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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Community-Based Organizing Under Control. Informal Control Strategies and Their Limitations on Political Action

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on informal control strategies and their effects on community-based organizations in Quebec (Canada). These organizations, highly institutionalized and rarely considered as radical actors, nevertheless have a long tradition of political action in Quebec, intervening as interest groups to present grievances to the government, as well as social actors protesting in the streets. Many control strategies hinder this essential part of associations' mandate. Interviews conducted in 2021 with 14 groups show that, despite these associations' relatively uncontroversial repertoire of action, more than twenty forms of control can be exercised over them. Implemented by multiple actors, these strategies affect individuals, groups, and their missions. These data shed light on what informal control strategies do to the political action of community-based organizations, while informing about control strategies by actors other than the police. Drawing on a sociology of social movements and repression, this article demonstrates the informality integrated into multiple repressive tactics, highlighting the importance of taking it into account when thinking about repressive and controlling practices, and their effects, especially on marginalized individuals and collectives.

KEYWORDS: Informal control and repression, community organizations, Quebec, effects of informal control, marginalized individuals

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1. Introduction

The classic definition of political repression refers to an action that coerces or prevents social protest actions (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001). This definition implies state repression of social actors in conflict with the state and has mainly been used to document the political action of large social movements and uprisings. But what about repression of social actors who are not the protest's usual suspects? Community-based organizations, at least in Quebec, form a unique sector, delivering individual services and organizing collective action with marginalized populations. They are subsidized by the state and, at the same time, active in various social movements. Due to its public funding and legal status, the community-based organizing sector is therefore both part of social movements and institutionalized, in some ways radical and in others, not at all. In this article, we present the case of groups that carry out visible actions in the public space, such as demonstrations and posterings, but who also run popular education campaigns, press conferences and meetings with elected representatives. This hybridity enables us to examine repression and its impact on institutionalized actors, both during more radical moments and in their everyday practices.

As suggested by the scientific literature (Combes and Fillieule, 2011; Davenport, Mueller and Johnston, 2005; della Porta and Fillieule, 2006; Deng and O'Brien, 2013; Kurtz and Smithey, 2018; Rafail, 2010), our initial hypothesis was that only activities related to actions such as protests were likely to be repressed. However, the 14 interviews conducted in 2021 with community-based organizations (CO) that have experienced repression show that all of their political activities and their implementation are repressed or controlled in one way or another, by one or more actors in a position of power. Our results also highlight that the forms of repression and control experienced by community-based organizations are often difficult to identify because they sometimes occur outside formal control mechanisms. In this article, we demonstrate that informal control and informal repression (to a lesser extent) hinder the advocacy work of community-based organizations. Informal control strategies thus have direct and indirect effects on political action, even when they appear to be a form of soft repression. These findings are all the more relevant as they highlight the significant effects of control and its informal dimension on marginalized people when they mobilize.

Our contribution, therefore, operates on three levels: it contributes to defining an aspect of repression and control that has been relatively unexplored in the scientific literature, namely informality. It extends the analytical questions related to repression to groups that are more institutionalized and composed of marginalized populations than those generally considered in the literature on social movements. Finally, it highlights the intersecting effects of repression and control practices, emphasizing their cumulative effect link to the actors involved, to different modalities—informal and formal—and to the way groups received them.

2. Beyond Formal Repression

Since the classic definitions of repression (Oberschall, 1973, Tilly, 1978), several others have helped to understand repression as a field on its own in social movements studies. Beyond the severity of repression from soft to brutal (Almeida, 2008; Boykoff, 2006; della Porta and Fillieule, 2006; Dupuis-Déri, 2006, 2013; Di Ronco, 2025; Ferree, 2004; Rafail, 2010; Wood 2014), repression and control have other characteristics that distinguish one form from another. Among the key definitions, Jennifer Earl theorizes repression based on three dimensions: the identity of the repressive agent, the repressive nature of the action, and whether or

not the repression can be observed (Earl, 2003). For example, Earl contrasts channeling with coercion, which corresponds more to the visible use of force, mainly by the police, private agents, and the army. Channeling is an example of the nature of repression, where protest activity is redirected towards something else (Jenkins and Eckert, 1986; Oberschall, 1973; Tilly, 1978).

In parallel, the term soft repression is now widely used to encompass forms of repression that do not involve physical violence or coercion. Depending on the definition, it is presented as a category comprising subtle (Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020) or non-violent (Ferree, 2004) forms of repression that aim to limit and exclude certain ideas and groups from the public and media sphere. It includes discursive strategies aimed at repressing or controlling, as well as techniques that channel protest actions in new directions (Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020; Ellefsen and Jämte, 2023). While Ferree's initial definition focused on ridicule, stigma, and silencing, others have added stigmatization and labelling (Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020), police infiltration, undercover policing, state and municipal regulations, undermining organizations' finances, and more (Fallon *et al.*, 2018; García, 2014; Ellefsen and Jämte, 2023).

From this shift in perspective emerged a series of conceptual proposals aimed at accounting for the multitude of repressive and controlling practices over political action, the numerous actors who implement them, and their various possible effects.

For example, the concepts of “quiet repression” (Talpin, 2016) and “indirect repression” (Codaccioni, 2019) seem tailor-made to capture the experiences of more institutionalized groups, such as community-based organizations as we know them in Quebec. “Quiet repression” makes it possible to grasp different practices affecting activists by withdrawing or limiting the material resources granted to groups, by individualizing certain group issues and by declassifying certain key group members. This proposal is one of the few in the available literature to have been specifically designed to name the experience of associations in France, comparable to some extent to community-based organizations in Quebec and elsewhere. The concept of indirect repression (Codaccioni, 2019) refers to various forms of action that aim at weakening the strength of a movement. The tactics used can target individuals, specific groups, a movement in general, or a mix of these scales of intervention. The term indirect refers to modes of repression that are not frontal or made in open confrontation.

By proposing to take into account “informal repression,” as defined in detail in the following section, we are aligning our work with these efforts to highlight the multiple dimensions of repression and control, as well as their multiple effects.

Thus, other proposals also make it possible to measure the effects of repression, through the level of demobilization produced (Boyckoff, 2006; Earl, 2011; Kurtz and Smithey, 2018; Peña *et al.*, 2023; Wood, 2014), the chilling effect, or by the opposite effect of boosting mobilization (Almeida, 2008; Honari, 2018; McAdam, 1990). The main studies addressing the effects of repression do so in three main ways. First and foremost, studies demonstrate that political repression and control are demobilizing (Boyckoff, 2006; Earl and Soule, 2010; Ellefsen, 2021; Kurtz and Smithey, 2018; Wood, 2014). Others instead emphasize the curvilinear effects of repression, indicating that repression may initially have deterrent effects, followed by mobilizing effects (Brockett, 2005; Khawaja, 1993; Opp, 1994). Similarly, the literature documents radicalization and a shift in focus, particularly toward activism against repression (Almeida, 2008; Carrier-Plante, 2018; Earl, 2003; Honari, 2018; McAdam, 1990; McAdam *et al.*, 2001; O'Brien and Deng, 2015).

If the practices of indirect or quiet control and repression are still very little conceptualized, their specific effects are even less so. The few research projects based on these concepts mainly point to the demobilizing, chilling and complexifying effects of subsequent political action (Codaccioni, 2019; Talpin, 2016). In this sense, the present article makes a direct contribution to documenting the effects of informal control and repression of political activity.

3. Informality as a Conceptual Frame

As in other disciplines such as economics, anthropology, political science, and urban studies (Bherer *et al.*, 2023; Boudreau, 2017; Hart, 1973), informality here refers to actions that bypass official practices. Because it occurs outside the sanctioned framework, interaction is particularly important in creating informal action, unlike sanctioned action, which may be more procedural. Although it may occur outside official regulations, informality is directly linked to the formalized dimension, with the two complementing each other to achieve the goals of individuals and entities in positions of power (Boudreau *et al.*, 2016).

Informality, applied to repression and control, indicates whether repression takes place within a standardized and sanctioned framework or whether it is exercised outside the regulations, and therefore without accountability or official traceability.

Although the idea of informality may overlap with certain concepts found in the literature, informality is not limited to channelling (Jenkins and Eckert, 1986), quiet repression (Talpin, 2016), or indirect repression (Codaccioni, 2019). Channeling is similar to part of the informality we theorize in that it limits the choices of action available to groups through indirect tactics, such as the tax restrictions on non-profit groups Earl is exemplifying in her own research (2003). Several informal tactics are also difficult to demonstrate, just as channelling is (Oberschall, 1973; Tilly, 1978). Nevertheless, informal repression and control describe another dimension of repression than the three theorized by Earl (2003).

Thus, informal control can be discreet, as a police officer insulting a protester gratuitously to demean and intimidate them, or as overt and public as a lawyer using certain tactics and language to discredit an activist during a trial, even though court pleadings are highly regulated. Insults and denigration are sometimes done very openly within an official setting, without constituting a formal procedure. In this sense, informality can be combined with formal procedures, or it can be used on its own.

Informality distinguishes itself from soft repression in that informal repression may take the shape of police brutality and coercion if it is not operated under formal procedures.

Thinking of formality/informality in those terms makes it also possible to account for the multiplicity of forms of control and repression that can be experienced within a single situation. For example, a group may be compelled to submit successive, extremely detailed reports, thus limiting the time available to fulfill its mission (formal control), while also being subject to informal control through unscheduled telephone interviews with donors (public or private) who question their political actions. Finally, considering the formal dimension of repression and control avoids assuming the gravity of the form of repression or its associated effects, adding nuances, for example, to the usual consideration of soft repression as less harmful than physical one.

4. The Community Organizing Movement in Quebec

Influenced at its beginning by community-based organizing models from the Settlement Houses and models derived from the United States of America, such as the Alinsky model, community-based organizations in Quebec found their roots in recreational options for youth and grassroots mobilizations to improve everyday life conditions (Bourque *et al.*, 2008; Lamoureux, 2010). The community-based organizations, called autonomous community organizations in Quebec, particularly flourished between 1970 and 1985 (Jetté, 2017). Influenced simultaneously by the Catholic Church and communist ideologies, this sector gradually became institutionalized from the 1970s onwards, while retaining its independence from public health and social services (Dufour, 2019).

Nowadays, Quebec's community-based organizations comprise thousands of organizations that share a common goal of promoting popular education, providing individual services, and advocating for both individual and collective interests. While adopting an intersectional lens, organizations are often structured around a primary social issue, such as illiteracy, domestic violence, homelessness, housing, poverty, or social welfare, among others. Nevertheless, not all of them engage in collective and political action. The autonomous community action sector, whose mission includes the collective defense of social rights, comprises more than 350 organizations (RODCD, 2024). All of them operate with paid employees as well as volunteers and activists. Although their mandate may vary from one group to another, the status of employee implies fixed working hours during which the objective is to fulfill the organization's entire mandate (counseling and mobilization), to monitor the group's finances, to ensure the completion of its annual planning, and more. Volunteers and activists tend to focus on one or more specific tasks, often of their own choosing, such as involvement in a mobilization committee.

Community-based organizations' autonomy is more ambiguous than it was at its beginning. They are now considered institutionalized in that they benefit from low but regular state funding and irregular private funding, while technically remaining independent from public services. In this sense, these organizations differ from international models, such as the United States, where private funding is more common, or the French one, where funding is public, but with far fewer opportunities for political action. In Quebec, although a significant part of their mandate relates to individual counseling, community-based organizations also accomplish substantial political work. Following its formal recognition in 2001 with the adoption of a policy testifying to this sector's autonomy and specificity from the State, while also framing many aspects of their relations, including funding (Gouvernement du Québec, 2001), most research on the subject highlights the virtuous circle of cooperation-conflict that community-based actors have developed with the Quebec government (White *et al.*, 2008). This dynamic technically allows community-based organizations to be recognized as experts in their sectors of intervention, to be involved in public decisions and their implementation, while having the capacity to create a balance of power with the institutions in order to contribute to social movement activities (Bergeron-Gaudin, 2017).

Following the many restructuring measures, the constant search for funds by the community-based organizing sector has become even more precarious, making them turn massively to private foundations (Alalouf-Hall *et al.*, 2022). Dependence on both public and private funds is leading the community-based sector to accept shorter-term financing with greater demands for statistical results, which is at odds with the more qualitative and process-oriented paradigm at the heart of this sector. This tendency also leads to bigger funding of individual services over collective advocacy, thus influencing organizations' programs.

Community-based organizations' financial dependence is often associated with a risk of co-optation and depoliticization. Hence, some research empirically studied how this dependence or how the cooperation-conflict dynamic can concretely impact community advocacy work (Bellot *et al.*, 2013a; Paumier, 2022; Leboucher, 2023). We propose to open this black box by taking a slightly different angle of analysis, that of the forms of informal repression and control experienced by community-based organizations when mobilizing. Beyond the relevance of the Quebec case study in answering local questions, it broadens the current theoretical debate on forms of repression beyond physical violence, whose effects on organizations are still little known. Our research thus contributes to this need for literature by demonstrating the very effects of low-key, discrete, informal control and repression (Davenport, 2007; Davenport and Inman, 2012; Earl, 2011; Earl and Soule, 2010; Johnston, 2012).

5. Method

This article is part of a broader research on the effects of political repression on activist and community-based organizing groups defending social rights. Recruitment was based on available data on groups that have been victims of political repression, as well as through a call for participation targeting specific groups.

From this recruitment, 14 semi-structured interviews were carried out in the summer of 2021, specifically with community-based organizations: 13 of them were carried out only with one or two employees of the organization and only one was carried out with a member of the organization, accompanied by a staff member. The groups come from six different regions of Quebec. The following table presents each organization's core mandate, scale of action and number of years of existence.

Table 1 – The formality/informality of control and repression practices

<i>Groups</i> <i>Local (L)</i> <i>Regional (R)</i> <i>National (N)</i>	<i>Localisation in</i> <i>Quebec Province</i> <i>(Canada)</i>	<i>Years of</i> <i>existence</i>	<i>Main Issue of Intervention</i>
1 (N)	Kahnawà:ke	48	Indigenous and first nations women's rights
2 (R)	Quebec	41	Popular education, poverty
3 (N)	Montreal	42	Social welfare
4 (R)	Outaouais	49	Popular education
5 (N)	Montreal	40	Environment
6 (N)	Montreal	48	Homelessness
7 (R)	Estrie	48	Popular education
8 (N)	Montreal	22	Immigration, work
9 (L)	Quebec	28	Human rights
10 (L)	Gaspésie	7	Environment
11 (L)	Quebec	46	Civil rights and local mobilization
12 (N)	Montreal	44	Housing
13 (N)	Montreal	51	Environment
14 (R)	Montreal	59	Human rights

Seven of the groups have a mission at the provincial level throughout Quebec, while four are involved in a specific region and three are at the local level. The diversity of scales of actions and fields of practice

adequately testifies to the variety of issues addressed by the community-based organizing sector. It should also be noted that these groups address other issues from an intersectional perspective, both in relation to their mission and thanks to various solidarity networks with the community, union and activist sectors.

Although other data, such as the annual budget available to the groups or their membership, could have been relevant to provide a more detailed picture, there are two reasons why we have decided not to include them. First, this information would make it too easy to identify the groups, thereby breaching the confidentiality clauses signed with them. Second, given the precarious nature of this sector, both budgets and employee numbers vary greatly. For example, at the time of the interviews, two-thirds of the groups had fewer than five employees. The others had less than 15. But depending on funding, which can vary considerably from year to year, the number of employees can decrease or increase by half. To save money, some employees also switch to a part-time schedule, and since burnout is a common problem in this sector, the number of people at work fluctuates. Finally, organizations may also rely on interns, activists, and volunteers.

The groups interviewed are at the heart of Quebec's community-based sector. They are a national reference in terms of expertise, political and media representation, and initiate, or at least participate in, the vast majority of political actions carried out by this sector. Eleven of the 14 groups surveyed are regional or national organizations, meaning they each represent dozens of community-based organizations. In this sense, although the number of interviews is limited, the analysis provided by the groups surveyed paints a reliable picture of the experiences of community-based organizations in Quebec.

In order to put the voice of the people targeted by the control of political action at the heart of this research, a thematic analysis was carried out through NVivo software (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The analysis was done both inductively and deductively. Some basic nodes, such as “repression”, “police”, “psychological effect” or “effect on the group” were created from the outset. Leaving room for inductivity in the coding of the interviews also enabled us to go beyond these more obvious categories that the sociology of social movements and repression provides us with, to add nodes such as “donors”, “attack on dignity” or “compromise the mission of the organization”.

5. The Multiple Forms of Repression and Control and Their Limiting Effects on the Political Actions of Community Organizations

The data collected from community-based organizations allowed us to address two main topics: the experience of repression or control and its effects. From these categories emerge more specific elements, enabling us to provide a picture of the political activity of community-based organization groups in Quebec, the different strategies of control experienced, the actors of this repression and the effects of the latter.

5.1 Forms of control and repression

Following interviews, we identified 19 types of repression or control of the political activities of community-based organizations. For almost each of them, we were able to identify formal and informal variations found in the interviews. Two entries in the table lack a formal example, as none emerged from the conducted interviews, but variations might be identified in subsequent research.

Table 2 - The formality/informality of control and repression practices

<i>Control and repressive practices</i>	<i>Example of formality</i>	<i>Example of informality</i>
Arrest	During a dispatch, a police officer is ordered to make arrests.	Detaining a person without stating the reason and without formal arrest.
Surveillance of individuals	Undercover police work	Police officers decide to visit an organizer at their home in the days leading up to a publicized action.
Surveillance of the group	Police informer	Police always know places of gathering, even though they were never informed.
Harassment	While atypical, a funder investigates for weeks a group to verify that it is fulfilling its mandate, counting the number of pamphlets created, etc.	Although it is not a funding criterion, one funder continuously suggests changing the organizational structure of the group.
Cuts in services or funding	Withdraw funding for legal reasons, timed when the group is launching a controversial political.	Withdrawing a group's municipal office without explanation or official motives.
Police brutality	The police have orders to push back a line of protesters.	Police pushing activists without apparent order given to them.
Preventing an activity	Refusing to hold an event because a form was filled out incorrectly.	Preventing an event from taking place under false pretenses.
Disproportionate request for information	Requiring information, on an official form, that is impossible to provide, such as the number of participants to a demo.	A journalist questions an organizer about their political beliefs when the interview is about a campaign by the group.
Harmful re-representation	As part of a communication campaign, police warns that protesters are dangerous on local radio.	A mayor describes the collective defense of rights as dangerous.
Police fine	Police fine for an alternative reason than activism.	Police fine even if the action is legal.
Negative coverage	The media constantly portrays activists in a negative light.	Without it being a communication strategy, questions to community groups are always phrased in the negative.
Using invalid regulations	Using a regulation while not knowing it was just invalidated.	Use of made-up regulations to justify intervention.
Disproportionate use of resources	Helicopters, federal police and child services are called on indigenous activists defending an unceded land.	Months of investigation from a foundation targets a group considered too political, while it isn't a criterion of exclusion.
Threat	Warning of shutting down a gathering of thousands of people if a single illegal act is committed.	A political attaché informally threatens to cut funding if it does not stop its campaign against the interests of the ministry.
Intimidation	Intimidation, as an official tactic, during an official police interrogation.	The prosecutor intimidates the organizer to confuse them in their response.
Selective facilitation	Tactic used by the police	A funder implies being uneasy financing a group aligned with certain associations.
Value judgment	A newspaper reports an organizer's personal life, discrediting the group's campaign.	In his closing arguments, the prosecutor inserts value judgments.
Inability to get media coverage	Not supposed to be formal.	Media continuously silencing group actions.
Ridicule	Not supposed to be formal.	A politician ridicules a cause.

This table was designed to highlight the fluid nature of each form of repression and control. Rather than attempting to classify practices as either formal or informal, our research shows that they can all be regulated and sanctioned by a formal framework or perpetrated informally, without any accountability mechanism. Informal control can take the form of both action and discourse. Physical practices refer, for example, to injuring a person, confiscating or breaking equipment. Many banners, which groups take hours to create, are taken by security services and police during actions for no official reason. The interviews also reveal informal control exercised through discourse, for example, when an elected representative ridicules a group's mission, or through the judgments made by a financial partner when renewing the group's funding.

Many of the elements generally associated with informality relate to norms and culture. Such is the case with a columnist's depiction of the group's dangerousness, or a leaflet that the police distribute to the population, warning of the potential danger of an upcoming action.

This table also takes into account several informal practices introduced in very formal situations, particularly those related to administrative regulations. This is a particularly important category for groups that have some forms of institutionalization, depending, for example, on public and private funding, having a bank account or renting municipal office space. Control is achieved here through threats, intrusive investigations, value judgment and excessive accountability, thus going beyond what is formalized as official procedures.

While some forms of control are more attributable to one actor than another, the majority of them can be carried out by more than one actor in a position of power. Our interviews document the actions of six main types of actors towards politically active community-based organizations. The control practices identified can be carried out by various police services, ranging from the municipal to the federal level. Forms of control carried out by governmental bodies have also been documented at the municipal, provincial and federal levels. Elected officials at various levels of government constitute a distinct category in that their privileged access to the media and their decision-making power may be used for specific repressive purposes, such as intimidation and ridicule. The media and the judicial system may also participate in control practices. Finally, funders, both public and private, constitute the last category of actors who can control the mobilization of community-based organizations. Digital repression was not addressed by the groups interviewed, as their online activities are limited, particularly due to their target audience. It should also be mentioned that although forms of control exist within community organizations (Dussault, 2025; Petitjean and Talpin, 2022), respondents did not mention that they had an impact on collective action.

The following list shows the different elements controlled when community-based organizations accomplish what they consider a political action :

List 1 - Community-based organizations' practices that have been controlled (N=14)

1. Postering
2. Leafleting
3. Providing training
4. Reading circle, workshop-discussion
5. Demonstration
6. Occupation, blockade
7. Gathering in public spaces
8. Artistic action or artistic activity
9. Legal procedures
10. Press conference, media interview
11. Publishing a journal or a report

12. Open letter, petition
13. Presence at the board of directors or committee
14. Meeting an elected official or decision-maker

Finally, 46 effects of these control practices were documented, here classified in six categories:

Table 3 - Effects of control and repressive practices (N=46)

<i>Precarization of subsequent political activity</i>	<i>Psychological and socio-affective</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modifies or stops a type of action - Stops a group's activities - Depoliticizes a group's actions - Changes an individual's involvement - Requires expertise to participate in actions - The most vulnerable no longer participate - Demobilization, loss of interest - Difficulty reacting - Difficulty returning to action - No longer willing to manage events - Distancing the group from the logic of community-based organization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frustration - Anger - Powerlessness - Exhaustion - Depression - Paranoia - Fear - Loss of sense of security - Trauma - Drug use and self-medication - Affects dignity - Affects empowerment - Affects sense of belonging - Affects the need for recognition
<i>Physical, legal and material effects</i>	<i>Social representations</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Action impeded - Physical injury - Break of equipment - Loss of employment - Financial effects - Judicialization - Legal action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Media exposure - Fuels discrimination - Representation of dangerousness associated with the group - Negative representation reproduced in public space
<i>Internalization of norms</i>	<i>Intensifies commitment and mobilization</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Normalizes control - Raises control tolerance threshold - Integrates the arguments and practices of people in a position of power - In-group conflict - Conflict between groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creates new knowledge - Creates new workshops or trainings - Creates new practices - Member-to-member support - Increases safety culture

These effects can be experienced by an activist in the community organization, by an employee, or they can affect the group's ability to fulfill its mandate. Although some effects target a specific category of actors more than others—for example, "No longer willing to manage events" applies more to employees—most of these effects are experienced by activists, employees, and the group in general. For example, fear or paranoia can be felt by an individual, but also collectively, and ultimately affect the group's ability to pursue its mission.

The effects are also difficult to relate to a single type of control or repression, to a single moment or to a single actor. The effects of repression and control are the result of the complex experience of moments when several forms of control are at play simultaneously, often from multiple actors. This accumulation of experiences of control and repression then creates many effects, which makes it difficult to analyze separately.

Adding a focus on the informality/formality of repressive and control practices makes it possible to situate several forms of control that are otherwise given very little consideration, such as excessive accountability procedures. It also highlights that informal control practices may interfere with highly formal procedures and affect the course of events, for example, during a trial or accountability to a donor. Finally, considering the formality of control practices as a dimension highlights the fact that one type of control does not always unfold in the same way. Rather than seeing controls as fixed, with a precise *modus operandi*, taking into account the level of formality enables us to consider the adaptability of repression to different contexts, actors and situations.

If we take the example of a class action brought by a group to challenge a regulation deemed unconstitutional, where the formality of the court of law is *a priori* obvious, participants told us that prosecutors referred to representations stigmatizing the group and, more generally, political action. Humiliation and the use of value judgments to discredit activists were also used as informal control in this very official setting. Regardless of the prosecutor's intentionality, this type of remark by a person in authority can have many of the effects listed above.

The following section analyzes the main findings of our research, centered on the conclusion that informal/formal repression and control practices lead to a limitation of community-based organizations' political actions, especially for the most marginalized people and groups.

5.2 Analysis: The limitations of Political Actions

This section discusses the effects of informal practices of repression and control on community-based organizations' activists, on paid organizers, and then on the organizations themselves. The following subsection highlights the effects of informal control on activists of community-based organizations, focusing on the intersection of psychological and socio-affective effects, the precariousness of subsequent action and the impact on social representations.

The effects of the informality of control on individual

Many of the psychological and socio-emotional effects of forms of control and repressive practices on individuals are already well documented in the scientific literature that focuses on traditional activist groups, such as those in the student, anti-capitalist, and environmental movements (CPRP, 2016; Dupuis-Déri, 2013; Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020; Peña *et al.*, 2023; Wood, 2014). In particular, there are effects such as depression, exhaustion and emotions such as anger and fear. These effects are also found in more institutionalized groups, such as those involved in community-based organizing.

Furthermore, the usual profile of people active in community-based organizations adds a factor of vulnerability to the latter and tends to increase the time required to process these various socio-emotional and psychological effects. For example, members of a housing committee were stopped, informally, by the police while posterizing for their campaign about the rent increase:

Even though posterizing is legal, the police were saying it isn't. That's why we weren't fined, but the participants were still traumatized. The police intervened quite firmly. [...] Housing committee members are often vulnerable, poorly housed, with low incomes. They have sometimes

experienced profiling in the past. They can quickly become tense when the police are around. Since then, we have to plan our activities around this fear. (Group 12, 2021)

Four other testimonials reported similar situations of informal police control. Being generally socially excluded and marginalized, these additional attacks on participants are part of a long series of control practices and exclusion. One might think that informal control and repression leave fewer traces, whereas this is not automatically true. A single insult, shove or ridicule can have decisive effects on a militant trajectory.

Getting involved in a community-based organization is a way to take back control of one's life and take action on social issues that affect the daily lives of those most affected by them (Mercier and Bourque, 2021; Parazelli, Campeau and Gaudreau, 2018). However, the different modes of control and repression of organizations' actions, whether it is the publication of an open letter or an occupation of the offices of provincial elected officials, counter the process of collectivization and regaining power over one's life, which is at the heart of community-based organizations' mission.

The data collected makes it possible to highlight the presence of effects impairing the agency, dignity, sense of belonging and the need for recognition of community-based members. We explain the importance of these effects in community-based organizations because of the profile they tend to attract. Whether it's an issue of literacy, food security or a problem with welfare, most members start their involvement to solve a pressing problem linked to their precarious situation. Engagement in the political and collective component is generally gradual. Through their engagement, the network they create and the knowledge they are initiated to, people respond to their needs by collectivizing their experience and developing another perspective on what is socially problematic (Bellot *et al.*, 2013b; Bourque *et al.*, 2008). Through popular education and the collectivization of experiences, people have a better understanding of the structural component at the root of the problems encountered. However, the control and repression they experience can affect this process:

So what is left for us to make ourselves heard by politicians? Our members are elderly, there are abilities that we don't have anymore, and our group, anyway, is peaceful. What we want is to deliver a message. The fact that we stand up for our rights is the problem. We should stay, watch, endure, accept and do nothing. How can we live in a society where we can't do anything? When I started to organize with others, I thought I could finally express myself, but every time I do, I'm repressed. It's not just physical violence, it's mental. (Gr. 3, 2021)

As this interview excerpt emphasizes, repression and control do not always need to be salient and physical to hurt. The attack on dignity is largely carried out through informal control practices. Because they are in a vulnerable situation, the process that people undertake to transform their lives can easily be invalidated through a denigrating comment from police officers who see people openly displaying their welfare status or through a journalistic columnist who publishes contemptuous opinions about people who have to live in encampments and who politicize the situation by linking it to the housing crisis.

Norms and social status influence how control is exercised and the resulting effects. Individuals facing mobility challenges, mental health issues, legal status concerns, or those more likely to be targets of racial, gender, or social profiling appear particularly vulnerable to these impacts. Although community-based organizations are intended to be welcoming spaces where people can, both individually and collectively, regain control over their situation and the social dynamics that position them in subordinate roles, these effects persist. A group advocating for indigenous women's rights highlighted the role of colonialism and racism in how

informal and formal repression are enacted against them, as well as the legal actions taken against them: “It’s a reminder to stay quiet, that despite our convictions, we shouldn’t be active” (Group 1, 2021).

Insults, in addition to other forms of informal control and repression, ultimately inhibit the empowerment process of members, affecting their self-perception and potentially demotivating them. Literature already underlines the negative effect of dismissive comments, misinformation, and value judgments expressed on public opinion of activism of radical groups and on specific populations such as women (Boyckoff, 2006; Earl, 2011; Ferree, 2004; Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020). Our research furthermore shows that in the longer term and in a more diffuse way, it also reinforces negative representations of already marginalized populations. While images of dangerousness and the discourse on the irrationality of collective action still largely affect the perception of social movements, focusing on the action of groups at the bottom of the social ladder also demonstrates that the actors of control reinforce stigmatizing and marginalizing representations of populations that mobilize precisely to deconstruct the structures that place them in this position (Chicoine-Mackenzie *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, these repressive practices contribute to maintaining the social order that places vulnerable populations in a position of powerlessness and silence. These effects do not just occur when a member directly experiences a situation of control or repression. They also manifest themselves indirectly, when someone witnesses it, when another member reports a situation, and even when another group’s experience comes to their attention.

These cumulative effects, which are mentioned in the majority of the testimonies received for this study, indicate that informal control and repression experienced affects the dignity and agency of the participants who mobilize to defend their rights. Participants, therefore, experience consequences that affect their relationship to society and their inclusion in the public and political space. The peculiarity of informal control and repression’s effect is that, because they are not carried out officially, people often struggle to identify what is causing their discomfort, or even to find their distress legitimate. In doing so, people who are often already vulnerable are made even more so.

Effects of informality on paid staff of community-based organizations

Contrary to what is generally discussed in the literature on classical political repression, which gives no or little mention of the status of the people targeted, we have noted effects of informal control and repression on the organizers of community-based organizations.

The many forms of control and repression exercised over community-based organizations, and especially their accumulation over time, have the effect of exhausting and disengaging their paid organizers. For example, dealing with the effects on participants takes up a significant amount of time in the months, even years, following a single event of repression.

The organizers interviewed emphasize the time and energy required to support members in managing the psychological and emotional effects of repression and control. Discussion forums need to be set up, training courses are usually provided and informative publications are usually produced to educate the public about control and its effects. Although they find this part of their work important, their schedule rarely allows for the time suddenly needed to vent and process, therefore adding to the organizers’ mental load and workload.

As documented in other contexts (O'Brien and Deng, 2015), groups, and especially paid organizers in community-based organizations, have to coordinate the reconsideration of the strategies available to them. These effects of control and repression add to the already busy schedule of organizers. The time and resources needed to rethink the approach to collective action are often lacking. In addition, changing the way one acts politically is not so easy. The repertoire of collective action (Tilly, 1995) available to groups is limited and generally does not adapt as quickly as what is experienced on the ground. Faced with all these obstacles, the perception of the possibility of action (Meyer, 2004) often becomes difficult to grasp.

Employees are also responsible for handling any charges or infringement notices issued to members or to the group. The same is true of the legal steps taken by certain groups to invalidate regulations considered unconstitutional. All these steps exhaust employees who no longer have the time, human or financial resources for these procedures. For them, demobilization may result in refusing to take charge of actions again. In other words, the costs of actions, which are all in all banal and generally legal, become too great for the action to seem worthwhile (Giugni, 2008; McAdam and Wiltfang, 1991; Tilly, 1978).

Effects of control informality on organizations

By observing formalized groups such as community-based organizations, it becomes possible to document the issue of harassment in an alternative way. Harassment can stem from funders targeting groups whose boards of directors include activists and employee representatives, especially if representatives from private companies are not involved. This situation also applies to organizations that operate with co-management or self-management structures. These models of participatory management and peer governance align closely with the values of the community-based sector, which prioritize citizen participation and the expertise of individuals directly affected by the issues the group addresses. Although governance structures are not formally evaluated with official criteria, several groups reported being repeatedly questioned about the relevance of their model. The same groups are often asked to modify their decision-making processes and submit supporting documents. Since these requests lack clear guidelines from funders, the persistent demands are seen as a form of harassment rooted in value judgments. As a result, groups feel pressured to produce explanatory documents about their operations, to hold intersectoral meetings on the topic with other organizations, and they fear that future funding might be cut or the amount granted could be unofficially influenced because of their management model.

As much as the fear of being listened to and the fear of being infiltrated are very present in networks of ecological or far-left struggles (Earl, 2003; Starr *et al.*, 2008), these types of fear are uncommon in the community-based organizing sector. Here, the fear of reprisals focuses more on budget cuts from funding instances:

Someone in a government department told a group during a break in an official meeting that if they continued their campaign, they would lose their funding. It's not done officially, but you have to listen to it, and then those who hear the story get suspicious too. (Group 5, 2021)

Whether endorsing an open letter, marching with other groups for a cause—even if it falls within the group's mandate—or holding a workshop on a topic such as tax havens and their impact on the financing of public

services, all the groups interviewed expressed concerns about backlash from public and private funders who do not support these ideas or actions, fearing potential financial consequences. While the literature identifies the isolation of radical groups as an effect of repression (Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020), these results highlight that isolation can extend to less subversive groups seeking to continue collective rights advocacy.

One of the main consequences of control and repression, formal or not, is that it derails the mission of groups. Having to spend time on the care of activists and employees affects the annual planning of groups. Furthermore, campaigns that were initially planned often become difficult to carry out (Codaccione, 2019; Talpin, 2016). People lack motivation and are afraid, while adding legal processes and forms of protest against repression to their agenda. As a result, the core issues that the group works on are inhibited by the time required to deal with the effects of control and repression.

For groups engaged in social rights advocacy, our findings are alarming. Taking into account the temporality of effects, our study shows that strategies to control political activity have short- and long-term consequences that affect individuals, their groups, and the causes they support.

6. Conclusion

The goal of this article is to document the formal and informal control and repressive practices of political activity in order to analyze their effects on community-based organizations. By focusing on the controlling and repressive practices experienced by actors who are mostly institutionalized, it has been possible to draw a dense, complex and multifaceted portrait of the control of political action. In particular, the data and analysis in this article contribute to the existing literature by capturing another facet of control and enforcement, that of informality. The data collected also provides information on the multiplicity of repressive actors, beyond the police. Finally, the article reiterates the importance of the most documented effects of repression, in addition to highlighting other effects, particularly on vulnerable populations and the mission of groups. Our analysis shows that community-based organizations involved in collective action are particularly prone to the informal nature of control over political actions, especially when they work with and for marginalized groups.

The point of considering informality as a dimension of repression and control is to emphasize that practices aiming to limit political activity are not always sanctioned by a legitimate authority. Even if they are visible, as can be the case with police brutality, they are not necessarily done officially. Similarly, this variation makes it possible to account for the complexity of the control of political activity. A single political action can be the target of several control and repressive practices, some formal, others not. This superimposition of control/repression by one or more actors, in addition to the formality/informality dimension of each of the acts committed against them, underlines the difficulty of grasping what can be contested, what is legal and what is not, or even the objective level of risk of social protest. The multiplicity of repressive actions intertwines to create complex effects (Bosi, 2016; Ellefson and Jämte, 2023). Also, by focusing on groups that are not labelled or self-defined as radicals, our study demonstrates the weight of control over political activity for different social and political groups, including partially institutionalized organizations. Control and repression are characterized by more or less stable and contextual configurations of both formal and informal practices, which are important to understand to account for their individual and collective effects.

Because the community-based organizing sector is largely composed of vulnerable people, repression has particularly important effects on their place in society. By experiencing forms of control during the moments

they speak out and occupy public space, the process of regaining power over their lives, their need for recognition and their sense of dignity can be affected, even if the repression may seem minor. Addressing these effects of repression and control, in addition to legal and organizational issues, requires time and energy from groups and their employees. Taken together, repression and control have the effect of taking groups out of their advocacy role, at least partially. Furthermore, these data raise questions about the very space left for protest in contemporary societies. If community-based organizations are less and less able to defend the collective rights of marginalized groups, who will?

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