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# Leadership Studies

## The Dialogue of Disciplines

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## NEW HORIZONS IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES

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leader. But one is not likely to get these experiences climbing up the corporate ladder. Indeed, the corporate ladder is the place where potential leaders are killed off by the demands of conformity and endless rounds of group-think-producing meetings. So the person who has the most experience of a large enterprise and its business is likely to be the person least capable, on a personal level, of leading it. And this is what motivates the desperate searches for genuine leaders in corporate life.

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## 8. Thinking sociologically about leadership

**Sonia M. Ospina and Margo Hittleman**

### INTRODUCTION

Sociologists have an ambivalent relationship with leadership as a social phenomenon worth exploring. On the one hand, a search for "leadership" in contemporary sociology journals yields few entries. Yet a sociological perspective has permeated the study of leadership from the field's beginnings (Ayman, 2000). Weber's insights on "charisma", for example, remain key to leadership studies. And social psychologists, along with scholars in applied fields such as management, education and public administration, draw heavily on sociological organization and management theories.

This paradox may arise from the heroic individual-centered approach that dominates the conventional leadership literature with its emphasis on the psychological dynamics of the leader–follower relationship. Sociology is premised on the belief that actors are socially embedded; the idea that meaningful human experience can be understood exclusively from the vantage point of isolated individuals runs counter to sociological thinking. Regardless of researchers' location in a particular epistemic community or where they fall within the quintessential sociological debate about "agency" versus "structure", sociology's goal is to capture how the key features of human agency relate to institutional and structural regularities, as well as the relationships between them. It is, in C. Wright Mills' words, about using "the sociological imagination" by grasping "history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Mills, [1959] 2000: 5).

Leadership scholars who use a "sociological imagination" may or may not be connected to departments of sociology. Nevertheless they consistently frame research questions and choose methodologies in ways that link individual biography to social structure. In organizational leadership studies, this means looking "beyond personal relations to the larger patterns of institutional development" (Selznick, 1957) and recognizing that the social and historical context in which the work of leadership takes place matters not only to how leadership is carried out, but to how it is constituted and understood.

In this chapter, we explore what thinking sociologically about leadership has offered the field of leadership studies, and more importantly, what integrating a stronger sociological approach could offer. We begin by pointing to two key sociological concepts – context and relationships – that permeate the leadership literature and highlight the ways a limited application of these foundational constructs has constrained their analytical and theoretical value. Next we suggest several ways scholars might bring a stronger sociological lens to the work of understanding leadership. We argue that thinking sociologically broadens attention beyond atomistic “leaders” or dyadic leader–followers engaged in an “influence relationship” to shine light on the social milieu within which relationships, interactions and processes are negotiated and constituted. Doing so challenges scholars to attend more closely to “the work of leadership” as well as to understand that work in new ways. We discuss these ideas first theoretically, then illustrate them by examining some recent empirical research on leadership in social change organizations.

Three caveats set the context for the choices we make here and help bound our reflections. First, our chapter draws predominantly from scholarship about leadership in organizational contexts rather than from studies of political leaders or the normative literature. Even here, we have been highly selective; a short chapter precludes an exhaustive review. Second, our examples come primarily from scholars working from an “interpretivist” perspective as that is the community in which our own work is grounded. This does not represent *all of sociology*, but instead presents a particular viewpoint within the discipline.<sup>1</sup> Finally, while the scholarship we cite draws upon the heritage established by the sociological fathers Emil Durkheim, George Simmel, Max Weber and Karl Marx, we do not explicitly review their work.

## SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS IN THE FIELD: LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES

Influential theories such as situational leadership theory, the contingency approach, and transformational and charismatic leadership draw upon salient sociological concepts. Most notably this is expressed in concerns with how leadership occurs within a social and historical context and in the growing interest in the collective, relational dimensions of leadership. We examine each in turn.

### Attending to Context

The desire to identify a universal set of inherent traits, styles or behaviors of “great men” and “great women” still defines much scholarship. Yet scholars

also agree that leadership cannot be fully understood apart from the context in which it exists. They argue that the leadership relationship is “embedded in a social setting at a given historical moment” (Biggart and Hamilton, 1987: 439), and that “leaders must be understood in their ‘natural’ setting” (Kets de Vries, 2001: 8576). A variety of contextual dimensions appear in the organizational leadership literature, including an organization’s structure and culture, goals, strategy and mission, demographics, core processes of technology, policy and governance, degree of success and organizational cycle (Jackson and Parry, 2008).

Neo-charismatic and transformational scholars influenced by the “sociologically informed work of Burns” (Pitsis, 2007) highlight the interconnections between the influence relationship and the circumstances and conditions within which it develops (Bryman et al., 1996; Parry and Bryman, 2006).<sup>2</sup> But leadership research has not been fundamentally transformed by these insights. Attention to the “organizational context” remains an “under-researched area” (Porter and McLaughlin, 2006: 206), marginalized in transformational leadership studies (Bryman et al., 1996) and unintegrated in neo-charismatic leadership theories (Beyer, 1999).

Even when context is explicitly considered, most empirical leadership work assumes that it exists independent of leaders, followers, and their relationship. In this “entity” approach (Uhl-Bien, 2006), context is the background environment within which leaders relate to followers, enact their behaviors and make decisions. It is assumed to exist prior to the studied phenomenon and explored primarily to better illuminate the relationship or the behaviors of the engaged actors.

In contrast to this person–situation split, a sociological perspective invites analysts to view the relationship between person and situation, biography and history (or agency and structure) as much more dynamic and reflexive: actions and interactions of social agents are both generative of social structure and constrained by it (Giddens and Turner, 1987). It calls into question both an excessive focus on the leaders (agents) and the unidirectional, deterministic ways in which “context” has been often used.

### Attending to Relationships

Leadership scholars are increasingly interested in exploring the relational dimensions of leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Transformational, neo-charismatic and LMX (Leader–Member Exchange Theory) scholars, for example, are now interested in the quality of the leader–follower relationship and the contingencies that surround it. Others have looked beyond the leader–follower dyad to consider collective relationships such as distributed or shared forms of leadership.

In general, however, these are identified as one kind of leadership increasingly necessary in today's complex environment. For example, scholars writing about distributed leadership suggest that the *trend* toward new organizational forms *requires* a type of leader capable of creating the conditions to manage effectively in more flexible organizational forms (Pearce and Conger, 2003). This perspective shifts attention from uni-directional to reciprocal exchanges (theorized as a response to new "contextual" requirements). But the notion of an influence relationship among discrete, independent entities remains unchallenged. In contrast, an explicitly sociological lens interrogates the dominant assumptions of the individual and collective versions of the entity perspective.

## BRINGING A SOCIOLOGICAL LENS TO LEADERSHIP STUDIES

A sociological lens invites us to separate "leaders" from "leadership" (for example, Rost, 1991; Vanderslice, 1988). It shifts attention from a nearly exclusive focus on attributes, styles, behaviors and activities of individuals involved in an influence relationship, to inquire about the nature and quality of what social actors do together to construct and advance a common purpose. Consider Drath's (2001) metaphor of the "deep blue sea". Leaders, he suggests, are merely the "sparkling white caps" of ocean waves. We can't understand the ocean merely by studying these caps. Similarly, our grasp of leadership is incomplete unless we consider not only questions about *who* leads, but also about the *what*, *where* and *how* of leadership (Grint, 2005: 18).

### Redirecting Attention to "the Work of Leadership"

Organization and management scholars in the late 1970s applied a sociological orientation to argue that leadership emerges from the constructions and actions of people in organizations as they assign each other different roles and functions, including the roles of leadership. Smircich and Morgan (1982) and Tierney (1987), for example, related leadership to shared meanings and stressed the leaders' role of managing meaning for effectiveness. Other scholars pointed to leadership's cognitive and symbolic functions to help people make sense of events (Hunt, 1984) or give legitimacy to organizational realities and decisions (Pfeffer, 1977).

These scholars shared transformational theorists' interest in meaning making and the new concern of leadership theorists with processes of social cognition. But their approach to leadership was fundamentally different. Leadership scholars who took the "cognitive turn" (Lord and Emrich, 2000)

overwhelmingly framed cognition as an individual, psychological process occurring solely in people's minds. They attended, for example, to the attributional processes by which followers bestow leaders with authority (Meindl et al., 1985; Hogg, 2001).

In contrast, those using a sociological lens portrayed cognition as "embedded" or grounded in the social world. Because people make sense of the world only through interactions with their environment and the people in it, meaning making is a collective, rather than an individual task. Further, a sociological lens proposes that the material aspects of the settings influence how cognitive processes develop, and that cognition is "embodied", reflected not only in individuals' minds and behaviors, but also in practices, artifacts and institutions. Hence "context" – with identifiable contingencies – affects how people comprehend the world and how they respond to it (Wilson and Keil, 2001).

Very little empirical work on leadership was produced to further develop these powerful ideas in the US.<sup>3</sup> But the renewed interest in context and relational leadership reinforces the value of thinking sociologically. For sociologically oriented scholars, "relational leadership" is neither a "type" of leadership nor a "trend". Rather, leadership is "intrinsically relational and social in nature... the result of shared meaning-making, and ...rooted in context and place" (Ospina and Sorenson, 2006: 188).

For these analysts, meaning making and organizing processes that mobilize individuals into collective action are as relevant as interpersonal influence dynamics. "Context" is an emergent space constructed and named by participants in events that draw upon shared agreements, or "knowledge principles" (Drath, 2001) to advance the work. And the emerging, mutually constituted relationships between leaders, followers and context provide the conditions for leadership to happen.

Thus, rather than focusing on "leaders" and "contextual factors" in a foreground-background manner, sociologically-based researchers argue that

leadership cannot be abstracted from the organizational processes of which it is a part. The study of leadership, properly conceived, is the study of the process in which flexible social order is negotiated and practiced so as to protect and promote the values and interests in which it is grounded. (Hosking, 1997: 315)

Further, this perspective questions the notion of leadership as something that belongs to the individual, suggesting instead that leadership is found in the work of a group, and so it is the property of the group (Dachler and Hosking, 1995), a collective achievement (Drath, 2001) or the emergent property of a social system (Parry and Bryman, 2006).

Leadership, then, is the social and relational processes (meaning-making included) that emerge to address organizing and action. Since structure is not merely a prescribed organizational framework but a negotiated and emergent

product of patterned interaction, it is wise to observe the work that helps organizational members construct, through everyday practices, the very “rules” of organizing that they follow. A key question becomes how relational interactions contribute to “the generation and emergence of social order” (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 42).

This has important implications, not just for theorizing about leadership, but for its empirical study as well. It invites us to “deconstruct leadership activities from their embeddedness in institutional hierarchies and structures” (Robnett, 1997: 19); understand the socially constructed roles and relations that contribute to create direct social order, action and systems change; and remember that since relational dynamics occur in a context, the latter is fundamental to understand leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 37).

Analytical attention then naturally shifts to “processes” (Hosking, 1988) and to “the work of leadership, as opposed to the agents through which it is carried out” (Foldy et al., forthcoming). Further, as Alvesson (1996) suggests, tying leadership “to a formal position or defined as a fixed quality” closes the inquiry “prematurely”. It is better to think of it, instead, “more openly in relationship to that which goes on in the work organization context and the relations being formed and reformed in processes of sense-making, attribution and negotiation” (Alvesson, 1996: 469). Observing these processes, he argues, will offer more insights about leadership than interviewing leaders about it. Indeed, this approach to empirical research explores the processes and relations that constitute the work of leadership as it is happening.

## SEEING LEADERSHIP DIFFERENTLY: AN EMPIRICAL LOOK

To illustrate our argument, we turn to a small, but growing, body of sociological literature about leadership in grassroots social change organizations. We believe this literature is noteworthy not merely to illuminate leadership in these particular contexts, but in its as-yet-unrealized contributions to a richer understanding of insufficiently explored facets of leadership in other settings as well.<sup>4</sup>

These scholars have produced empirical research on how leadership emerges and develops in community-based social change organizations and social movement groups. They bring distinct interests, approaches and contributions to their work. Nevertheless, their sociological lens produces identifiable consequences. First, they draw heavily from social theory – particularly feminist and critical race theory – which challenges assumptions about who is a leader and what is defined as leadership. Second, taken together, their work shifts theorizing from an emphasis on leadership as an “influence rela-

tionship” to an understanding of leadership as a process of collective meaning-making, developmental capacity-building and collaborative action. Third, they direct attention to dimensions of leadership rarely examined in other studies. Most notably they elucidate the work involved in building the capacities of people, organizations and communities, and developing, not “followers”, but groups of people empowered to act together to bring about change. Fourth, they attend to the processes and practices by which this work is carried out.

In each case, these researchers moved beyond the most visible, formal actors in top organizational positions, to attend to work that included those without formal organizational titles or traditionally recognized leadership roles. The “centerwomen” in Sacks’ (1988) study of union organizing, the “bridge leaders” in Robnett’s (1997) work on African-American women’s leadership in the Civil Rights movement, the “midwife” leaders in Belenky et al.’s (1997) study of grassroots organizations in the US and Germany, or the US social change leaders in Ospina and her colleagues’ multi-year study (for example, Ospina and Foldy, 2008), all played important – if often overlooked or unacknowledged – roles in shaping people’s consciousness, building organizations, forming networks, and mobilizing people into action.

In contrast to scholars who worry about the dangers of “an overly broad definition of leadership” that devalues organizational hierarchies (Morris and Staggenborg, 2004: 177), we find that these studies demonstrate how examining various types of leaders – and more importantly, their work – sheds a dramatically different light on what “leadership work” is, how it unfolds and how given organizations’ goals are accomplished. Indeed, positioned outside the mainstream leadership field, these researchers are less directly concerned with the role of leaders or the nature of leadership itself. Instead, they aim to understand the work of a particular type of group and “the recurrent problems they face” (Selznick, 1957: 23) in their organizing efforts to realize a social change vision. This aim mirrors Selznick’s characterization of a sociological interpretation of organizational leadership.

Expanding the typical equation of leadership with activities such as crafting decisions and influencing followers, these researchers highlight the ways leaders and followers collectively and strategically support growth and development in people, organizations and communities. And they demonstrate how, through this work, people (particularly those who have been marginalized or excluded) change their sense of who they are and what they are capable of, form new understandings of themselves and the world in which they live, develop a public voice, and come together to take effective, collective action.

Leaders do not disappear in these studies. But light is shed on the nature of what they do and the logic underlying their work. Thus, for example, Belenky et al. (1997) describe the work of what they came to call “developmental leadership” as follows:

These leaders want to know each person, what they care about, and where they are trying to go. They also work to articulate the goals that people in the group have in common. They look for each person's strong points, for the things already in place upon which the person could build. They also look for the strengths in people's culture as a building foundation for the whole community. They ask good questions and draw out people's thinking. They listen with care. ... Then they look for ways to mirror what they have seen, giving people a chance to take a new look at themselves and see the strengths that have not been well recognized or articulated. (1997: 14).

Then, the authors continue, critical analysis through permanent and deep conversation helps the group to "develop a vision of how things ought to work" (ibid.: 14).

Similarly, Ospina and her colleagues have identified a variety of "leadership practices" that help groups seeking to make social change move their agendas forward. In one study, for example, they identified "bridging leadership practices", that is, purposive interventions that helped diverse groups cross boundaries by creating new bonds or strengthening existing ones. Such practices include prompting cognitive shifts; naming and shaping identity; and engaging dialogue about difference (Ospina and Foldy, 2008).

Finally, this body of research reveals the historical, social, cultural and political character of leadership. Drawing heavily from feminist and critical race theory, and embracing the interpretive turn, scholars like Robnett (1997), Belenky et al. (1997) and Ospina and Su (2008) incorporate an analysis of social location, power, hegemony and oppression into their inquiry. They explore how micro and macro mechanisms that sustain particular systems of oppression and their intersections are weaved through, and influence the work of leadership in significant ways. By challenging dominant assumptions, their gendered and/or critical race analyses deepen and advance our understanding of leadership.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter we offer a way to think sociologically about the complex social phenomenon we call "leadership". We have argued that this allows scholars to incorporate more successfully concepts like context and relationship both in empirical research and in theory. This happens in two ways. First, a sociological lens redirects attention to the work of leadership as collective and relational. Second, it makes evident how this work is embedded in broader processes and institutions, thus highlighting the structures of power and domination that characterize and sustain stratified social systems.

The result is a broader understanding of what counts as leadership, one which challenges the heroic, male, white, positional view that has dominated

the field. The studies of leadership in social change organizations illustrate this point. In deconstructing the actual logic of the organizing processes from which leadership emerges (Hosking, 1988), these scholars have drawn attention to how the relationships, interactions and negotiations required for collective action manifest in actual leadership practices in localized contexts (Ospina and Foldy, 2008). They also remind us that leadership emerges in particular contexts characterized by culturally and historically grounded structures of power.

In doing so, they make visible dimensions of leadership vital not only to "social change" organizations, but to leadership in other settings as well. These dimensions are particularly salient given both scholars' and practitioners' concerns with new organizing trends. As people seek models of "multicultural" leadership or expect positional leaders to move beyond "influencing followers" to build collectively the capacity of flattened, flexible and boundary-less organizations, understanding how people can take effective initiative and engage in coordinated action becomes urgent.

In our attention to what sociology has and can bring to the study of leadership, we are not arguing that it offers the only or the best way to understand this phenomenon. For example, we agree with Shamir's claim (1999) that a psychological and a sociological approach to charisma can be complementary, not contradictory. Yet a sociological lens is particularly suited to address the growing concern to expand scholarship beyond individual leaders, followers and their relationship (Uhl-Bien, 2006) to new conceptualizations that enrich understanding of the "work of leadership" and the "interactive ... processes" related to it (Gronn, 2002: 4441). Such a lens has been relatively absent from empirical studies of leadership, particularly in the US. Addressing this imbalance can help move the field forward.

## NOTES

1. An apparent rift between a US research community dominated by a psychological (and positivist) orientation to the study of leadership and a more sociological (and interpretivist) orientation in Europe, Australia and New Zealand merits turning a sociological eye on the field of leadership itself. That, however, is outside the scope of this chapter. We simply note here that much of the empirical sociological work on leadership is currently taking place outside the US. Other leadership scholars who do not work under the positivist paradigm in the US tend to take a multidisciplinary approach, drawing as needed from the humanities and the social sciences. See Goethals and Sorenson (2006) for examples.
2. Debates triggered around interpretations of charisma are quite educational. See Issue 4 in Volume 9 of *The Leadership Quarterly* (1999), particularly the articles by Bass, Shamir, House and Beyer, respectively.
3. In Europe, scholarly interest in leadership took off at about the same time that the "postmodern turn hit Europe", producing from the start scholarship that was "both sociological and postmodern" (Grint, personal communication, 2008).
4. For studies of social change and leadership within a traditional perspective see *The*

*Leadership Quarterly* Yearly Review of Leadership, 5(3–4), pp. 193–317 (1994). For a more extensive review of the study of leadership in social movements, see Morris and Staggenborg (2004). We do not discuss here other sociologists studying social change organizations (for example Polletta, 2002 and Wood, 2002) because their interests are not explicitly on leadership.

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## 9. What makes leadership necessary, possible and effective: the psychological dimensions

**George R. Goethals and Crystal L. Hoyt**

In 1914 British explorer Ernest Shackleton, along with 27 other men, embarked on an expedition to cross the continent of Antarctica. They would go by dog sled from one side to the other, passing through the South Pole. In early December, as the southern summer solstice drew near, the expedition left a whaling station on tiny South Georgia Island on the ship *Endurance*. *Endurance* was to sail through ice floes to the Antarctic, disembark a small party to cross the continent, and return to South Georgia, and then to England. Another ship would meet the crossing party on the other side of the continent, and bring it home to England.

Things didn't go as planned. The ice floes were unusually thick that summer, and in mid-January, they trapped *Endurance*. She was stuck fast. Shackleton ordered the crew to make winter quarters in the ship, and on the ice. Crossing the Antarctic was now out of the question. Survival would have to do. Shackleton hoped that in the spring, roughly the next November, the floe would break up enough to set *Endurance* free. However, when the ice eventually began to move, it simply crushed the *Endurance*. All 28 men barely managed to get into three small lifeboats, escape the floe before they were also trapped and crushed, and row and sail through wind and waves for days to Elephant Island, a small speck of land at the end of a peninsula stretching into the South Atlantic. They were fortunate to locate Elephant Island. They could easily have missed it, and been blown into the fiercely stormy South Atlantic and certain death.

Shackleton decided that the only hope of rescue was to sail before winter set in again with five other men in the largest of the lifeboats, 800 miles across the South Atlantic to the whaling station they had left more than a year before. Then he would hire a ship to return to rescue the other 22 men. Sailing through icy hurricanes in April, the six miraculously found South Georgia. Shackleton and two others immediately set out on a dangerous march across the island to the whaling station. Once there, Shackleton sailed a ship back to rescue the