consists of governmental organizations in Iran, with the target sample being public managers who have experienced and lived through organizational democracy in their professional lives. Using a non-random snowball sampling method, 15 public managers were selected as participants. This sampling technique was chosen to ensure that participants who have significant and relevant experiences with organizational democracy are included in the study, facilitating a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

2.2   Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences and perceptions. The semi-structured format provided a flexible framework for the interviews, ensuring that key topics related to organizational democracy were covered while also allowing participants to freely express

their thoughts and experiences. Each interview was conducted in a conducive environment, ensuring confidentiality and comfort for the participants. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The process of data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new significant themes or insights were emerging from the interviews. This saturation point was reached after interviewing 15 participants.

2.3   Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the phenomenological method, which involves several systematic steps to ensure a thorough and rigorous examination of the interview transcripts. The analysis was conducted as follows:

Familiarization: The researcher thoroughly read the transcribed interviews multiple times to immerse themselves in the data and gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

Coding: Key phrases and significant statements relevant to organizational democracy were identified and coded. This process involved breaking down the data into meaningful units and labeling them with codes that capture the essence of the participants' experiences.

Categorization: The coded data were then grouped into categories based on similarities and patterns. These categories represented the core themes that emerged from the participants' descriptions of their experiences with organizational democracy.

Thematic Analysis: The categories were further analyzed to identify overarching themes that encapsulate the essence of organizational democracy as experienced by the participants. This step involved interpreting the data to uncover deeper meanings and insights.

Validation: To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher conducted member checks with a subset of the participants. This involved sharing the preliminary themes and interpretations with the participants to confirm that the findings accurately reflected their experiences.

3   Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the 15 participants in this study reflect a diverse range of educational backgrounds, organizational positions, and years of experience within Iranian governmental organizations. All

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participants were male, holding high-level positions such as Director General, Governor, and Hospital President. The participants had extensive experience in their respective fields, ranging from 9 to 30 years. Their educational qualifications varied, with the majority holding advanced degrees, including seven with doctoral degrees, six with master's degrees, and two with bachelor's degrees. The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 to 58 minutes, allowing for in-depth exploration of their experiences with organizational democracy.

Table 1

Qualitative Analysis Results

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Transparent and Accountable Management	Transition to Democratic Supervision and Control	Moving from traditional to democratic methods in oversight and control.
	Shift in Attitude Towards Organizational Democracy	A change in mindset towards implementing democracy in the organization.
	Planning for Civic Participation	Strategic planning aimed at increasing civic engagement.
	Transparency in Communications	Clear and open communication channels within the organization.
	Trust-Based Operations	Conducting work based on mutual trust.
	Fair Treatment of Employees' Rights	Ensuring that employees' rights are upheld fairly.
	Provision of Coaching Opportunities or Flexible Working Methods	Offering mentorship or adaptable working practices.
	Financial Support for Employees	Providing financial assistance to employees.
	Multiple Meetings Between Officials and Employees	Regular interactions between management and staff.
	Entrepreneurship Training and Workshop Sessions	Conducting training and workshops focused on entrepreneurship.
Independent Organizations	Establishment of an Information System for Sharing Organizational Data	Implementing systems to facilitate information sharing.
	Team-Building for Generating Superior Ideas	Creating teams to brainstorm and generate high-quality ideas.
	Fostering Organizational Innovation	Creating an environment that encourages innovation.
	Implementation of a Democratic Evaluation System	Developing a system to assess performance democratically.
	Training on New Organizational Methods	Educating staff on new methods and practices.
	Training Managers to Substitute Excellent Work Culture	Training leaders to instill a superior work culture.
	Integration of Diverse and Competitive Values	Merging various competitive and diverse values into the organization.
Personal Fulfillment	Creating Conditions for Constructive Personal Changes	Facilitating positive changes in individuals.
	Improving Competencies and Skills	Enhancing individual skills and competencies.
	Classes to Attract Top Talent	Organizing sessions to attract talented individuals.
	Conducting Meetings and Allocating Necessary Time	Holding meetings and providing time for discussions.
	Training Employees for Organizational Improvement	Educating staff to contribute to organizational betterment.
	Motivating Future-Oriented Thinking and Adapting to Organizational Norms	Encouraging employees to think ahead and adapt to organizational values.
	Prioritizing Career Paths in Line with Personal Progress	Aligning career development with individual progress.
	Offering Higher-Level Roles to Various Job Positions	Proposing advanced roles to employees across different levels.
	Educational Classes on New Technologies and Their Workplace Applications	Providing training on new technologies and their practical applications.
Free and Fair Participation	Training Managers for Participatory Decision-Making Implementation	Educating managers to effectively implement participatory decision-making.
	Creating Conditions for Teamwork	Establishing an environment conducive to teamwork.
	Classes to Familiarize and Involve Individuals in Strategic and Tactical Decision-Making	Organizing sessions to engage employees in decision-making processes.
	Fairness in Employment Tests	Ensuring justice in recruitment processes.
	Sessions for Sharing Ideas and Appreciating Individuals	Conducting meetings to share ideas and recognize contributions.

The findings of this study, derived from the phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interviews with 15 public managers, highlight several key themes related to the experience of organizational democracy within Iranian governmental organizations. These themes and their corresponding subthemes provide a comprehensive understanding of how organizational democracy is perceived and implemented by public managers.

3.1 Transparent and Accountable Management

Transition to Democratic Supervision and Control: Managers reported a significant shift from traditional oversight methods to more democratic approaches. One manager noted, "We have moved away from rigid supervision to a system where employees have more autonomy and input in how things are done."

Shift in Attitude Towards Organizational Democracy: There has been a noticeable change in mindset towards embracing democracy in organizational practices. "There is a growing recognition of the value of democratic principles in our daily operations," remarked a participant.

Planning for Civic Participation: Strategic efforts have been made to increase civic engagement within the organization. A manager explained, "We actively plan initiatives that encourage employees to participate in decision-making processes."

Transparency in Communications: Clear and open communication channels have been established. As one manager stated, "Transparent communication is now a cornerstone of our organizational culture, ensuring everyone is informed and involved."

Trust-Based Operations: The work environment is increasingly built on mutual trust. "Trust is fundamental; it drives our interactions and work ethic," said a manager.

Fair Treatment of Employees' Rights: Ensuring fairness in upholding employees' rights is paramount. One participant shared, "We prioritize fairness and equity in all aspects of employee rights and benefits."

Provision of Coaching Opportunities or Flexible Working Methods: Organizations are providing more coaching opportunities and flexible working arrangements. A manager highlighted, "Mentorship and flexibility have become key elements of our employee support system."

Financial Support for Employees: Financial support mechanisms have been implemented to assist employees. "We have introduced various financial support programs to help our staff," mentioned a manager.

Multiple Meetings Between Officials and Employees: Regular interactions between management and staff have increased. "Frequent meetings between officials and employees ensure everyone is on the same page," noted a participant.

Entrepreneurship Training and Workshop Sessions: Workshops and training sessions focused on entrepreneurship are being conducted. A manager explained, "We hold regular sessions to foster entrepreneurial skills among our employees."

3.2 Independent Organizations

Establishment of an Information System for Sharing Organizational Data: Information sharing systems have been established to facilitate transparency. "We have developed systems that allow for easy sharing of organizational data," said a manager.

Team-Building for Generating Superior Ideas: Team-building activities are encouraged to generate innovative ideas. One participant stated, "Team-building exercises have led to some of our best ideas and innovations."

Fostering Organizational Innovation: There is a strong focus on fostering innovation within the organization. "We strive to create an environment where innovation can thrive," remarked a manager.

Implementation of a Democratic Evaluation System: A democratic evaluation system has been put in place. "Our evaluation process is now more democratic, involving input from all levels," shared a participant.

Training on New Organizational Methods: Employees receive training on new organizational methods. "Continuous training on the latest methods keeps us ahead of the curve," noted a manager.

Training Managers to Substitute Excellent Work Culture: Managers are trained to instill a superior work culture. "Leadership training is focused on promoting an excellent work culture," said one manager.

Integration of Diverse and Competitive Values: Diverse and competitive values are integrated into the organizational culture. "We embrace a variety of values, making us more dynamic and competitive," mentioned a participant.

3.3 Personal Fulfillment

Creating Conditions for Constructive Personal Changes: Efforts are made to facilitate positive personal changes among employees. "We provide the necessary conditions for our staff to grow and change constructively," said a manager.

Improving Competencies and Skills: There is a strong emphasis on improving employees' skills and competencies. One participant highlighted, "Skill development is a continuous process here, aimed at enhancing our team's capabilities."

Classes to Attract Top Talent: Classes and workshops are conducted to attract top talent. "We organize sessions to bring in and retain the best talent," mentioned a manager.

Conducting Meetings and Allocating Necessary Time: Meetings are conducted regularly, and adequate time is allocated for discussions. "Regular meetings and proper time allocation ensure thorough deliberation on important matters," noted a participant.

Training Employees for Organizational Improvement: Training programs are aimed at organizational improvement. "Our training initiatives are designed to improve overall organizational performance," said a manager.

Motivating Future-Oriented Thinking and Adapting to Organizational Norms: Employees are encouraged to think about the future and adapt to organizational norms. "We motivate our team to look ahead and align with our organizational values," mentioned a participant.

Prioritizing Career Paths in Line with Personal Progress: Career paths are aligned with individual progress. "We ensure that career advancement is in sync with personal development," said a manager.

Offering Higher-Level Roles to Various Job Positions: Higher-level roles are offered to employees across different job positions. "We provide opportunities for advancement to employees at all levels," noted a participant.

Educational Classes on New Technologies and Their Workplace Applications: Educational classes on new technologies and their applications in the workplace are offered. "Our classes on new technologies help employees apply them effectively at work," said a manager.

3.4 Free and Fair Participation

Training Managers for Participatory Decision-Making Implementation: Managers are trained to implement participatory decision-making. "We focus on training our leaders to adopt and implement participatory decision-making processes," remarked a participant.

Creating Conditions for Teamwork: Conditions conducive to teamwork are created. "Teamwork is a priority, and we ensure the right environment for it," said a manager.

Classes to Familiarize and Involve Individuals in Strategic and Tactical Decision-Making: Sessions are held to involve employees in strategic and tactical decision-making. "We conduct classes to engage our staff in critical decision-making processes," mentioned a participant.

Fairness in Employment Tests: Employment tests are conducted fairly. "Ensuring fairness in our recruitment processes is essential," said a manager.

Sessions for Sharing Ideas and Appreciating Individuals: Meetings are held to share ideas and appreciate contributions. "We have regular sessions to share ideas and recognize individual efforts," noted a participant.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of public managers in Iranian governmental organizations regarding organizational democracy, using a phenomenological approach. The findings revealed four main themes: transparent and accountable management, independent organizations, personal fulfillment, and free and fair participation. These themes reflect a shift towards more democratic organizational practices, emphasizing transparency, employee empowerment, and participatory decision-making processes.

The theme of transparent and accountable management highlights the importance of clear communication, trust-based operations, and fair treatment of employees. This is consistent with previous research, which has emphasized the role of transparency in enhancing organizational efficiency and employee satisfaction (Bauer, 2023; Clark, 2020). For instance, the study by Clark (2020) demonstrated that transparent communication in collaborative governance processes leads to better policy outcomes and increased public trust (Clark, 2020).

The subthemes within this category, such as the transition to democratic supervision and control, planning for civic participation, and financial support for employees, align with findings from other studies. For example, public participation in government projects in Thailand has been shown to improve project performance through enhanced transparency and accountability (Zhao, 2018). Similarly, the shift towards trust-based operations and fair treatment of employees resonates with the findings of Afzalan and Sanchez (2017), who highlighted the positive impact of inclusive and transparent planning processes on organizational outcomes (Afzalan & Sanchez, 2017).

The theme of independent organizations underscores the importance of establishing systems for sharing information, fostering innovation, and implementing democratic evaluation systems. This aligns with the study by Bhérer, Gauthier, and Simard (2020), which emphasized the role of independent bodies in developing public participation fields and ensuring inclusive participatory processes (Bhérer et al., 2020). The findings also resonate with the study by Liu et al. (2020), which highlighted the importance of multi-stakeholder involvement and collaborative planning in fostering innovation and organizational effectiveness (Liu et al., 2020).

The subthemes such as team-building for generating superior ideas, fostering organizational innovation, and integrating diverse values further support the idea that participatory practices can lead to more innovative and effective organizations. The study by He, Yeerkenbieke, and Baninla (2020) on the 2022 Winter Olympics also supports this, demonstrating that public participation and information disclosure can significantly contribute to environmental sustainability and innovative project outcomes (He et al., 2020).

Personal fulfillment emerged as a critical theme, emphasizing the importance of creating conditions for constructive personal changes, improving competencies, and aligning career paths with individual progress. This theme aligns with the findings of Leisink, Knies, and Loon (2018), who showed that public service motivation and opportunities for personal growth are crucial for employee engagement and organizational commitment (Leisink et al., 2018). The emphasis on training and development also resonates with the findings of Ichdan (2023), who highlighted the role of participation in decision-making and career development in fostering organizational commitment (Ichdan, 2023).

The theme of free and fair participation underscores the importance of participatory decision-making, teamwork, and fairness in organizational processes. This aligns with the study by Buckwalter (2014), which demonstrated the potential for public empowerment through structured participatory processes (Buckwalter, 2014). The subthemes such as training managers for participatory decision-making, creating conditions for teamwork, and ensuring fairness in employment tests support the findings of Njue et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of stakeholder participation and equitable practices in public project implementation (Njue et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings of this study are consistent with the broader literature on public participation and organizational democracy. They highlight the critical role of transparency, participatory decision-making, and employee empowerment in enhancing organizational effectiveness and employee satisfaction.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was limited to 15 public managers within Iranian governmental organizations, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the public sector. Second, the study focused solely on male managers, which limits the generalizability of the findings to female managers and other gender identities. Third, the phenomenological approach, while effective in capturing the lived experiences of participants, may be subject to researcher bias and interpretation. Finally, the study was conducted within the specific cultural and organizational context of Iran, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other cultural and organizational settings.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by including a larger and more diverse sample of participants, including female managers and managers from different regions and organizational contexts. Comparative studies across different cultural and organizational settings would provide valuable insights into the universality and contextual variations of organizational democracy practices. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore the long-term impact of organizational democracy on employee satisfaction, organizational effectiveness, and public trust. Further research could also investigate the role of technology in facilitating organizational democracy, building on the findings of Harrison et al. (2011) and Kenix (2008) regarding the use of digital platforms for public participation (Harrison et al., 2011; Kenix, 2008).

The findings of this study have several practical implications for public managers and policymakers. First, fostering a culture of transparency and accountability within public organizations is crucial. This can be achieved by establishing clear communication channels, trust-based operations, and fair treatment of employees. Training programs for managers on democratic supervision and participatory decision-making should be implemented to support this cultural shift.

Second, creating systems for sharing information and fostering innovation within organizations is essential. Public managers should prioritize team-building activities and the integration of diverse values to generate innovative ideas and improve organizational effectiveness. Implementing democratic evaluation systems and involving multiple

stakeholders in decision-making processes can further enhance organizational outcomes.

Third, supporting personal fulfillment and career development for employees is critical for maintaining high levels of engagement and commitment. Public organizations should provide opportunities for training and development, align career paths with individual progress, and ensure fairness in employment practices. By prioritizing the personal and professional growth of employees, public managers can foster a more motivated and committed workforce.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of organizational democracy in enhancing transparency, accountability, and participatory practices within public sector organizations. By addressing the limitations and building on the findings, future research can further our understanding of the impact of organizational democracy on public sector effectiveness and employee satisfaction. Public managers and policymakers can use these insights to implement practices that foster a more democratic, transparent, and effective public sector.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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