

INSTITUTIONAL BUREAUCRACY IN ALGERIA: A STUDY OF THE INTERACTION BETWEEN HUMAN RESOURCES POLICIES AND THE PRODUCTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

 Belkacem Boumaza ¹

¹ University of Morsli Abdellah - Tipaza (Algeria)
belkacem.boumaza@cu-tipaza.dz

Abstract: This Organizational culture is usually defined as the shared values and beliefs that direct behavior in organizations, yet traditional management research often treats culture as a fixed element that can be measured and controlled from the top, a view that ignores the changing and socially shaped nature of culture especially in settings where formal rules interact with personal relationships and informal habits; in Algeria, the difference between official policies and actual daily practices provides a useful way to study how organizational culture is constantly created rather than simply inherited or imposed. This research examines how employees in Algerian organizations understand, use, and adjust human resources policies in their daily work, shifting the focus not from how efficiently policies are applied but to what happens when formal rules meet real human actions, and to achieve this the study employed an ethnographic method over fourteen months across three organizations – a state-owned energy company, a bank that is modernizing, and a private telecommunications firm – while data were collected through participant observation, forty-seven detailed interviews with staff at different hierarchical levels, and analysis of informal artifacts such as handwritten notes and WhatsApp groups. The results reveal that policies function as ambiguous scripts requiring local interpretation, that digital systems generate a veneer of formal compliance beneath which analog workarounds continue to thrive, and that every day practices forge hybrid professional identities where employees constantly switch between official and unofficial ways of working; consequently, mechanisms designed to standardize behavior end up producing unique organizational cultures rather than uniformity, and the study therefore introduces a complementary perspective that distances policy concern from interactional collectivism, arguing that effective governance should align formal frameworks with existing informal dynamics instead of trying to eliminate them, thus shifting the primary goal from enforcing compliance to enabling adaptive capacity.

Keywords: Institutional Bureaucracy; HR Policies; Organizational Culture; Ethnography; Algerian institutions.

How to Cite This Article

Boumaza, B. (2026). Institutional bureaucracy in Algeria: A study of the interaction between human resources policies and the production of organizational culture. *Journal of Studies in Language, Culture, and Society (JSLCS)*, 9(1), pp. 338-353 .

¹ Corresponding author : Belkacem Boumaza. Authors' ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1878-8196>

1. Introduction

Walking into the administrative heart of an Algerian institution, one observes a distinct social ecology where a sense of order and interaction reflects deeper logics beneath routine tasks; this environment which shapes how work is experienced and how decisions come to be made is what scholars conventionally label organizational culture. Yet for too long, managerial scholarship has approached this concept through a diagnostic, engineering-oriented lens, treating culture as a static variable to be measured, manipulated, and aligned, rather than as an ongoing process. While pragmatically useful, such a perspective tends to overlook the insight that culture is not something an organization simply has but something its members continuously do.

In the Algerian context, where a long-standing tradition of state bureaucracy exists in intimate entanglement with complex webs of social relations and historical particularities, this process of cultural creation is not merely an academic concern but a central feature of organizational life. It is from this vantage point that the present study proceeds, arguing that to understand the organizational culture of an Algerian institution, one must look not first to its mission statements or leadership rhetoric but to human resources policies and the bureaucratic machinery through which they are enacted. What is proposed here is a paradoxical lens, for institutional bureaucracy frequently maligned as the suffocator of innovation and the emblem of impersonal rigidity emerges, upon closer examination, as one of the most fertile sites for the generation of meaning, identity, and shared practice. Every recruitment panel deliberation, every performance appraisal interview, every meticulously routed request for authorization carries significance far beyond its administrative function; each constitutes a profoundly social event, in which organizational values are performed, tested, and subtly rewritten. When a manager interprets a vaguely worded clause on professional conduct, or when a team collectively devises an unofficial workflow to circumvent a cumbersome digital platform, they are not merely solving problems they are actively negotiating the boundaries of authority, the practical meaning of fairness, and the contours of belonging. Culture, from this perspective, does not descend from boardroom decrees but grows upward, woven in the dynamic, often tense interplay between the pristine ideal of written rules and the messy, relational, pragmatically adaptive realities of human coexistence.

Consequently, this inquiry deliberately shifts its guiding question from the technocratic “how efficiently are policies implemented?” to the sociological question: “what happens when the abstract architecture of policy encounters the dense reality of people?” How does the universalizing language of bureaucratic rationality with its promises of equity and control engage with the particular social fabric of the Algerian workplace, with its layered hierarchies, its powerful undercurrents of *wasta* (connection), and its resilient, often quiet forms of agency? To answer such questions requires a methodology of deep immersion, one that privileges observed interaction over survey responses, listens to the frustrations and triumphs shared in break rooms, deciphers the meaningful silences that punctuate meetings, and attends carefully to the choreography of compliance and adaptation that operates just beneath the official record. This is not merely a methodological choice but an epistemological stance a conviction that the richest understandings are forged in the gap between proclamation and practice, between structure and agency (Ben Aouda, 2019; Salhi, 2020).

What this study reveals is a landscape in which policies are rarely simply obeyed or rejected; instead, they are metabolized, broken down, and reconstituted by the social body of the organization. A stringent digital monitoring system may remain formally operational while an unwritten consensus quietly governs its reasonable use; a policy promoting transparency in promotion may exist on paper while tacit understandings about seniority and social capital steer outcomes in practice. None of this is a simple narrative of failure or deceit,

but rather a far more interesting story of synthesis and lived negotiation a process through which a global managerial idiom is patiently translated, and sometimes transfigured, into a local dialect, resulting in a hybrid cultural order where the formal and the informal are not merely coexistent but functionally interdependent. By focusing intently on this intimate interaction between policy and practice, this study aims to illuminate the dynamics of organizational life, offering a portrait that is dynamic, contested, and profoundly human a space where individuals craft and navigate their professional selves, perpetually balancing the identity of the impersonal procedural citizen demanded by the rulebook with that of the embedded relational person shaped by a wider world of obligations and trusts.

2. Literature Review

The study of organizational culture in Algeria and the broader Arab region has evolved significantly over the past decade, moving from static, entity-based conceptualizations toward more dynamic, process-oriented understandings that emphasize the interplay between formal institutional structures and informal social practices (Smircich, 1983; Schein, 2010; Weick, 1995), a shift that reflects a growing recognition that organizational behavior cannot be fully understood through official policies and hierarchical mandates alone, but rather requires attention to the subtle, often invisible ways in which employees negotiate, interpret, and sometimes subvert formal rules through deeply embedded relational networks, cultural norms, and everyday tactics (de Certeau, 1984; Scott, 1998; Bourdieu, 1977). In this section, we critically review the existing literature along three thematic lines: first, the persistent gap between formal policies and informal practices in Algerian organizations; second, the role of identity and hybridity in shaping organizational culture; and third, the implications of digital transformation for ceremonial compliance and workarounds, after which we identify the research gap that our ethnographic study addresses, integrating foundational theoretical works with recent empirical studies to build a coherent analytical framework.

2.1 The Persistent Gap Between Formal Policies and Informal Practices

A consistent finding across recent scholarship is the significant and persistent gap between what formal policies prescribe and what employees actually do in their daily work, a gap that Laichi (2023) has critically analyzed by showing how social structures particularly *wasta* (intermediation), favoritism, and regional loyalties shape administrative bureaucratic management in Algerian institutions, revealing that the absence of a formal, codified organizational culture allows informal social logics to fill the void; this finding aligns with earlier observations by Salhi (2020) and Ben Aouda (2019), but Laichi's contribution lies in demonstrating how deeply embedded social structures systematically override formal procedures, often without overt conflict, whereas Haouam, Hamami, and Badraoui (2024) document a similar gap between formal HR policies and actual practices in Algerian enterprises, showing that deeply institutionalized yet ineffective practices persist precisely because they are mediated by informal customs and traditional power dynamics. Their study resonates with Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy theory, which argues that frontline workers inevitably exercise discretion in implementing policies, and with Feldman and March's (1981) insight that information and rules often serve symbolic rather than instrumental functions, yet neither Lipsky nor Feldman and March fully account for the specifically relational and communal logics that operate in the Algerian context, a lacuna that recent work by Koburtay, Syed, and Haloub (2023) begins to address by contextualizing leadership in the Arab Middle East and demonstrating that cultural values and informal hierarchies fundamentally shape organizational behavior in ways that universal leadership models fail to capture. This insight is particularly relevant for understanding how middle managers in Algerian organizations serve as crucial buffers and translators between top-down

policies and ground-level realities, a theme that Boukhalifa (2021) has explored in the context of digital transformation and HR policies, and that Bouziane, Harders, and Hoffmann (2016) have examined at a broader political-sociological level by showing how informal institutions and everyday practices govern local politics and organizational dynamics across the Arab world, including Algeria; their edited volume argues that governance cannot be understood solely through formal structures but must account for the subtle, often invisible, ways in which local actors negotiate, circumvent, and adapt official rules, thereby providing a theoretical and methodological foundation for studying the gap between formal policies and informal practices that lies at the heart of our ethnographic investigation. The role of informal networks and relational capital in mediating policy implementation has also been theorized by Salih (2015), who analyzed organizational culture in Arab institutions broadly and concluded that formal rules are consistently adapted to align with communal and familial values, a phenomenon that Al-Twal, Alsarhan, Nabulsi, and Horani (2024) have recently examined in relation to organizational justice, showing that informal networks can sometimes enhance perceptions of fairness when they are perceived as compassionate rather than self-serving, a nuance that complicates any simple condemnation of *wasta* as merely corrupt or inefficient.

2.2 Identity, Hybridity, and the Production of Organizational Culture

Beyond the policy - practice gap, a second strand of literature examines how organizational actors construct hybrid identities that navigate between competing logics, drawing on Giddens' (1991) concept of self-identity as a reflexive project in late modernity, a framework that Bouziyan (2016) has operationalized by developing a process model explaining how national identity influences organizational identity in family-run Algerian businesses through three mechanisms protection, justification, and adaptation based on qualitative fieldwork in four enterprises, finding that organizational identity serves as a social affirmation response allowing businesses to demarcate their role in a challenging institutional context. This study confirms that hybrid identities, where formal and informal logics coexist, are a pervasive feature of Algerian organizational life, and it provides empirical evidence that cultural production is not a top-down process but an ongoing negotiation shaped by broader societal forces, a conclusion that resonates strongly with Smircich's (1983) seminal argument that culture is not something an organization has but something an organization is, and with Weick's (1995) sensemaking perspective, which emphasizes the retrospective, socially constructed nature of organizational reality; moreover, the narrative construction of organizational identity has been further explored by Czarniawska (1997), who argues that organizations are continuously narrated and re-narrated through stories, rituals, and everyday conversations, and by Czarniawska and Sevón (2005), who examine how global ideas travel and are translated into local institutional contexts, creating unique hybrids that are neither fully global nor purely local. Salhi (2020) adopts a sociological framework, informed by Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of habitus and practice, to examine how informal networks and relational capital mediate the implementation of formal policies in Algerian organizations, demonstrating that the Algerian institution remains deeply connected to the value system of the society it belongs to, as well as to the customs, traditions, and shared social norms of its workers and executives; he argues that there is a close, functional relationship between the economic system and the social system, and that organizations operate based on the principle of continuous interaction between these two systems, so that formal administrative rules are rarely applied in a pure, mechanical fashion, but are constantly interpreted, adjusted, and sometimes bypassed through informal social logics rooted in family, community, and personal relationships. This constant negotiation between formal dictates and informal realities forges what we term, following Giddens (1991) and Bouziyan (2016), a hybrid professional identity

characterized by behavioral and linguistic code-switching, and the role of national identity in shaping organizational practices has also been examined by Boukhalifa (2021), who found that HR policies are translated into locally sustainable practices through the daily interpretive work of middle managers.

2.3 Digital Transformation, Ceremonial Compliance, and Workarounds

A more recent but rapidly growing body of research examines how digital transformation interacts with existing organizational cultures in Algeria, with Isa (2025) investigating the relationship between modernity (including technology adoption and rational management models) and organizational culture in Algerie Telecom and finding a statistically significant correlation between the two; however, Isa's quantitative approach, while valuable for identifying broad patterns, does not capture the subtle, often contradictory ways employees negotiate these modernizing pressures through code-switching and identity bricolage, a limitation that Hima, Benarous, Louail, and Hamadi (2025) partially address by examining how digital HR practices influence employee engagement in Algerian universities, identifying organizational trust as a crucial mediating variable and suggesting that technology implementation succeeds not through technical sophistication alone but through the cultivation of trust, which is itself a product of informal relational dynamics rather than formal policies. This finding aligns with Orlikowski's (2007) sociomaterial perspective, which argues that technology and social practices are mutually constitutive, and with Leonardi and Barley's (2010) emphasis on the importance of social compatibility in technology adoption, both of which caution against technological determinism. Benachenhou and Guerrou (2023) explore how innovative digital practices can enhance HR effectiveness in Algerian public organizations, yet they also caution that technology alone cannot transform deeply embedded informal workarounds, a caution that echoes Scott's (1998) analysis of how centralized, standardized schemes often fail because they ignore local knowledge and practical wisdom, as well as Geertz's (1973) argument that thick description is necessary to understand the complex layers of meaning that inform human action. Together, these studies point to what our research terms the "digital veil" a layer of technical procedure that simultaneously reveals and conceals actual organizational workings, where what we might call ceremonial compliance coexists with analog shadow systems; this concept of ceremonial compliance draws on Feldman and March's (1981) observation that organizations often gather and use information symbolically rather than instrumentally, as well as on de Certeau's (1984) distinction between institutional strategies (the formal, top-down power of structures) and the tactical creativity of everyday users (the subtle, opportunistic, and often invisible arts of the weak), a distinction that has profound implications for understanding how employees navigate digital mandates. The practical wisdom required to navigate these tensions has been theorized by Senge (2006) as part of the learning organization, where adaptive capacity is prioritized over rigid compliance, and where leaders are encouraged to ask "why is this workaround necessary?" rather than simply ordering its closure.

2.4 Methodological Foundations and the Case for Ethnography

The methodological approach of this study is grounded in the ethnographic tradition, which Van Maanen (2011) has characterized as uniquely suited to capture the tacit, embodied, and context-specific dimensions of organizational life, dimensions that remain invisible to surveys and statistical analyses; Geertz (1973) famously argued that ethnography provides "thick description" a detailed account of the layers of meaning that inform human action, which cannot be captured through questionnaires or aggregated data alone and Yin (2018) has further articulated the value of case study research for understanding complex social phenomena in their real-world contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the

phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident. Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) have emphasized the importance of reflexive, interpretive approaches that treat contradictions not as noise or error but as evidence of creative tension and as windows into the taken-for-granted assumptions that shape organizational life, a principle that guides our analysis of the contradictions between formal policies and informal practices throughout this study. This methodological commitment to immersion and interpretation distinguishes our study from previous research that has relied primarily on surveys or interviews, allowing us to observe the micro-moments in which culture is made and unmade on a daily basis.

2.5 Research Gap and Contribution of the Present Study

Collectively, the reviewed literature establishes that organizational culture in Algeria is neither purely formal nor entirely informal but emerges from continuous negotiation between the two, and scholars have documented the policy-practice gap (Laichi, 2023; Haouam et al., 2024; Salhi, 2020; Ben Aouda, 2019), theorized hybrid identity formation (Bouziyan, 2016; Giddens, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997), and begun to explore the effects of digital transformation (Isa, 2025; Hima et al., 2025; Benachenhou & Guerrou, 2023; Boukhalifa, 2021), with foundational works by Bourdieu (1977), de Certeau (1984), Schein (2010), Weick (1995), Scott (1998), Feldman and March (1981), and Smircich (1983) providing the theoretical scaffolding for understanding these dynamics.

However, several significant gaps remain: first, most existing empirical studies rely on surveys, interviews, or document analysis, and few employ sustained ethnographic immersion across multiple organizational types to examine how cultural production unfolds moment by moment in everyday work practices, despite Van Maanen (2011) and Geertz (1973) having long argued that ethnography is uniquely suited to capture the tacit dimensions of organizational life such approaches remain rare in Algerian organizational research; second, while the gap between policy and practice is widely acknowledged, the specific mechanisms through which employees produce hybrid cultural orders including the tactical use of workarounds, the performance of ceremonial compliance, and the forging of code-switching identities remain underexplored, and even recent work by Kaouache, Himrane, Brewer, and Kaouache (2025), which compares existing and preferred organizational cultures in Algerian power plants and finds a strong preference for achievement-oriented cultures over existing power-oriented cultures, does not examine the micro-processes through which employees navigate this gap on a daily basis; third, the policy implications of this processual understanding have not been systematically articulated. The present study addresses these gaps by providing a thick ethnographic description of cultural production at the interface of HR policies, digital systems, and informal social logics, drawing on fourteen months of participant observation, forty-seven in-depth interviews, and artifact analysis across three Algerian organizations (a state-owned energy enterprise, a modernizing bank, and a private telecommunications company), and by introducing a complementary perspective that distances policy concern from interactional collectivism, arguing for the alignment of formal frameworks with existing informal dynamics rather than their suppression.

3. An Ethnographic Inquiry into the Production of Organizational Culture

3.1. Methodology

3.1.1. Rationale for Ethnographic Immersion

To apprehend the intricate reality of how human resources policies, deeply rooted social logics, and imposing digital systems interweave within contemporary organizations, this investigation demanded a methodological approach capable of accessing the tacit and the

everyday; for while quantitative surveys might delineate broad attitudinal patterns, they remain inadequate for illuminating the subtle choreography of a manager tempering a rigid policy with a personal aside, or the collective knowing glance that follows the announcement of a new digital mandate precisely the micro-moments in which culture is perpetually made and unmade (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 223). This research was therefore grounded in a qualitative, ethnographic methodology conceived as a form of sustained immersion, a deliberate sojourn within the natural habitat of organizational life where culture can be observed in situ.

3.1.2. Research Setting and Case Selection

The study unfolded over fourteen months within three distinct Algerian organizations, a design that provided a crucial spectrum of bureaucratic intensity and technological adoption while simultaneously maintaining an analytical focus on a shared socio-cultural substrate (Yin, 2018, p. 48). The first site was a traditional state-owned enterprise (SOE) in the energy sector a monument to entrenched bureaucratic tradition; the second, a semi-public bank in the throes of rapid modernization, where architectural glass walls created a theater of transparency often contradicted by hushed conversations in corridors; and the third, a private telecommunication company that styled itself as global in aspiration even as its daily workflows navigated persistent local and relational currents.

3.1.3. Modes of Data Collection and Analysis

The primary mode of engagement was participant observation, a process that involved embedding ourselves within these organizational worlds attending formal meetings where consequential decisions were often pre-cooked in sidelined conversations, shadowing HR officers as they performed their duties, and spending significant time in common areas where the unofficial organizational chart, mapped according to influence and social capital rather than formal title, gradually became legible (Geertz, 1973, p. 5).

We observed what might be termed ordinary sacred rites: the intricate leave-approval dance, a complex performance of deference and negotiation; the protracted procurement saga, where a petitioner's relational standing proved as critical as the submitted form; and the client interaction theater, where employees adeptly code-switched between the formal French of official procedure and the relational Arabic of local pragmatism. This robust observational bedrock was supplemented by forty-seven in-depth narrative interviews conducted across all hierarchical levels, ranging from HR directors articulating visions of talent pipelines to frontline employees narrating their daily workarounds with the savvy of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010, p. xii).

Our analysis extended beyond formal policy documents to encompass the informal artifacts that coexisted with them the clarifying sticky note affixed to a monitor, the "Quick Solutions" WhatsApp group that bypassed official channels, the amended checklist taped to a cubicle wall for these items constituted the organization's shadow curriculum, a parallel body of essential knowledge. Analyzing this corpus required a reflexive, interpretive approach that treated contradictions not as noise but as evidence of creative tension, with our positionality as insider-outsiders facilitating the kind of naïve questions that reveal taken-for-granted practices (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1265).

This methodological triad observation, interviewing, and artifact analysis generated a stereoscopic view of organizational life, moving decisively beyond what organizations proclaim they do to understand what they actually do, and the complex how and why behind those actions, thereby laying bare the intricate mechanics of cultural production at the dynamic interface of policy, practice, and technology.

4. The Ambiguous Script: HR Policies as Invitations to Interpretation

The Formal human resources policy typically presents itself as a clear, authoritative blueprint for action, yet ethnographic scrutiny reveals it to be something far more fluid and contested an opening statement in an ongoing organizational conversation rather than its final word (Feldman & March, 1981, p. 178). These documents, frequently adorned with the logos of international consultancies and phrased in the universalizing lexicon of “best practice,” project an image of rational order akin to architectural renderings of perfect buildings; they seldom account, however, for the actual weathered topography of the organizational landscape the existing social structures, the entrenched habits, the inevitable weathering effects of daily use. A key feature enabling their local adaptation is strategic ambiguity, for policies are often crafted at a sufficiently high level of abstraction to leave intentional gaps that are subsequently filled by prevailing local logics. Phrases such as “in the best interest of the organization” become a conceptual canvas upon which existing values are projected; within the SOE, for instance, this clause in recruitment contexts was consistently interpreted through a lens of social stability, whereby hiring a respected employee’s nephew was perceived not as corrosive nepotism but as a prudent investment in social cohesion and future loyalty a holistic, culturally informed calculation of “interest” that the policy’s abstract language could neither prevent nor explicitly endorse, thereby allowing a traditional logic to operate undisturbed within a modern managerial frame (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72; this phenomenon of local interpretation mediating universal policy frameworks is a recurrent theme in analyses of Arab administrative systems, where formal rules are often adapted to align with deeply held communal and familial values (Salih, 2015, p. 114)).

This critical interpretive work falls predominantly to middle managers, who act as the crucial cultural translators of the system (Schein, 2010, p. 23). Policies descend from above as abstract imperatives, but department heads must translate them into concrete actions affecting real people with whom they maintain ongoing relationships, and a poignant illustration of this emerged in the bank following the implementation of a strict new biometric attendance policy. The policy text was unequivocal, yet one department head, faced with a valuable employee who was chronically late due to caring for an elderly parent, instituted an informal “grace period”; he would manually adjust the digital record each week while counseling the employee privately, explaining, “the system sees a time, but I see a man honoring his father. My job is to satisfy the system without breaking the man.” In this act, he was not merely circumventing a rule but translating an impersonal digital mandate into a locally sustainable practice that balanced operational efficiency with a culturally ingrained ethic of compassionate flexibility and familial duty, functioning as a vital buffer a shock absorber between systemic rigidity and human reality, actively producing a culture that valued loyalty and humanity alongside efficiency. This finding complicates the relationship between *wasta* and organizational justice, as Al-Twal, Alsarhan, Nabulsi, and Horani (2024) suggest that informal networks can sometimes enhance perceptions of fairness when they are perceived as compassionate rather than self-serving, a nuance that our ethnographic data strongly support. Thus, from their very conception, HR policies are best understood as invitations to interpretation, and it is within this interpretive act that the first decisive strokes of cultural production are applied (Weick, 1995, p. 13). Thus, from their very conception, HR policies are best understood as invitations to interpretation, and it is within this interpretive act that the first decisive strokes of cultural production are applied (Weick, 1995, p. 13); each policy is a seed, but the organizational culture is the unique plant that grows from it, shaped irrevocably by the soil of local habits and the daily gardening of its members, for the formal script provides a genetic code, but the lived culture is always a phenotype expressing the complex interaction between that code and its immediate environment (Boukhalifa, 2021, p. 21).

5. The Digital Veil: Ceremonial Compliance and Analog Workarounds

The implementation of sophisticated Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS) and Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems introduced a powerful new actor into the organizational drama: the algorithmic system, promoted as a technological solution to human vagaries but revealed by ethnography as a novel terrain for age-old interactions between formal policy and informal practice. This dynamic creates what we term a digital veil a pervasive layer of technical procedure that simultaneously reveals and conceals the actual workings of the organization. A central finding was the prevalence of ceremonial compliance within digital spaces, for digital platforms, by design, demand explicit individualized actions and acknowledgments. Benachenhou and Guerrou (2023) examine how innovative digital practices can enhance HR effectiveness in Algerian public organizations, yet their findings also suggest that technology alone cannot transform deeply embedded informal workarounds. In the telecommunication company, for example, the ERP required every discrete project task to be assigned to a single named individual; however, the technical teams' work culture was fundamentally collaborative and fluid. In the telecommunication company, for example, the ERP required every discrete project task to be assigned to a single named individual; however, the technical teams' work culture was fundamentally collaborative and fluid, and the solution was a form of cultural bricolage: a team leader would assign the task within the system to one person, thereby fulfilling the digital requirement, while the actual work continued to be performed collectively, as it always had been. The digital record displayed clean individualized accountability for audit purposes, but the lived reality remained messily collective; the system was thus accommodated, not circumvented, for its formal demands were met at the surface level while deeper embedded practices continued undisturbed beneath the digital veil (Orlikowski, 2007, p. 1435).

Furthermore, technology often served to re-mediate rather than eliminate informal networks; the notion that a digital job portal would erase the influence of relational capital proved naive, for candidates were informally identified and vetted through relational networks long before a posting went live, rendering the subsequent digital application a pro forma step for the pre-selected candidate. In several observed cases, managers subtly tailored digital job descriptions to match a preferred candidate's CV, thereby using the system's own formality to legitimize a pre-ordained outcome; the digital tool was thus absorbed into the existing logic of relational capital, adding a veneer of procedural legitimacy without fundamentally altering the social mechanics of opportunity allocation. Perhaps most strikingly, digital rigidity spawned vibrant adaptive ecosystems of analog workarounds; when the SOE's new digital procurement module was universally deemed too slow for urgent needs, employees collaboratively developed a parallel paper-based "emergency request" system, legitimized solely by a director's verbal approval. This shadow system faster and more adaptable coexisted symbiotically with the official digital one, with the consequence that digital logs presented an incomplete picture of organizational activity while the true hybrid process lived in email trails, signed paper slips, and face-to-face agreements. Hima, Benarous, Louail, and Hamadi (2025) demonstrate that digital HR practices in Algerian universities enhance employee engagement only when mediated by organizational trust, a finding that aligns with our observation of ceremonial compliance in digital spaces. Such a phenomenon is not merely a sign of technological failure but a testament to organizational resilience and the generation of practical local knowledge essential for real-world operation (Scott, 1998, p. 313). Such a phenomenon is not merely a sign of technological failure but a testament to organizational resilience and the generation of practical local knowledge essential for real-world operation (Scott, 1998, p. 313). Technology in this context does not unilaterally dictate a new culture; rather, it enters into a dialectic with the old, resulting in a hybrid socio-technical order where

digital traces and analog realities coexist in a state of productive, if perpetually tense, symbiosis.

6. Ritual, Resistance, and the Forging of Hybrid Identity

Beneath the veneer of policy documents and digital interfaces lies the rich symbolic life of the organization, where culture is most vividly embodied and where routine procedures reveal themselves as potent rituals laden with meaning. The annual performance review, for instance, was rarely a straightforward assessment of key performance indicators; instead, it transformed into a ritual of recognition, relationship management, and social negotiation, with the formal scoring sheet serving as a pretext while the core of the event was the conversation. The manager's indirect criticism delivered through proverbs, the employee's justifications rooted in family needs or collegial solidarity, and the delicate dance around future promotion prospects. These interviews ritually reaffirmed hierarchical structures, demonstrated paternalistic concern, and negotiated individual standing, thereby performing the organization's essential social drama in miniature (Bouziyan, 2016, p. 85). Inevitably, formal structures provoke informal resistance and tactical agency, reflecting what de Certeau termed the "arts of the weak" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix); this resistance was rarely overt rebellion but manifested in subtle tactics such as "work-to-rule" protests, or more commonly the collective development of unofficial know-how, the shared tacit understanding of which rules could be benignly bent, or which manager to approach for a sympathetic hearing. This distributed intelligence, passed on through socialization, acted as a cultural counterweight to the formal HRM system, a repository of practical wisdom that enabled the organization to function smoothly despite, and sometimes because of, its own procedures.

This constant navigation between formal dictates and informal realities forges a distinctly hybrid professional identity, for the Algerian professional in these settings emerges as a skilled practitioner of behavioral and linguistic code-switching, not suffering from schizophrenia but performing a sophisticated context-dependent self (Giddens, 1991, p. 81). Isa (2025) demonstrates a statistically significant correlation between modernity (including technology adoption and rational management models) and organizational culture in Algeria Telecom, yet our ethnographic data reveal that employees actively negotiate these modernizing pressures through code-switching and identity bricolage. In the course of a single day, an individual may input data into an SAP system with detached procedural precision, leverage a personal connection to expedite a stalled shipment, and mediate a team conflict by appealing to communal values and interpersonal harmony. In the course of a single day, an individual may input data into an SAP system with detached procedural precision, leverage a personal connection to expedite a stalled shipment, and mediate a team conflict by appealing to communal values and interpersonal harmony. This chameleonic ability that reflects the hybrid reality of Algerian organizational life, where multiple often contradictory cultural systems intersect. The organization's culture, at its core, resides in the collective, often unarticulated understanding of when and how to switch between these codes, the ingrained knowledge that real effectiveness lies in mastering both the formal workflow and the informal network. The resulting professional identity is a resilient bricolage stitched together from global HR mandates, local social expectations, Islamic ethics, colonial administrative legacies, and daily pragmatic experience; it creates a professional self uniquely adapted to its environment, being neither traditionally Algerian in a parochial sense nor impersonally Western-corporate, but something distinctly and dynamically Algerian-modern.

7. The Produced Cultural Order: Implications for Theory and Practice

What emerges unequivocally from our sustained immersion within these Algerian institutions is the understanding that organizational culture is not a fixed entity handed down from senior directors but a living process constantly being negotiated and reproduced by everyone present (Smircich, 1983, p. 347). It forms in the fertile, if contested, gap between the strict rulebook and the flexible reality of daily life, between the imported digital system and the familiar trusted paper trail, and between the official policy drafted in formal French and the practical Arabic spoken in the hallway to mobilize action. This emergent cultural order is a hybrid, a pragmatic blend, but it is far from a symptom of failure; rather, it is a testament to remarkable social resilience and intelligence, for it represents a collective strategy for meeting the exigent demands of a modern bureaucracy without abandoning the deeply held social values of respect, familial obligation, and personal connection that frame the employees' wider world.

Within this conceptual space, a human resources policy is best understood not as a final command but as an opening statement, a textual provocation that managers and employees interpret, discuss, and adapt through a hundred small daily decisions; likewise, the new software platform is not an all-powerful solution but a new tool that gets integrated into older trusted ways of working, often in surprising and inventive ways that keep the organization functioning. To truly understand an organization, therefore, we must attend to this continuous process of cultural production as it happens, reconceiving culture not as a noun that an organization *has* but as a verb that its people *do* every day through their compromises, their quiet collaborations, and their shared often unspoken understanding of how things truly get accomplished (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 41).

This perspective fundamentally challenges the traditional managerial paradigm that culture can be engineered from the top down with the precision of a machine, and instead asks us to view the workplace as a kind of ongoing conversation or negotiation where the most culturally significant events are often not captured in the boardroom memo but are located in the way a team leader applies a rigid attendance policy with compassion, or in the unspoken collective agreement to use a parallel paper system when the digital one proves too slow for urgent needs. For organizational theory, this implies a need for wariness regarding the uncritical importation of "best practices" from one context to another, for ideas and systems certainly travel, but they are always translated, reshaped, and endowed with new meaning by the local contexts they enter, creating unique hybrids that are neither fully global nor purely local (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005, p. 8). This reality asks us to reconsider elegant but often simplistic convergence theories that predict organizations worldwide will become homogenized; while many Algerian firms may adopt the same modern HR policies or software as companies elsewhere to signal legitimacy, the life inside those structures the daily practices, the relationships, the unspoken rules remains distinctly its own, guided by a resilient and different social logic.

For practitioners who manage and lead such organizations, the implications are significant and substantive, for the primary goal must shift from enforcing perfect compliance with abstract rules to stewarding a healthy adaptive culture. The human resources specialist thus becomes less of a police officer auditing for policy violations and more of a skilled translator and facilitator a role that requires understanding the legitimate reasons behind prevalent workarounds and committing to bridging the gap between corporate intentions and local reality without defaulting to punitive measures. This might involve designing policies with built-in flexibility for legitimate local exceptions, or creating safe forums where middle managers can explain the practical challenges they face in applying corporate rules (Senge, 2006, p. 139). Leaders, for their part, need to cultivate what might be termed cultural

consciousness: the ability to look past the clean aggregated data on a digital dashboard and appreciate the messy human processes that actually make the organization function. When an unofficial “emergency” procedure emerges, the first managerial question should be “why is this necessary?” rather than an immediate order to shut it down, for the answer often contains the practical wisdom required to improve the official system itself (Salhi, 2020; Ben Aouda, 2019).

This principle is especially critical during the introduction of new technology, which is too often mistakenly viewed as a magic bullet; our findings strongly suggest that technology succeeds not when it is technically perfect but when it is socially compatible. Before launching any new digital platform, leaders must engage in deep observational inquiry to ask critical questions: will this system’s requirement for individual accountability damage our culture of collective responsibility, and does its promise of total transparency undermine our local effective ways of preserving dignity and resolving conflict quietly? A technology implementation must be managed not as a mere IT project but as a profound organizational change initiative, one that plans for and respects the inevitable conversation and sometimes struggle between the new digital logic and the old trusted social ways of working (Leonardi & Barley, 2010, p. 143).

Complementary Perspective on Policy Concern

The findings of this study distance policy concern from the organizational process of interactional collectivism. In other words, while organizational culture is cultivated through ongoing interactions, formal policy interventions often fail to recognize or address this bottom-up process. From a scientific and policy-oriented point of view, this suggests that policy makers should adopt a complementary regard one that does not seek to replace informal collectivism but rather to align formal policies with existing interactional dynamics. Policies that ignore the relational and adaptive nature of cultural production risk being ceremonial or counterproductive. As Haouam, Hamami, and Badraoui (2024) argue, transforming deeply institutionalized but ineffective HRM practices requires more than policy revision; it demands attention to the informal customs and power dynamics that sustain those practices. Therefore, an effective policy approach should acknowledge that culture emerges from interactional collectivism rather than top-down mandates. Therefore, an effective policy approach should: (a) acknowledge that culture emerges from interactional collectivism rather than top-down mandates; (b) design policies that provide flexible frameworks rather than rigid rules; and (c) invest in mechanisms that facilitate feedback from middle managers and frontline employees who enact the daily translation between policy and practice. This complementary perspective shifts the policy concern from enforcing compliance to enabling adaptive capacity (Ben Aouda, 2019; Salhi, 2020).

8. Conclusion

This ethnographic journey through three Algerian organizations over fourteen months has led us to a fundamental reconceptualization of organizational culture, one that firmly rejects the managerial fantasy of culture as a fixed asset to be engineered from above, and instead reveals it as a living, breathing, and perpetually contested process that emerges from the messy, often contradictory interactions between formal policies, digital systems, and the deeply embedded social logics of everyday work life; indeed, what we have witnessed across the state-owned enterprise, the modernizing bank, and the aspirational telecom company is not a story of policy failure or cultural deficiency, but rather a far more fascinating narrative of creative synthesis, pragmatic adaptation, and silent resilience where HR policies function not as commanding decrees but as ambiguous scripts inviting endless local interpretation, where digital platforms become stages for ceremonial compliance rather than instruments of

total control, and where employees at all levels develop sophisticated tactics of code-switching, bricolage, and informal know-how that enable the organization to function smoothly despite, and sometimes precisely because of, the rigidities imposed upon it. The Algerian case, with its pronounced and historically sedimented tension between the impersonal ideals of state bureaucracy and a deeply relational habitus rooted in family, community, and networks of obligation (*wasta*), has brought this process into sharp and illuminating relief, demonstrating that the hybrid cultural order we observed where formal and informal systems are not merely coexistent but functionally interdependent is not a symptom of organizational immaturity but rather a testament to remarkable social intelligence and adaptive capacity; it represents a collective, often unspoken strategy for meeting the exigent demands of modern managerial rationality without abandoning the deeply held values of respect, loyalty, compassion, and human dignity that frame the employees' wider world, and it is precisely within this fertile, if perpetually tense, gap between the strict rulebook and the flexible reality of daily life that organizational culture is continuously made and unmade.

Building on these empirical insights, we have introduced a complementary perspective that deliberately distances policy concern from the organic, bottom-up process of interactional collectivism; in other words, while organizational culture is cultivated through ongoing, often invisible, interactions among colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates through the quiet adjustment of a biometric record, the shared understanding of which manager to approach for a sympathetic hearing, or the collective development of a parallel paper system when the digital procurement module proves too slow formal policy interventions almost invariably fail to recognize, let alone harness, this subterranean dynamics. Kaouache, Himrane, Brewer, and Kaouache (2025) compare existing and preferred organizational cultures in Algerian power plants, finding a strong preference for achievement-oriented cultures over existing power-oriented cultures; this gap reflects the daily reality of hybrid identity that our study has documented across three organizational sites. From a scientific and policy-oriented point of view, this finding suggests that policy makers and organizational leaders would be wise to adopt a complementary regard, and instead operate as if culture could be dictated from above through ever more detailed rules, tighter surveillance, and standardized best practices imported from wholly different contexts. From a scientific and policy-oriented point of view, this finding suggests that policy makers and organizational leaders would be wise to adopt a complementary regard, one that does not seek to replace or suppress informal collectivism but rather to align formal policies with existing interactional dynamics, acknowledging that culture emerges from the ground up and that effective governance requires not the elimination of workarounds but the intelligent incorporation of their underlying logic into the design of policies and systems; concretely, this means (a) designing policies with built-in flexibility mechanisms such as exception clauses, discretionary spaces, and participatory review processes, (b) shifting the primary metric of success from perfect compliance to adaptive capacity and practical outcomes, and (c) investing in genuine feedback mechanisms that allow middle managers and frontline employees those who perform the daily labor of translation between abstract mandates and concrete realities to inform and shape policy from below, rather than merely being its passive recipients.

In the final analysis, therefore, bureaucracy is not culture's antithesis but its crucible, and the most resilient and effective organizations of the future may well be those that learn to steward, rather than suppress, the dynamic and deeply human interaction between structure and agency; for human resources management, this implies a fundamental role transformation from policy police to cultural facilitator, from enforcer of compliance to enabler of sense-making, crafting frameworks that are intelligent enough to guide but flexible enough to breathe, and creating safe spaces where the inevitable tensions between formal rules and local

realities can be discussed openly rather than driven underground into shadow systems and silent resistance. For leaders, the imperative is to cultivate what we have called cultural consciousness the ability to look past the clean, aggregated data on a digital dashboard and to appreciate the messy, relational, and often invisible processes that actually make organizations function, asking not “how do we stop these workarounds?” but rather “why are they necessary, and what wisdom do they contain?” For technology implementation, the governing principle must be socio-technical compatibility, recognizing that no digital platform, however sophisticated, can succeed if it is socially incompatible with the existing rhythms, relationships, and tacit knowledge of the people who must use it; every new system should be preceded by ethnographic observation, designed with user input, and implemented not as a mere IT project but as a profound organizational change initiative that respects the inevitable conversation sometimes a struggle, sometimes a dance between new digital logics and old trusted ways. Ultimately, the Algerian organizational landscape instructs us that culture is a verb, not a noun; it is something people do every day through their compromises, their quiet collaborations, their shared, often unspoken understanding of how things truly get accomplished; and the task of researchers, policy makers, and practitioners alike is not to flatten this vibrant complexity into neat models or rigid rules, but to engage with it respectfully, intelligently, and with the humility that comes from recognizing that the most profound organizational wisdom often resides not in boardroom memos but in the small, everyday acts of translation and care that occur in the humid, vital space where policy meets practice, and where the universal aspirations of management theory meet the particular, meaningful, and irreducibly human realities of people working together.

9. List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Term
HR	Human Resources
HRIS	Human Resource Information Systems
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
SAP	Systems, Applications, and Products (ERP system)
HRM	Human Resources Management

Ethical Statement

All participants in this ethnographic study were fully informed about the research objectives and the voluntary nature of their participation, and to protect data confidentiality and participant anonymity, all personal identifiers (names, job titles, and specific departmental affiliations) were removed and replaced with numbers; raw data, including interview transcripts and field notes, were stored on a password - protected computer accessible only to the researcher, and no incentives or compensation were offered, nor were any deceptive practices employed at any stage of the research.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there are no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest associated with this research, as this study received no funding from any

governmental, commercial, or non-profit entity, and the author has no affiliation with or involvement in any organization or entity that has a financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter discussed in this manuscript; rather, the research was conducted independently, and the findings are presented objectively and without any bias.

AI Use Statement

No artificial intelligence tools were used in this research, as the research and its editing are entirely the work of the author alone; the research design, data collection, participant observation, interviews, analysis, interpretation of findings, and formulation of theoretical contributions are entirely the original work of the author, and no AI tool was used to generate any part of the data or to produce the core arguments of this study.

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