



Building an integral metatheory of management



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ABSTRACT

The increasing fragmentation of organization theory seems not to be responding to the challenges and complexities of organizations and society. This article contends that integral theory can make an important contribution to our discipline and presents a metatheory that integrates all previous organizational knowledge in an integral, balanced and non-marginalizing framework. Using metatriangulation techniques it reviews management and organization theories, classifies them according to their underlying paradigms and integrates them in a new metatheory. The resulting theory called “3D Management” maintains that there are 3 basic and irreducible dimensions of management: science, arts and ethics which refer respectively to the techno-economical, the aesthetic-emotional and the moral aspects of organizational reality. The fourth management dimension, the spiritual dimension, integrates the Big Three in an essential unit and strives for unity and meaning. An assessment of the theory and a concluding discussion of its contributions and potential applications is provided.

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Introduction

The multifaceted crisis we are facing is shaking the world, causing financial turmoil, massive unemployment, bankruptcies, increasing inequalities, etc. A wide percentage of the population is against many of the measures Governments are adopting and many people are even questioning the system altogether and demanding a fundamental reorientation of organizations and society (Lioudakis, 2012; Marazzi, 2011)

With different degrees, this situation has been co-created by all of us. Obviously, companies and governments have a big share of responsibility, but the accusatory finger also points at academia for reasons including our incapacity to anticipate changes, our distance to the business world and the irrelevance of our research. That is why authors like Corley and Gioia (2011) and Okhuysen and Bonardi (2011) hold that management science has come up short in fulfilling the charge of being on the leading edge of management thinking and Polzer, Gulati, Khurana, and Tushman (2009: 280) note, the failure “to either anticipate or deeply understand some of the most fundamental challenges of our times threatens the legitimacy of our enterprise”.

The increasing fragmentation of management and organization theory can be one of the reasons we are not conveniently responding to the challenges of organizations and society. Traditional approaches to building management theories have led to valuable but incomplete views on organizations as a result of being developed under the premises of a single paradigm (Gioia & Pitre,

1990; Robledo, 2004, 2005a, 2005b). As Edwards (2010a, 2010b: 223) puts it, middle-range theory will not resolve global problems. The growing complexity of society and management requires explanations that are matched in complexity (Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011). The current organizational models, critical or mainstream, are too simple, taken individually, to encompass it (Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2010) and insufficient to account for future trends (Corley & Gioia, 2011).

For more than 50 years theory testing and elaboration of middle-range theories has been the dominant area of research in our field with little to none effort of integration. This could be the moment to emphasize not the confrontation of reductionisms, but the integration towards increasingly holistic and complex theories. Global problems of the scale that we currently face, require and integral vision and some level of big-picture metatheoretical response. If we believe Edwards (2010b: 3): “There has never been a time when integrative metatheorising could be of greater importance.”

This article adopts an alternative approach of theory building based on metatheoretical research in order to obtain a more comprehensive view of organizational phenomena that better reflects the multifaceted nature of these institutions (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). As a result of that, it presents an integral metatheory of management developed by the author that integrates all previous organizational knowledge in an integral, balanced and non-marginalizing framework.

The article starts by highlighting the lack of a dominant paradigm in the field, the consequences of that and the need for higher integration of theories into more complex ones. It then presents integral theory as a useful theory for those purposes. Following, a methodology of multiparadigm research called metatriangulation

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is used to integrate the theories of business administration in a single metatheory. The first step of this metatriangulation process is a multiparadigm review of management and organization theories classifying them and identifying their underlying paradigms using integral-theory's AQAL methodology. Then, a synthesis, comparison and study of transition zones between theories and paradigms are provided. As a result of that, an integral theory we call 3D-Management that integrates all of them into a metatheoretical epistemological framework is proposed. Lastly, the new and original metatheory is evaluated and its implications for management research, education and practice are discussed.

Towards an integral metatheory of management

Management seems to be progressing not towards normal science (Kuhn, 1962), i.e. convergence of knowledge in a single paradigm or "Grand Narrative". Research in our field seems to evolve towards the model of proliferation of paradigms defended by Feyerabend (1970) as a result of the increasing diversity of research perspectives, theories and schools of thought (Bartunek, Bobko, & Venkatraman, 1993; McKinley, Mone, & Moon 1999; Pfeffer, 1993). The lack of a dominant paradigm leads to competition between schools (Kuhn, 1962) guided by different belief systems and ways of thinking and researching the business world (Robledo, 2004: 80).

The information overload that academicians suffer (Field, 1993; McKinley et al., 1999) as a result of the increasing theoretical diversity¹ of our field (a phenomenon reported by Koontz (1961) as early as 1961) prevent researchers from exploring related disciplines and fields and may push them closer to becoming locked in their own paradigms.

This situation is viewed very differently from functionalism or from postmodernism. Functionalists and modernists believe that Management is in a pre-paradigm stage, waiting for the advent of the period of normal science. Authors of this trend (Burrell, 1996; Donaldson, 1985; Grandori, 2001; Pfeffer, 1993) define the current state of fragmentation as a "Tower of Babel" or a "balkanization" where the plethora of theories cannot even communicate with each other, with two main consequences: excessive theoretical compartmentalization (Astley & Van de Ven, 1983), and incommensurability of their assumptions and methods (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Jackson & Carter, 1991; Schultz & Hatch, 1996; McKinley & Mone, 1998; Scherer, 1998).

On the contrary, postmodernists believe that Management is in a perpetual multiparadigm stage (Cannella & Paetzold, 1994; Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Zald, 1996) and there it has to remain, since a growing theoretical pluralism is indicative of a better understanding of the complex nature of organizations and of a refinement of the interests and concerns of researchers. From their point of view, the measure of success of our discipline lies in the fragmentation, lack of consensus, and methodological tolerance that open new areas of study that would likely be ignored in a stage of normal science. They consider pernicious the "paradigmatic mentality" (Bouchikhi, 1998; Deetz, 1996; Reed, 1996) that causes polarization of perspectives and inhibit the discourse between paradigms, skewing the theorists against different views and encouraging theoretical provincialism and confrontation.

However, there seems to be a consensus between the two factions on the need to advance towards a higher integration of theories in more complex ones (Elsbach, Sutton, & Whetten, 1999). For the functionalists, it is a step towards their desired period of normal science and for the postmodernists it enables dialogue between paradigms.

Edwards (2010b: 2) believes that what is required is a balance between the synthesizing instincts of modernity and the respect for pluralism of the postmodern. Integration can be the middle way, since it addresses the problem of increasing theoretical perspectives in our field, while finding ways of valuing the differences between mainstream and marginal discourses. That is why an increasing number of authors (Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Lewis & Kelemen, 2002) advocate for the multiparadigm study of organizations as an alternative to the mainstream dominance of functionalism and the ongoing diversity of postmodernism.

Since the American philosopher Ken Wilber started talking about integral theory in 2000, it has become the most influential theory within the larger fields of integral studies² and metatheory³ and has been considered "the most integral of integral theories" (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2010a: 11). Wilber first began to use the word "integral" to refer to his approach in 1995. He clarifies what he means by it (Wilber, 2003: xii–xiii):

"The word integral means comprehensive, inclusive, non-marginalizing, embracing. Integral approaches to any field attempt to be exactly that: to include as many perspectives, styles, and methodologies as possible within a coherent view of the topic. In a certain sense, integral approaches are "meta-paradigms," or ways to draw together an already existing number of separate paradigms into an interrelated network of approaches that are mutually enriching."

The general field referred to as "integral" had its genesis in what is known as "cross disciplinary studies." These approaches sought to bring together (merge or blend) the various fields of human study in academic institutions. This initially resulted in a "heap" of knowledge rather than an integrated "system" of knowledge. But eventually, after many decades of research and synthesis and some significant breakthroughs, what emerged was an "integrating" of these fields into one coherent whole knowledge system: Integral Theory, defined by Esbjörn-Hargens (2010b: 34) as follows:

"Integral Theory is the comprehensive study of reality, which weaves together the significant insights from all the major human disciplines of knowledge acquisition, including the natural and social sciences as well as the arts and humanities.(...) Because integral theory systematically includes more of reality and interrelates it more thoroughly than any other current approach to assessment and solution building, it has the potential to be more successful in dealing with the complex problems we face in the 21st century".

In particular, an integral theory is a theory that seeks for a complete and holistic understanding of reality in all its facets. To do that, it tries to incorporate as many perspectives and methodologies as possible into a single coherent vision. An integral approach is, therefore, a metaparadigm approach, which joins previously separated paradigms in more complex metatheories (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2010a).

According to Edwards (2010a: 387), "metatheorizing is a form of conceptual research that recognizes the validity of each theoretical

² As Esbjörn-Hargens (2010b) clarifies, integral studies encompass all visions and theories that present a comprehensive view of reality and aim at the development of metatheories. Under its umbrella we find thinkers like Wilber himself, Cowan, Aurobindo, Gebser, Laszlo, Sorokin, etc. Instead, integral theory is developed by Wilber and his followers, focusing on the AQAL model and its applications. However, it is more common to find the term integral theory not only applied to Wilber's work but broadly defined as a synonym of integral studies and not only circumscribed to Wilber's work.

³ A metatheory is a theory that is dedicated to the study of other theory or set of theories. In a general sense, it could be considered a "theory of theories". The field of metatheory includes the work of George Ritzer, Roy Bahskar, Gioia and Pitre, Lewis and Grimes, etc.

¹ According to Carson, Lanier, Carson, and Guifrey (2000: 43–6) the life cycle of a theory is around three years.

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