Conflict Theory and Structuration:

Growing beyond Dynamic Structuration

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Introduction

We still do not fully understand why organizations suffer systematic outages largely

unrelated to external influences. What is evident, based on my experience, is that systemic

issues are usually known by technically well informed leaders and subject matter experts prior to

system failure or collapse. Given this prior knowledge, it can be suggested that environmental,

cultural, or behavioral settings may influence the sharing of this knowledge. According to Katz

and Kahn, leadership behavior occurs in three settings (1978). The first locale where leadership

behavior occurs is during the introduction of structure. This setting is driven largely by external

influences on the organization and according to Katz and Kahn is the most difficult. The second

situation is during the interpolation of structure, also known as improvisation in which the leader

pieces out, or improvises, policy to keep the organization moving (Katz, 1978). Finally, the third

setting suggested by Katz and Kahn where leadership behavior occurs is during the application

of structure. This environment is used to maintain the motion of the organization. The final

ecological setting is known as administration. It is in this third setting where I am in support of

Katz and Kahn's suggestion that leadership behavior occurs (1978). Supporting evidence,

provided by Barley and Tolbert's (1997) enhanced version of Gidden's structuration model,

provides needed structure and institutionalization to explain the effects of this lower level of

leadership. Additionally, I make propositions designed to further the work summarized.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Gidden's work on structuration theory suggests that social structure is both a constraint

on human action and a product of human action (1976). His model of structuration attempts to

define the connection between social order and structure. While Gidden's has sought to fill in this void, the research served as a solid baseline for Barley and Tolbert to define a process, which moved through Gidden's structure.

Structuration, as updated by Barley and Tolbert, is a continued process that must be measured over time (1997). Their appended work of Gidden's theory suggests a more dynamic view of institutionalization (1997). As illustrated in Figure 1, a process occurs where actors move through a series of actions within the boundaries put in place by the organization. This dynamic view of structuration theory helps to explain change within an organization while providing a framework (1997) for the actors. The arrows in Barley and Tolbert's enhanced model represent structure. This updated model of structuration includes four steps labeled as encode, enact, replicate or revise, and objectification. Arrow (a) labeled *encode* is defined as the period where an individual learns the rules of the organization. Arrow (b) labeled *enact* is a largely unintentional stage while the individual acts out the organizational script as defined by the organization. The third arrow labeled (c) indicates *replication of revision*. At this stage, the individual has a choice to follow the script or revise it. If there is no context that supports revision, the individual is more likely to replicate what is already present and follow the script. Finally, arrow (d) is labeled *objectification* and suggests that repetitive organizational behavior has largely become accepted as fact. It is at this stage that previous interactions are mostly forgotten (Barley, 1997).
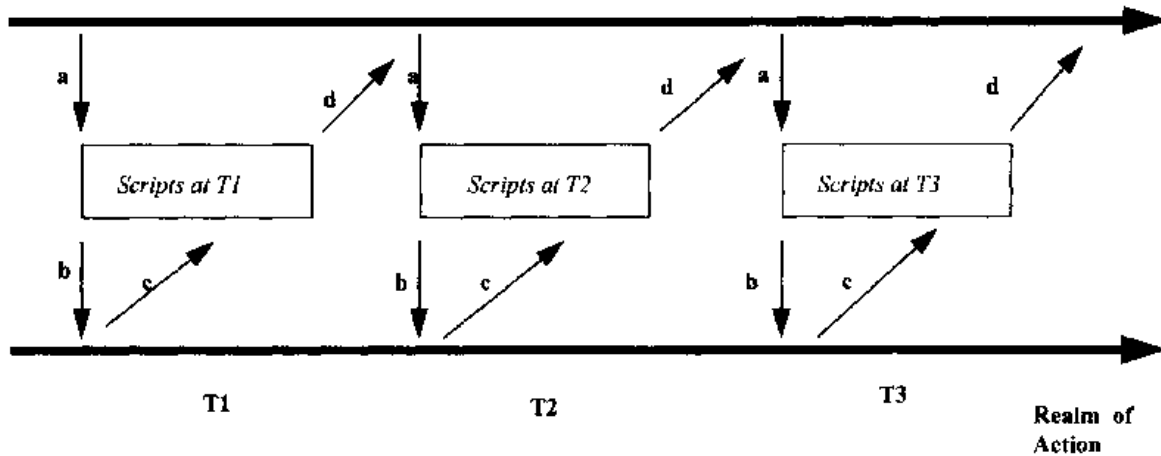
Key: a = encode, b = enact, c = replicate or revise, d = externalize and objectify

Figure 1: Barley and Tolbert (1997); A Sequential Model of Institutionalization derived from Giddens, Berger & Luckmann

Barley and Tolbert's view of structuration theory offers an updated logical explanation of organizational behavior based upon a complex environment that changes rules and scripts. I suggest that the dynamic nature of structuration theory, as presented by these researchers, is valid for a systematically developed and maintained organization. A model of conflict gives evidence that supports Barley and Tolbert's dynamic views of structuration and further suggests that the stage of administration fosters leadership behavior.
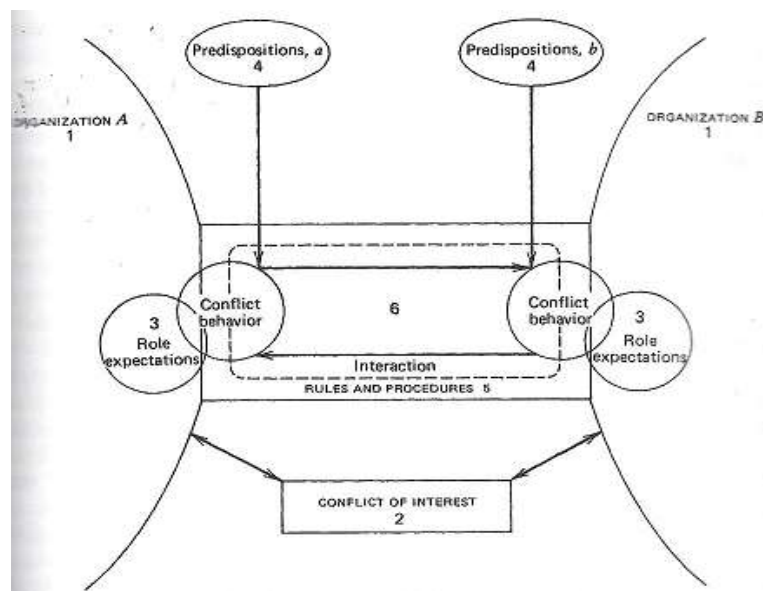
Conflict

Katz and Kahn suggest that conflict is present when, "two systems interact directly in such a way that the actions of one tend to prevent or compel some outcome against the resistance of the other (Katz, 1978, p.613). Their definition removes conflictive influence from the basic form requiring direct resistance (1978). Figure 2 indicates the six variable set used to explain conflict between two organizations (1978). These variables include several descriptors. *Organizational properties* help to define those organizational units designed to create conflict. Organizations may not have an apparent need to compete or to engage in conflict, however, the

design of such groups could foster conflict. Secondly, the *conflict of interest* variable suggests

that organizational units have properties that are incompatible with one another. Thirdly, *role*

expectations administered by the organization, suggests people operate within the guidelines of

the role they play in the organization. This role may not move beyond inner bastion of the

organization, but will serve to operate as conflict creators or managers. *Personality and*

predisposition provide a description of the individual's impact on conflict based on their

personality. *External norms, rules, and procedures* are social, legal, or organizational rules that

provide guidelines for conflict. Finally, the *interaction* variable explains the behaviors of those

working to create or engage in conflict (Katz, 1978). Any one of these variables provides

support for structuration theory by promoting structure within the organizational units by

management of conflict sources. However, it is specifically the *conflict of interest* variable in

Katz and Kahn's conflict model and the *objectification* step in structuration where I suggest a

point of convergence that helps to explain the organizational impacts of systemic conflict. I

further suggest that conflict is generated by the adherence to structure and institutionalization.

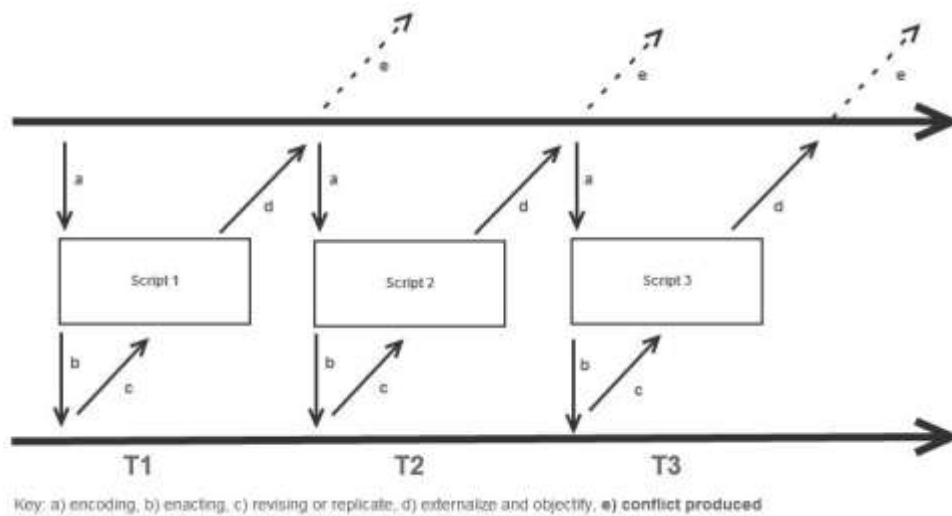**Figure 2: Katz and Kahn's Multivariate Conflict Model**

Appended and Converged Model

Thomas Kuhn suggests that ideas are actually kept out of many fields and disciplines simply because they do not fit within the current constructs (Kuhn 1970, p.24). The field of technology is not immune to this behavior among its subject matter experts. My proposed appended model (shown as Figure 3) supports this suggestion and goes on to add that the structuration model provides a basis for actor objectification of a script while merging into Katz' conflict model as an actor attempts to make sense of the script's results. Weick suggests that it is the sense maker that searches for understanding from a lifetime of experiences and is tasked with not searching for the one true picture of reality (Weick, 2001). Making sense of a script is not related to following and executing the script with many systemically integrated fields. This solidification of the objectification step known as *fact creation*, continues while often producing conflict which Katz and Kahn's' conflict model addresses as a *conflict of interest*. Additionally, there are two behaviors addressed with this converged model not currently in the scope of the structuration model.

As the actor agrees with and satisfies the script, revision is not necessary or warranted. However, often this does not negate the completeness of the scripts for quality or defect free work. A defect is defined in this new model as an error that may or may not be effecting the immediate systematic operation of a script. The scripts could become known as fact and work appropriately as the expert moves beyond the script, or it could continue to work despite not being completely correct. Conflict of interest could explain the technical expert's lack of addressing the defect or error present to a downstream system. This conflict of interest could be produced by a lack of motivation on the actor's behalf that prevents identification of the error as the script reaches maturity. As Schein posits, actors within an organization may behave in ways

that are detrimental to the organization's survival (Schein, 1992). These behaviors suggest that actors may be intentionally placing the organization under life threatening situations by not addressing known down-stream systematic potential defects.

A second behavior addressed by the appended model suggests that scripts themselves can fight against the needed stress levels of a self-preserving system. Katz and Kahn suggest that competition between human beings can create and perpetuate conflictive interactions within an organization (1978). My appended model (Figure 3) suggests that the continuation of scripts without revision can produce conflict through interactions (labeled 'e' on Figure 3). Barley and Tolbert's previous model does not take into account the production of conflict produced by actors following a script. As systems operate by way of a script, the system itself is often designed to be a self-sustaining unit. The completion of a script by an actor can produce, during normal operations, a lack of systemic stress needed to move the system out of self-preserving operations. This can produce the appearance of competitiveness between actors while providing the environment with what appears to be randomly generated defects through the system.

Key: a) encoding, b) enacting, c) revising or replicate, d) externalize and objectify, e) conflict produced

Figure 3: New Model based on Barley and Tolbert (1997); A Sequential Model of Institutionalization as derived from Giddens, Berger & Luckmann and Katz and Kahn (1978) Multivariate Conflict Model

Based on the evidence provided, I suggest that Barley and Tolbert's enhanced model of Giddens, Berger and Luckmann should include the step labeled *conflict* as shown in Figure 4. This step will take into account those actions by the actor not currently defined but present during and after the script sequencing. This conflict-generating step merges with the *revising or replicating* stage of a parallel script. Once merged, the steps of *encoding* and *enacting* are essentially skipped to produce silenced competitive actions levied upon the system either by human or by system. The research of Weick & Quinn supports this idea. They suggest that changes are continuous and instigated by a failure of adaptation (1999). I suggest that the creation of conflict in non-sequential systemic actions serves to provide non-intentional competition and change that is at many times radical and extremely difficult to indicate origin.
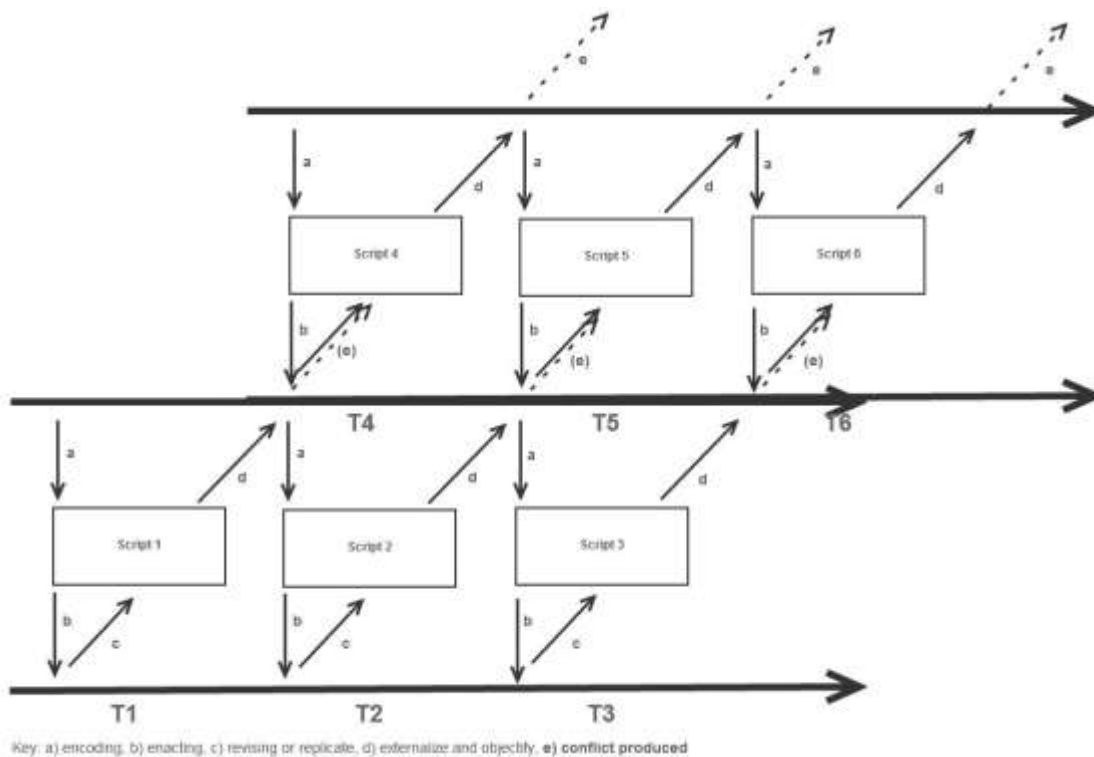

Figure 4: New Model based on Barley and Tolbert (1997); A Sequential Model of Institutionalization as derived from Giddens, Berger & Luckmann and Katz and Kahn (1978) Multivariate Conflict Model

Plowman suggests that change is both radical *and* continuous. It explains how small individual adaptations can become radical, thereby transforming an organization in unintended, yet dramatic, ways (Plowman, 2007). These human and system driven changes are difficult to locate and when accompanied across a complex organization, they provide radical change that mirrors the look of competitiveness.

Propositions and Implications

Two propositions are made to further research conflict and complex systems requirements for sustainability:

1. Complex adaptive systems may limit the overall effectiveness of institutionalization.

   The proposed research agenda on the roles of complex adaptive systems and institutionalization will promote understanding of instances where a complex system may serve to hinder the long-term health of a system. This research would include the baseline understanding of an institutionalized organization that has matured by patterned long-term organic growth.

2. Conflict is an essential step in producing continuous change required for systematic growth.

   Research agenda on the roles of conflict and continuous change will include the new model in figure 4 as a foundation used to suggest conflict is an instigator in the radical change process of destabilization of a system. This research may suggest that without conflict, systemic growth will be retarded in the organization, and may actually serve to expedite organizational entropy.

Conclusion

Organizations fight natural entropy to remain sustainable. This battle is not without scars and often in radical, largely silent, and unintended change. Conflict plays a major role in these changes, and while conflict is often viewed as negative, the reality is that without conflict, organizational growth remains stagnant. More importantly, the realization that conflict can be generated by a system not interacting with a human helps to explain the power of human influence over its surroundings. While it is the human tendency to build self-sustaining systems, it can be detrimental to do so.

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