Leadership and organizational change:

Practitioner anecdotes and academic indifference

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Abstract

In *Leadership,* Burns (1978) highlighted the intellectual mediocrity of leadership studies and encouraged interest in the transformational capacity of leadership. Independently theories and practices of leadership and organizational change have subsequently advanced. However, theorizing relationships between leadership and organizational change has been surprisingly disappointing. This paper based upon an ongoing critical literature review of the last 35 years of leadership and organizational change, features meta-level explanations and ranks the most cited publications since 1978. Competing explanations for the lack of progress are discussed with conclusions framed in terms of the *International Journal of Management Reviews* key literature review principles.

Word Count 1949 (excluding tables and references)

Introduction

Practitioners and policy makers have high expectations about the outcomes of leadership and organizational change, fuelling the expectation that a large and rigorous body of knowledge relating leadership to organizational change exists. So reporting the weakness/absence of such a literature sounds too close to the lament of a frustrated undergraduate. However, reassurance resides within Parry's (2011) meta-level account of leadership and organizational change.

> Leadership and organizational change are inextricably intertwined. However, 'organizational change' has become an interest for organizational consultants more so than for empirical researchers. There are many more books and articles on practitioner or conceptual scholarship than on theoretical or empirical scholarship. Much of the practitioner work is case study-based, and anecdotal and not rigorous in its conduct. (Parry, 2011:57)

Parry's conclusion drawn within the context of *The Sage Handbook of Leadership* reassures, yet also troubles.   Reassuring in that my own independent literature reviewing was resulting in the same surprising conclusion. Troubling given the levels of interest and investment in leadership and organizational change within organizations and the wider society.

Meta-level explanations of leadership and organizational change

Meta-level explanations contained within academic handbooks/companions (Nohria and Khurana, 2010; Bryman et al, 2011, Beer and Nohria, 2000, Burke et al, 2009; and Boje et al, 2011) synthesise what is known about leadership and organizational change and seek to communicate the cumulative state of knowledge. *The handbook of leadership theory and practice* (Nohria and Khurana, 2010) comprised of 26 chapters written by eminent leadership scholars only contained one chapter focussed upon leading change, written by Marshall Ganz and focussed upon social movements and politics, rather than organizational change. Lorsch (2010) in his chapter believed that contingency theories were heading in the right direction, with Kotter cited as an illustration of the move away from contingent accounts of leadership towards a general theory. Lorsch argued that the now popular distinction made between leaders and managers (see Zaleznik, 1977 and Kotter, 1990) was a false dichotomy.

The Sage handbook of leadership (Bryman et al, 2011) involved individual editors taking responsibility for parts, resulting in a handbook containing 38 contributions from 64 authors who were subject experts in their respective fields. There were chapters on the Leader – Member Exchange and transformational leadership, though no separate chapter on leadership and organizational change. In Ken Parry's (2011) chapter on leadership and organization theory, there was a short sub-section on leadership and organizational change, cited earlier. Diaz-Saenz's (2011) chapter focussed upon transformational leadership suggested that over 30 years transformational leadership had been the single most studied and debated idea within leadership studies.

Three organizational change focussed books (Beer and Nohria, 2000; Burke et al 2009; and Boje, Burnes and Hassard, 2011) were reviewed for meta-level explanations. *Breaking the code of change* (Beer and Nohria, 2000) brought together experienced scholars and practitioners in organizational change. The edited reader was divided into seven sections, with the *Leadership of Change* section comprised of a short editorial introduction followed by three chapters. Conger (2000) made the case for top-down change leadership, Bennis (2000) reluctantly made the counter case for bottom-up change leadership with Dunphy (2000) acting as discussant for these two competing positions.

In *Organization change: A comprehensive reader* (Burke et al, 2009) three of the fifty two contributions made reference to leaders/leadership in their titles (Witherspoon and Cannon, 2004; Rioch, 1971; and Burke, 2008). Witherspoon and Cannon's (2004) focus was upon executive coaching of leaders in times of transition and similarly, Rioch's (1971) chapter appeared tangential. However, its prescience engaging with followership chimes with many current leadership debates. In the absence of participative/community based change, the leader becomes the surrogate for the agency of the community '…there seems to be a tendency in human beings, which becomes aggravated when they are isolated or faced with unfamiliar situations, to find the exercise of their own powers of mind and will extremely burdensome' (Rioch, 1971:4). Finally, Burke's (2008) chapter was structured around four organizational change phases; prelaunch, launch, post-launch and the sustaining phase, with each phase having implications for the leader's role and function.

By and Burnes (2011) in their contribution to *The Routledge companion to organizational change* (Boje et al, 2011) focussed upon leadership and change (see also By and Burnes, 2013). By and Burnes (2011) develop themes introduced in Burnes (2009) and Burnes and Jackson (2011) commencing with an acknowledgement of major developments with regards to approaches to leadership and change and the case for ethical change leadership. Their concern was with the advance of emergent change and the consequences of such developments for planned change. They drew three conclusions; that leadership and change were inextricably linked, that the planned approach to change was more likely to lead to utilitarian outcomes than the emergent approach and that emergent change was more likely to lead to unethical outcomes.

Leadership and organizational change citation counts

Citations through quantification identify the most influential publications within this sub-field. The analysis of academic citations focussed upon books and journal papers published between the 1st January 1978 and the 31st December 2012 which referred to: - change leader/s, change leadership, leadership of change and leading change and transformational leader/s, transformational leadership, leadership of transformation and leading transformation within their titles. Publish or Perish software (Harzing, 2007) which utilizes Google scholar citations enabled the generation of the top 1000 citations based league tables. In this paper, the top 15 most cited transformational leadership publications and the top 15 most cited leadership of change publications as identified at the 6th January 2014 are featured (see Table 1 for a combined league table).

Reviewing the 15 most cited transformational leadership publications identified the late Bernard Bass as the most cited contributor with eight of the 15 publications either authored or co-authored by him and the other publications reflecting his influence. The most cited leading change contributor was the Emeritus Harvard Professor John Kotter. A prevalence of books over papers was evident reflecting the applied nature of these debates. Troublingly for the development of this sub-field academics were citing practitioner orientated books in the absence of anything else. Merton (1968, 1988) has identified distributions of citations being skewed towards a small number of scholars, with these scholars accounting for the majority of citations, a phenomenon he labelled the 'Matthew Effect', evident within the publications of Bernard Bass and John Kotter featured here.

No	Citations	Transform/Change	Publication	Title	Author/Year
1.	5543	Change	Book	Leading change	(Kotter, 1996)
2.	3795	Change	Paper	Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail	(Kotter, 1995)
3.	3213	Transformation	Book	Transformational leadership	(Bass and Riggio, 2005)
4.	2654	Transformation	Book	Improving organizational effectiveness through transformational leadership	(Bass and Avolio, 1993)
5.	2592	Transformation	Paper	Transformational leader behaviors and their effects on followers' trust in leader, satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors	(Podsakoff et al, 1990)
6.	2146	Transformation	Paper	From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision	(Bass, 1990)
7.	2026	Transformation	Book	The transformational leader: The key to global competitiveness	(Tichy and Devanna, 1986)
8.	1365	Transformation	Paper	Ethics, character, and authentic transformational leadership behavior	(Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999)
9.	1352	Transformation	Paper	Does the transactional–transformational leadership paradigm transcend organizational and national boundaries?	(Bass, 1997)

10.	1303	Transformation	Paper	Transformational leadership, transactional leadership, locus of control, and support for innovation: Key predictors of consolidated-business-unit performance	(Howell and Avolio, 1993)
11.	1094	Transformation	Manual	Transformational leadership development: Manual for the multifactor leadership questionnaire	(Bass and Avolio, 1990)
12.	1034	Transformation	Paper	Two decades of research and development in transformational leadership	(Bass, 1999)
13.	1015	Transformation	Paper	Transformational leader behaviors and substitutes for leadership as determinants of employee satisfaction, commitment, trust, and organizational citizenship behaviors	(Podsakoff and MacKenzie, 1996)
14.	1005	Transformation	Chapter	Transformational leadership: A response to critiques	(Bass and Avolio, 1993)
15.	949	Transformation	Paper	Further assessments of Bass's (1985) conceptualization of transactional and transformational leadership	(Bycio et al, 1995)
16.	925	Transformation	Paper	Impact of transformational leadership on	(Dvir et al, 2002)

					follower development and performance: A field experiment	
17.	855	Transformation	Paper	Effects of transformational leadership training on attitudinal and financial outcomes: A field experiment	(Barling et al, 1996)
18.	721	Change	Book	Leading change: Overcoming the ideology of comfort and the tyranny of custom	(O'Toole, 1995)
19.	281	Change	Book	Leading change toward sustainability	(Doppelt, 2009)
20.	190	Change	Book	Building the bridge as you walk on it: A guide for leading change	(Quinn, 2011)
21.	178	Change	Paper	Change management - or change leadership?	(Gill, 2003)
22.	177	Change	Paper	Leadership self-efficacy and managers' motivation for leading change	(Paglis and Green, 2002)
23.	174	Change	Book	Real change leaders: How you can create growth and high performance at your company	(Katzenbach, et al, 1996)
24.	166	Change	Paper	The effects of transformational and change leadership on employees' commitment to a change: A multilevel study	(Herold et al, 2008)
25.	166	Change	Book	Leading change	(Reeves,

					in your school: How to conquer myths, build commitment, and get results	2009)
26.	130	Change	Book	Leading academic change: Essential roles for department chairs	(Lucas, 2000)
27.	121	Change	Paper	Strategic change leadership	(Graetz, 2000)
28.	121	Change	Book	Change leadership: A practical guide to changing our schools	(Wagner et al, 2010)
29.	120	Change	Book	Managing for change: Leadership, strategy, and management in Asian NGOs	(Smillie and Hailey, 2001)
30.	108	Change	Paper	The enduring skills of change leaders	(Kanter, 1999)

Table 1 - The 15 most cited leadership of transformation and the 15 most cited leadership of change publications ranked in combination.

Discussion – Leadership and organizational change academic indifference

The two previous sections highlight academic indifference towards advancing understanding about leadership and organizational change with this sub-field dominated by practitioner prescriptions and anecdotes. This discussion offers explanations for this apparent lack of academic engagement.

Language and definitions - The subject of leadership loses focus with reference to different objects, such as organizational change or transformation or strategic change. Kotter (1996) entitles his book *Leading Change*, yet refers largely to transformations. Equally studies of leadership suffer from definitional issues (Rost, 1991) and organizational change engages with ambiguity (March, 1981; Dawson, 2003).

Management and leadership differentiations –The apparent discovery of differentiations between leading and managing (Zaleznik, 1977; Kotter, 1990) has been questioned (see Rost, 1991). The very specific differentiation between managing and leading change, although initially appealing in promoting leaders and their capabilities may prove to be a false dichotomy (Lorsch, 2010).

Research methods, methodologies and access – The highest ranked publications based upon academic citations (Table 1) frequently did not employ research methods, preferring to prescribe best practices. More pragmatically given what we know about power and politics at times of organizational change and given the longitudinal nature of significant strategic change research access is likely to be problematic.

Socially constructed leadership – Critical leadership studies have highlighted the socially constructed nature of leadership and leadership contexts, searching for academic accounts of leadership and organizational change may be illusory. As Grint (2000:13) noted '…leadership is primarily rooted in, and a product of, the imagination.'

Conclusions

In taking stock of the state of the literature key principles (indicated through bold/bullet points) of the *International Journal of Management Reviews* offer an evaluation framework (see Table 3 in the Appendix for a summary of main themes).

 • **Is the choice of a field or sub-field in management and organization studies mature enough to warrant a literature review?**

Leadership studies and organizational change studies are certainly mature enough, the sub-field of leadership and organizational change currently at best looks immature.

 • **Are details provided of how the boundaries to that field have been defined to include specific details of what is included and excluded, and why?**

Development of a sub-field of leadership and organizational change suffers from definitional issues (see discussion section) impeding progress.

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• Is there a synthesis and evaluation of the accumulated state of knowledge in that field, summarizing and highlighting current and emerging insight, while stressing strengths and weaknesses of prior work?

Meta-level accounts of leadership and organizational change struggle to offer readers a synthesis of an accumulated state of knowledge (see meta-level accounts section). Academic handbooks/companions offered informative yet fragmented insights.

• Does the review include consideration of how research has developed in the field into sub-categories, concepts or themes that can provide a more holistic interpretation and (re)categorization of that field?

Over the 35 years two major themes have been transformational leadership as advanced by Bernard Bass and leading change as advanced by John Kotter. John Kotter's work was neither informed by original research nor the research of others and has not been subsequently empirically tested. Bernard Bass's work has been advanced through research, although it remains very practice orientated.

• Is there a complete analysis of the literature surveyed in terms of discussions of any contrasting methodologies? (abreviated)

Bernard Bass's conceptualisation of transformational leadership resulted in mainly quantitative research, with an interest in psychology over sociology privileged. Kotter's work was based upon his observations of consulting with American companies. There have been informative empirical studies undertaken over the past 35 years, but these have been in the minority, rather than the majority.

• Are there reasoned and authoritative conclusions as to where the literature is, or perhaps should be going, and what important questions, or gaps, still exist in the field?

There are reasons to be optimistic about the critical advance of the sub-fields of leadership studies and organizational change. So the most fruitful development of the sub-field would be areas of leadership studies and organizational change studies overlap, for example, discourse studies, social constructionism, political analyses and gender studies.

• Is there a clear statement about what contribution the review makes to theory, practice and/or research?

This review raises doubts about the knowledge which underpins investments in leadership and organizational change, particularly with regards to public services; troublingly there is a lack of empirical work, with even academics now defaulting to citing practitioner accounts of leadership and organizational change (see Table 1).

Please Note BAM submission guidelines limit this paper to no more than 2000 words, I am happy to share a fuller version via email (m.a.hughes@brighton.ac.uk).

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Appendix

Introduction
Meta-level explanations of leadership and organizational change
Nohria and Khurana (2010)   Bryman et al (2011)   Beer and Nohria (2000)   Burke et al (2009)   Boje et al, (2011)
Leadership and organizational change citations
Leading change (Kotter, 1996) - 5543   Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail (Kotter, 1995) - 3795   Transformational leadership (Bass and Riggio, 2005) - 3213   Improving organizational effectiveness through transformational leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1993)- 2654   Transformational leader behaviors and their effects on followers' trust in leader, satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Podsakoff et al, 1990) - 2592
Discussion – Leadership and organizational change academic indifference
• Language and definitions   • Management and leadership differentiations   • Research methods, methodologies and access   • Socially constructed leadership
Conclusions (IJMR Key Principles abbreviated)
• Is the field/sub-field mature enough to warrant a literature review?
• Are details provided of how the boundaries to that field have been defined?
• Synthesis and evaluation of the accumulated state of knowledge in that field?
• Does the review include consideration of how research has developed in the field into sub-categories, concepts or themes that can provide a more holistic interpretation and (re)categorization of that field?
• Is there a complete analysis of the literature surveyed in terms of discussions of any contrasting methodologies used in the literature, the strength and weakness of particular approaches to studying the subject under review, the quality of the studies in the field, the general conclusions to be drawn from the literature?
• Are there reasoned and authoritative conclusions as to where the literature is, or perhaps should be going, and what important questions, or gaps, still exist in the field?
• Is there a clear statement about what contribution the review makes to theory, practice and/or research?

Table 3 – Paper summary table