A Theoretical Framework for Agency

Eric T. (Rick) Mogren, PhD
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Introduction:

• “Agency” = the capacity of individuals to:
  • Cognitively reflect on social circumstances
  • Imagine new or innovative social structures
  • Act to bring those changes about

• Source:
  • Institutional analysis of governance history in the Columbia River Basin
  • “A Paradox of Governance”

• Question:
  • What influences “agents” when establishing governance networks?
Model for Network Establishment

**Existing Systems and Structures**
(Established relationships with patterns of conflict, dominance and frustration during periods of stability within a network of systems)

- Organization #1 with supporting constituents
- Organization #2 with supporting constituents
- Organization #3 with supporting constituents
- Organization #...n with supporting constituents

**Critical Situation**
- Calls existing patterns and relationships into question
- Creates opportunity to revise existing systems and structures

**Conflict?**
- Yes
- No

**Conflict**
- Critical situations reopen suppressed or open new lines of conflict
- Components of conflict: interests and values
- “Realistic” (or instrumental) conflict due to competing interests or scarce resources
  - Leads to desire for rational governance process
- “Social” (identity based) conflict results in (1) “rightness” of institutional positions and (2) disagreement over form and authority

**Resolution**
- Leaders call for rational systems and process
- “Agents” meet to negotiate and promote institutional position(s)
- Agential flexibility is both enabled and constrained by:
  - Belief systems
  - Institutional culture
  - Organizational identity
  - Individual values

**Selection / Rejection of New Systems and Structures**
(Establish new relationships and patterns of conflict, dominance and frustration)

- Revised System #1 with supporting constituents
- Revised System #2 with supporting constituents
- Revised System #3 with supporting constituents
- Revised System #...n with supporting constituents
Relevance to Sustainability?

- Public administrators frequently called upon to participate and/or lead network establishment
- Network members represent variety of institutional cultures, identities, worldviews, and values
- Skills needed go beyond agency technical training
- Network leader needs skills of diplomat / statesperson:
- Sustainable relationships within the network depend on a sense of common purpose and identity
Underlying Propositions:

1. The organizational role
2. Challenges transcend traditional jurisdictions
3. Emerging trend: multi-jurisdictional networks
4. Network building blocks = institutions
5. Networks constituted by institutional representatives
6. Assumptions of network establishment:
   - Issues are interest-based
   - Solutions based on rational choice / optimization
Theoretical Framework (cont’d)

Sociology

**Functionalist Theory:** Individual behavior is driven by social norms & group expectations

**Behavioralist Theory:** Group behavior is collective of individual actions

Efforts to reconcile led to

**Structuration Theory:** Dynamic and continuous interaction between the individual and society that both constrains individual behavior and allows society to adapt and advance in time

- Explains “what” happens
- Partially explains “why”
- Does not explain intensity
- Does not explain “how”
Theoretical Framework (cont’d)

Sociology

Social psychology

**Organizational Culture:**
- Social systems defined by patterns and structures of rules, norms, belief systems
- Culture = learning process
- Pattern of “shared basic assumptions” with strong psychological effect
- *Teaches members correct way to perceive, think, and feel under given circumstances*

**Social Identity theory:**
- Individuals self-categorize into social groupings that exhibit values the individual holds or wishes to assume
- Group becomes integrated into the individual’s sense of self
- *Groups become collection of like-valued individuals*

- Better explains “why”
- Explains intensity
- Does not explain “how”
Theoretical Framework (cont’d)

Sociology
Social psychology
Psychology

Individual Decision Making: Image Theory

- Explains “how”

Diagram from Weatherly and Beach, 1998, (Adapted from figure 14.1, p. 212)
Theoretical Framework

Structuration
Organizational Culture
Social Identity
Decision Theory

Historical institutional evolution

Integration provides linkages between institutional values and interests and agential decision making

Explains the “what,” “why,” and “how” of agential action in the negotiation of governance networks

Results in new Governance Network
Implications for Leader Training:

1. Self awareness: the network leader comes from value-laden institutional background

2. Network participants will come from similar background

3. Primary objective of selected agents: protect organizational interests and values

4. Therefore, network success depends on the leader’s ability to instill in members a common sense of identity and purpose

5. Once established, this sense of network identity must be sustained
Questions / Discussion

Contact information: MogrenE@pdx.edu