

Leadership, Organizational, and Institutional Studies: Reconciling and Teaching Competing Perspectives

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Abstract

Leadership, organizational, and institutional theories provide competing explanations on the nature of leadership and role of leaders. Part of the problem is that each theory is often studied in isolation, leading to incomplete perspectives on the essence of leadership in value-driven contexts. A holistic paradigm that blends the three dominant models for understanding the work of the collective is warranted and necessary to optimize organizational outcomes. This article briefly highlights the contributions and limitations of each frame and provides an overview of complexity theory as a model for reconciling major differences. The paper provides specific perspectives, practices, and metaphors for navigating the collective to bring about desired outcomes.

Managers are imprisoned only to the degree that their palette of ideas is impoverished.

Bolman and Deal (1991, p. 4)

There is nothing so practical as a good theory.

(Lewin, 1951)

Introduction

The impetus of this paper was a series of conversations with a dean of a school of business who shared that business people do not pay much attention to institutional theory and leadership studies. The reason for the latter was because organizations emerge to manage the collective, hence there is no need for a leader, at least one as being romanticized in the leadership studies field (Bligh, Kohles, and Pillai, 2011). Formal policies and procedures routinize behavior such that organizations are more managed than led. The reasons cited for business dismissing institutional theory was similar, but a bit more nuanced. While acknowledging that values and norms influence the collective, the depth and breadth of influence of competing values are minimal in the private sector in contrast to the public sector, and even in the public sector the norms are still codified in policies and procedures. The plethora of formal and informal values and norms provide the parameters of what an administrator can and cannot do in the public sector, hence limiting a leader's ability to lead.

Whether realizing it or not, the dean was making the distinction that in the private sector there are organizational managers and in the public sector there are institutional administrators.

As a result, the concept of leadership is an artificial and misleading construct. While it might be easy to dismiss the dean as “old-school”, there are elements of truth to his observations. At the same time, how is it that some formal managers and administrators perform better than others? Could they be bringing a leadership element to the organization and institution not typically accounted for in their corresponding professional field of study?

Organizational, institutional, and leadership theories are often treated and studied as three separate and independent paradigms to explain and prescribe collective activity. The study and practice of each theory in isolation leads to incomplete perspectives on the essence of leadership in the value-rich and value-driven contexts in which leadership takes place. Change efforts are short-sighted or sabotaged in early implementation when they are anchored in one field of study at the expense of other fields. A perusal of separate organizational, institutional, and leadership genre reveals that minimal, if any, attention is devoted to reconciling the three models that independently make insightful and, yet, often contradictory claims about collective behavior. This article highlights the advantages and limitations of each theory and discusses how complexity theory provides a comprehensive model for optimizing collective behavior that integrates insights from leadership and organizational studies and institutional theory.

This article encourages emerging and established leaders to expand their frames of reference to include lessons from leadership, organizational, institutional, and complexity theories. Harter (2012) documents the power and utility of students of leadership to blend various points of view. Both organizational and institutional theories suggest that leadership does not, and cannot, make a substantive difference in organized and institutionalized environments (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). While organizational theories tend to treat collectives as rational entities operating according to clearly stated goals and processes, institutional theories treat collectives as entities operating according to dominant stories and myths (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). In organizational theory, leadership is often reduced to the equivalence of a manager who rationally coordinates processes and procedures. In institutional theory, leadership is often reduced to a ceremonial statesperson who makes the abstract messages of the institution tangible. For different reasons, both traditions are logically consistent and explicit in taking a less than optimistic view of leaders as agents who can maximize outcomes.

Simon (1997 [1945]) documented the limits organization imposes on leadership when he posited that the best leaders can do is to satisfice – “look for a course of action that is satisfactory or ‘good enough.’” (p. 119). Bennis (1989) captured this pessimistic perspective of organizational and institutional variables undermining a leader’s ability to lead in his book titled *Why Leaders Can’t Lead: The Unconscious Conspiracy Continues*. Bennis reported:

An unconscious conspiracy in contemporary society prevents leaders—no matter what their original vision—from taking charge and making changes. Within any organization, an entrenched bureaucracy with a commitment to the status quo undermines the unwary leader. To make matters worse, certain social forces—the increasing tension between individual rights and the common good, for example—discourage the emergence of leaders. (p. xii)

In contrast, leadership theories posit that leadership is indispensable and matters much, regardless of the organizational and institutional constraints. Leaders do make quantitative and qualitative differences in organizational and institutional performance. The positive perspective on leadership is evident by the fact that some leaders generate better results than others and are able to transform organizations and institutions when others have failed (Burns, 1978; Collins, 2001; Schein, 1992; Shoup, 2005).

A lack of understanding of organizational and institutional realities results in the false impression that leaders are omnipotent – able to accomplish whatever they want. A lack of understanding of established leadership theories and practices results in managers and administrators resigning to the status quo, creating the false impression that leaders are relatively powerless – making minimal contribution to the outcomes.

It appears that each theory represents at least one facet of all formal collective endeavors. The field of leadership studies captures how formal and informal leaders provide inspiration, focus, and direction. Organizational theory captures the formal roles and responsibilities and explicit rational aspects of any collective activity (Scott, 1998). Institutional theory captures the informal manner in which various roles and responsibilities are fulfilled and the implicit rational and non-rational aspects of any collective activity (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). While organizational and institutional theories explain the landscape in which leadership is exercised, leadership does not have to be conformed or limited to the contextual constraints. Complexity theory provides an integrated and comprehensive model for leadership that reveals the hidden architecture of adaptive systems. It functions as a frame of reference that attunes leaders to how and when organizational and institutional rules can be leveraged to bring about desired outcomes.

Leadership Studies

While people debate if the emerging field of leadership studies is an autonomous academic discipline, it does have the accouterments to make it look like a distinct and established professional area of study. Riggio (2011) made a cogent case that “leadership studies is an emerging discipline that will continue to grow and develop, and ultimately receive academic recognition” (p. 18). While scholars debate to what extent leadership studies has a 1) codified body of knowledge, 2) developed paradigm for framing the phenomenon, 3) primary method of inquiry, and 4) consensus by a community of scholars, Riggio demonstrates how leadership studies is on par with other established interdisciplinary soft sciences. Riggio tracked how the field of leadership studies is going through the “same sort of disciplinary emergence” that the field of public administration experienced (p. 15). A similar story and pattern took place in the establishment of organizational studies as a stand-alone and established multidisciplinary field of study (Porter, 1996). The fact that leadership studies now has several academic journals and professional associations reveals that the field of leadership studies meets the “hallmark of an academic discipline” (Riggio, 2011, p. 13).

As an established field of study, the discipline of leadership studies, for the most part, attributes organizational accomplishments to the group’s formal and informal leaders.

Such sentiment was expressed in Thomas Carlyle's observation that the history of the world is but the biography of great men (Carlyle, 1840, p. 15). In the seminal work that marks the birth of leadership studies, James MacGregor Burns, whom many consider the founder of leadership studies, also took a leader-centric approach in his book, *Transformational Leadership*, published in 1978. Through the study of different leaders, Burns developed the concept of transactional and transforming leadership. While Burns acknowledged that studying leadership was different than studying leaders, Burns attributed good leadership to good leaders.

When it comes to making things happen, Burns (1978) contrasted two types of leadership practices or interactions. Transactional leadership is limited to the "exchange of valued things" (p. 19). Transactional leaders create a *quid pro quo* bargaining environment. Ultimately people engage and perform the way they do because of what they will receive or avoid. The bond between the leader and the follower is conditional. Transforming leadership happens "when one or more persons *engage* with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (Burns, 1978, p. 20). The evidence of transforming leadership is when people engage above and beyond what is expected. There is almost a sacrificial element of service because of some transcendent bond of loyalty between the leader and the follower that develops as a result of specific leader practices and orientations.

Burns is not alone in putting the leader as the main agent for bringing about desired outcomes. Collins (2001) described Level 5 leaders ("an individual who blends extreme personal humility with intense professional will" p. 21) as a primary cause for companies moving from good to great. Greenleaf's (1991) model of servant leadership highlighted how the great leader is first a servant. Hersey and Blanchard's (1988) situational leadership model highlighted the different roles and styles leaders assume as a function of the nature of the people and task at hand. Each model takes a leader-centric perspective. While the field of leadership studies has matured to recognize the importance of followers, situations, timing, and context, the message is clear that some people succeed in optimizing organizational outcomes where others fail. A primary lesson from leadership studies is that leaders matter. The primary goal of leadership studies is to equip people with essential leadership perspectives and skills to optimize organizational and institutional outcomes.

Organizational Studies

The field of organizational studies as an academic discipline is a bit more mature than leadership studies. Fligstein (2001) argued that the scholarship on organizations emerged from the study of management control (Frederic Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management*, 1911), bureaucracies (Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1922), and economics of firms (Ronald Coase, *The Nature of the Firm*, 1937). The field of organizational studies is not as interdisciplinary as leadership studies, given most programs are housed in business schools (March, 2007). At the same time, March observed that the field incorporates multiple modes of inquiry and analysis.

The field of organizational studies is a large, heterogeneous field involving numerous enclaves having distinct styles, orientations and beliefs. It is integrated by neither a shared theory, nor by a shared perspective, nor even by a shared tolerance for multiple perspectives. It retains substantial intellectual, geographical and linguistic parochialism, with separate enclaves persisting in their own worlds of discourse and forming a common field only by a definition that overlooks the diversity. (pp. 9, 10)

The essence of organizational studies is that people organize to coordinate and streamline behaviors and decisions toward predetermined and specified goals as efficiently as possible. Early organizational studies focused on the bureaucracy, power and authority, and formal structures and processes necessary to streamline the work of the collective (Hall, 1999). Later studies emphasized human relations and open systems approaches that addressed the need for rational engagement with people and the environment to bring about organizational outcomes (Hall, 1999; Scott, 1998).

The reliance on rational and formal structures equips organizations to accomplish goals as efficiently as possible. The formal policies, procedures, and structures make organizations stable over time. This stability allows organizations to weather leadership transitions and endure bad leaders without failing in their mission. It is this same stability that minimizes the need for transformative leaders who inspire innovation. At a minimum, organizations need managers who ensure compliance to policies and procedures. In organizational theory, it is the formal systems that allow the collective to perform and achieve organizational outcomes.

Organizational scholars recognize that leaders are necessary and do make a difference, but hold a less romantic version of their influence and contribution to the collective outcomes than leadership scholars. A primary lesson from organizational studies is that good policy, procedures, and systems matter the most. The primary goal of organizational studies is to develop best practices to efficiently manage policies, procedures, practices, and systems for managers to implement.

Institutionalism

Lawrence and Shadnam (2008) rightly noted that while the formal study of institutionalism is relatively recent, the concept has been around for a long time. They state:

the effects of great institutions such as language, government, religion, laws, and family are so clear and widespread that one can hardly imagine social research that would not attend to them. Consequently, the history of institutional theory is as long as the history of social theory. (p. 2289)

Selznick's *Leadership in Administration* (1957) marked the advent of institutional theory proper. Selznick distinguished between an organization and an institution and detailed how leadership is correspondingly different as a result. In the former, leadership is equated to management, while in the latter it is the infusion of "value beyond the technical

requirements of the task at hand” (p. 17). It was not until the seminal works of Meyer and Rowan (1977), Zucker (1977), and DiMaggio and Powell (1983) did institutional theory become a major field of inquiry in organization and management studies, in what became known as the “new” form of institutionalism, in contrast to the form introduced by Selznick (Greenwood, Hinings, & Whetten, 2014). Meyer (2007) noted that

Contemporary institutional theorizing in the field of organizations dates back to thirty-odd years. This particularly describes what are called new or neo-institutionalism. These terms evoke contrasts with earlier theories of the embeddedness of organizations in social and cultural contexts, now retrospectively called the ‘old institutionalism’ (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997; Sinchcombe, 1997). (p. 788)

Whether new or old, institutional theory recognized that formal and rational systems did not adequately explain the behavior of the collective. Ingersoll (1993) perceptively observed that:

Many researchers and practitioners, rarely finding organizational realities to conform fully to the blueprint of formalized, specialized, standardized structure, have lost confidence in both the explanatory power and practical applicability of rational interpretations of the classic Weberian model. As a result, over the years organizational research has progressively emphasized the degree to which employees’ sentiments, human relations, informal structures, dysfunctional attributes, uncertainties, contingencies, and environmental influences all work to limit organizational rationality. (p. 83)

There are many organizational behaviors that defy purely rational explanations. While policies and procedures provide structure, organizational theory does not address why some work groups excel when others underperform. It might be logical for institutions of higher education to chase national rankings to appear legitimate, but it is irrational in that the metric is suspect, displaces resources, and creates mission creep (Wong, 2015; Ehrenberg, 2005; Hossler, 2000). Why is it that schools and colleges expend limited resources on so much pomp and circumstance for graduations? The symbolic act of graduation makes the intangible value of a diploma tangible and legitimate. Institutional theory best explains how schools, hospitals, companies, and government agencies with similar missions, policies, and procedures can have dissimilar cultures and outcomes, respectively.

Social scientists discovered that values, myths, symbols, norms, and environmental factors had disproportionate, if not greater, influence on organizational activities and outcomes than the formal systems. Rowan and Miskel (1999) observed that

The common theme among all [institutional] orientations is the “rejection of models in which social actors are engaged in unrestrained, rational pursuit of their interests. Instead, all institutional theorists see action as socially embedded and constrained by regulations, normative obligations, and/or cognitive

schemata. (p. 362)

In their review of institutional theory, Amenta and Ramsey (2010) noted that the “basic similarity in all institutional theoretical claims is that something identified at a higher level is used to explain process and outcomes at a lower level of analysis (p. 15). Meyer and Rowan (1977), the progenitors of “new” institutionalism defined institutionalism as “the processes by which social processes, obligations, or actualities come to take on a rule-like status in social thought and action” (p. 341).

Institutional theorists assert that while leaders matter, leadership is embedded in networks and roles. Institutional theory reveals that leaders are rarely as autonomous as the field of leadership studies suggests (Ogawa & Bossert 1995; Ogawa & Scribner 2002). It is rare for a leader to get 100% of his or her way 100% of the time. The best a leader can hope is to bring about optimal outcomes in lieu of ideal outcomes because of competing norms, values, and myths. Leaders who lack savvy for the unwritten rules and norms frequently experience derailment in their public career trajectory (Bennis, 1989).

Because organizations are comprised of autonomous individuals and units with their own set of competing values and unwritten rules, a leader’s inability to have direct influence over all of the organizational and institutional activities is accounted for in the concept of loose coupling. Although there are positive and negative justifications for loose coupling and a variety of definitions (Ingersoll, 1993), leaders can’t but help decouple, or intentionally promote employee autonomy at the expense of lower levels of coordination and control over most of an organization’s activities. Organizations are too complex for a leader to coordinate and control all that takes place within and outside of the organizational boundaries. As a result, a formal leader’s influence is limited much more than what is assumed in the leadership studies genre. A primary lesson from institutional theory is that norms, values, and myths matter the most when accomplishing objectives. The primary goal of institutional studies is to equip administrators with best principles and practices to infuse the collective with proper values that will optimize organizational outcomes.

A Case for Complexity Theory

It appears each theory provides complementary insights to the different facets of leading a collective. There are personal (leadership studies), formal (organizational studies) and informal (institutional studies) facets when working with people to accomplish common goals. The nexus between organizational, institutional and leadership theories reveals that effective leadership requires multiple perspectives and is contextual in terms of when and what is attended to so as to bring about desired outcomes.

Hernandez, Eberly, Avolio, and Johnson (2011) established that a comprehensive model for leadership that accounts for competing perspectives associated with leading collectives is needed. They observed that the

diverse range of perspectives within the leadership literature represent legitimate ways of conceptualizing leadership; with each having contributed to furthering our

understanding of what constitutes leadership in terms of its breadth and depth. At the same time, such breadth makes it extremely difficult not only to create a coherent picture of the state of leadership theory and research, but also to guide what is needed in term of the next stage of development. (p. 1165)

The authors go on to provide a synthetic model for understanding leadership in a two-dimensional framework with vertical and horizontal continua representing mechanisms and loci of leadership, respectively. While the model is instructive, it is limited to its intent of providing a “coherent and overarching conceptual bridge among the core leadership theories represented in the literature” (p. 1181). The authors go on to state that additional “attention to the evolving, interactive, and multi-dimensional nature of the leadership process is needed” (p. 1182).

Bolman and Deal (2008) masterfully demonstrate the science and art of understanding leadership and organizations from multiple perspectives. They provide four frames of reference for understanding how and why organizations function the way they do. The structural and human relations frames align with the lessons from organizational studies. The political and symbolic frames are associated with the truths found in institutional theory. As a result of the different organizational frames, effective leaders are analysts and architects (structural), catalysts and servants (human relations), advocates and negotiators (political), and prophets and poets (symbolic).

While Bolman and Deal (2008) and Hernandez, et. al. (2011) integrate the various theories into cohesive and congruent models, complexity theory goes beyond the synthetic and complementary approaches of reconciling competing ideas by providing a comprehensive model that captures the dynamic and nonlinear nature of reality only hinted at in the leadership, organizational, and institutional theories. Complexity theory encapsulates the reciprocal and dynamic relationships of the truths revealed in organizational, institutional and leadership theories, and additional macro and micro forces that influence the collective (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007; Wheatley, 1994). Schneider and Sommers (2006) recognize the potential of complexity theory as a comprehensive model for understanding and practicing leadership in the 21st century. They observed that while complexity “has indeed entered the leadership lexicon, its linkage with leadership theory is nascent” (p. 351).

Even though complexity science is relatively new (Gleick, 1987; Wheatley, 1994), it emerged from the convergence of a different theories dealing with systems found in both hard and soft sciences. Klijn (2008) noted that the various theories had in common “the idea that the whole (the system) is more than the sum of the parts (the individual agents), while, at the same time, developments of the whole stem from the (interaction of the) parts” (p. 301). Sanders and McCabe (2003) legitimized the status of complexity science when they observed that

The challenges of the 21st century will require new ways of thinking about and understanding the complex, interconnected and rapidly changing world in which we live and work. And the new field of complexity science is providing the insights we need to push our thinking in new directions. (p. 5)

Complexity theorists basically discovered the hidden architecture common to all complex adaptive systems, such as collectives. Complex adaptive collectives maintain relative homeostasis by balancing competing priorities, values, and demands associated with, but not limited to, the truths revealed in leadership, organizational, and institutional studies. Shoup and Studer (2010) documented seven interdependent features of the underlying architecture that are logical extensions of each other and explain why and how dynamic systems function, survive, and even thrive in the midst of complexity. They are:

1. homeostasis and change
2. strange attractors (non-negotiables)
3. fractals (similarity across scales)
4. cybernetics (feedback)
5. emergence (thriving and growing)
6. sensitive dependence, and
7. self-organized criticality

After elaborating on each feature, Shoup and Studer used the following sailing metaphor to illustrate the essential features of the complex systems identified above.

Sailing is an appropriate metaphor for leadership in any complex environment. Seasoned captains make it look easy as they defy natural laws to harness the wind to their advantage. The tacking back and forth and continuous trimming of the sails and rudder allow the captain to sail smoothly into the wind on choppy waters. The strange attractors of the wind, condition of the ship, and desired course allows the captain to maintain a course (homeostasis). The captain is continuously, and ever so subtly, trimming the sails and rudder (changing) to keep an even keel (homeostasis) in response to the compass or dead reckoning (feedback). At the same time, once under sail, the captain's trajectory continuously emerges as a result of prevailing winds and other environmental demands such as oncoming ships, changes in the wind, and natural boundaries. Sailors recognize a small over-correction with the rudder or an unanticipated gust or shift in the wind can have a big effect in causing the ship to capsize (sensitive dependence). In addition, for a ship to sail smoothly, even in windy and chaotic conditions, the crew needs to follow the lead of the captain, mirroring his or her actions relative to the position of the sail boom (fractals). Seasoned sailors also recognize that a combination of variables at any point in time could have consequential effects such as attempts to avoid an obstacle and a sudden gust causing the sail boom to swing quickly in the opposite direction into unsuspecting passengers (self-organized criticality). (p. 98)

While the metaphor supplied above is not sufficient to provide a crash course on complexity theory, it does illustrate how the concepts capture complex adaptive systems. To be more specific, complexity theory reveals that leaders are part of a collective and must attend to the following equally if the collective is to thrive (emergence):

- balance (homeostasis) many competing demands and expectations (strange attractors) highlighted in leadership, organizational, and institutional studies

- implement ongoing midcourse corrections (change) based upon feedback (cybernetics)
- know that some changes will have a disproportionate effect (sensitive dependence)
- know that their vision and actions will be mirrored throughout the collective (fractals)

All collective endeavors are complex adaptive systems, although some are more complex than others. While leadership, organizational, and institutional studies capture several features of working with a collective, each theory by itself is inadequate to explain and predict the collective as a whole. Complexity theory provides the frame to understand the dynamic nature of collectives so as to leverage the truths from leadership, organizational, and institutional studies, plus more.

Table 1 – Facets of Leadership in a Collective highlights the different assumptions, primary agents of change, motivations of the collective, and metaphors for the person in charge (a.k.a., the formal leader) from the respective fields of study to provide a synthesis of the corresponding relationships among the competing theories.

Table 1 – Facets of Leadership in a Formal Collective

	Leadership Studies	Organizational Studies	Institutional Theory	Complexity Theory
Agent	Leaders	Rational Policies	Myths and Values	All + Environment
Motivation	Varies	Efficiency	Legitimacy	All + Homeostasis
Assumptions	Life is linear and controllable	Life is linear and rational	Life is dynamic and not always rational	Life is dynamic and cyclical
Metaphor for formal leader	Leader	Manager	Administrator	All + Pilot / Navigator
Bolman & Deal Metaphors		Analysts, Architects, Catalysts, Servants, Advocates, Negotiators, Prophets, & Poets		

A primary lesson from complexity theory is that leaders, managers, and administrators matter equally, but are first among equals at different times (i.e., sometimes leaders must act as managers and administrators). A primary goal of complexity studies is to equip people to understand the essence of dynamic adaptive systems that include, but are not limited to, the truths from leadership, organizational, and institutional studies so as to bring about desired outcomes.

Implications for Teaching and Practicing Leadership

Individuals equipped with only one theory for the collective are limited in their ability to optimize their contribution to the collective. Leaders equipped with only one theory for understanding the collective will attend to certain aspects of the collective at the expense of others, eventually sabotaging his or her leadership impact. Leaders would do well to recognize that:

- Leadership makes a difference. Poor leadership can ruin good people and organizations. Good leadership can promote employee engagement and organizational success. Too much formal leadership can create person-centered collectives and centralize mission critical activities. Thanks to leadership studies, we know what makes for good leadership.
- Formal organization is necessary. Designing and implementing good policies and procedures maximize resources and promote organizational efficiencies. Yet, too much organization can create overly rule-centered collectives and unresponsive organizations. Thanks to organizational studies, we know what makes for good organization and management.
- Formal and informal networks, norms, and values matter. Infusing the collective with proper value(s) promotes legitimacy and sustainability. Too much emphasis on legitimacy can emphasize symbolism over substance. Thanks to institutional studies, we know what makes for the good administration of values.

- The work of a collective is complex. Leading, managing, and administration are first among equal activities at different points of time when working with any collective. Too much emphasis on one aspect at the expense of others can create imbalance and dysfunction to interfere with performance. Thanks to complexity theory, we know how to successfully pilot multiple roles and competing demands highlighted in leadership, organizational, and institutional studies.

Emerging and established leaders would do well to expand their theoretical tool belt and embrace multiple metaphors to better understand their numerous roles and responsibilities.

Conclusions

Leadership, organizational, and institutional theories provide relevant and diverse insights into the multi-faceted nature of working with a formal collective. Traditional approaches when optimizing the work of the collective has been to either emphasize one theory at the expense of the others or assume complementary multiple frames of reference. While the latter option is more robust, it fails to provide people with the insights to discern which frame of reference should take precedence at any one point in time and how to account for additional macro and micro forces influencing the collective. Complexity theory makes sense of the contradictory aspects of each theory, normalizes the chaos of governing a collective, and provides a comprehensive contingency-like model for optimizing collective behavior in dynamic environments. Leaders who attain a level of expertise in leadership and organizational studies and institutional and complexity theories are better prepared to navigate the challenges associated with optimizing the work of their respective collectives.

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