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Organizational opinion leadership: a critical perspective

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this research is to find out two assumptions: the first derived from critical perspectives that power struggles and identity are likely to effect the relations between Organizational Opinion leaders (OOLs) and Organizational Opinion seekers (OOSs) and the second derived from the perspective that power and knowledge may have influences on the selection of OOLs. Grounded theory is utilized to analyze data gathered through semi-structured interviews. The result suggests that critical perspectives, communication channels, organizational status and identity should be considered in studying informal leadership. Leadership practitioners should take non-managerial leadership into account. Practitioners should have critical reflection. Likewise, leadership theorists should study leadership in grassroots and horizontal groups in the bottom of the organization/society. **Keywords:** Organizational Opinion Leadership, Critical perspectives, Grounded theory.

INTRODUCTION

Roger and Cartano (1962, p.435) described opinion leaders as “individuals who exert an unequal amount of influence on the decisions of others...those individuals from whom others seek advice and information”. Opinion Leadership has been well studied in

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the fields of Marketing (Flynn et al., 1996) and of Public Administration (Cohen, 2015); however, few studies are done in the area of Organizational Opinion leadership (OOL) (Chen et al., 2015).

Rogers and Cartano (1962) state that three generalizations of opinion leadership. Firstly, *opinion leaders deviate less from group norms than the average group member*: opinion leaders were more innovative than their followers. Secondly, *there is little overlap among the different types of opinion leaders*: opinion leaders tended to influence on monomorphic topic rather than polymorphic. Finally, *opinion leaders differ from their followers in information sources, cosmopolitanism, social participation, social status, and innovativeness*: Opinion leaders favor impersonal sources, cosmopolitanism, social participation in formal and informal organization, higher social status, and innovative, comparing with their followers. On the other hand, Leonard-Barton (1985) indicates the pro-innovation bias in Marketing, researchers tend to ignore the negative influence from opinion leaders, which means anti-innovative oriented (slow innovative adaptors) opinion leaders.

Peterson (1972) studied the influence of the perception of opinion leaders between managers and subordinates in three areas. *Task opinion leader* gives his/her associates opinions to complete the assigned jobs. *Organizational Scuttlebutt opinion leader* influences his associates, because this person usually has the inside story of promotions, policy changes, personnel cutbacks, potential organizational changes, and any scuttlebutt in the organization. *Personal guidance opinion leader* would be asked for advice from an organizational member on personal problems which are not related to job. He found that organization members went to their line-manger or supervisor for advice while seeking task or job-related information. Organizational members went to someone whom they believed in possessing inside story, for example, union steward or the relatives of boss, while seeking for scuttlebutt. Organizational members tend to go to close friends, while seeking for none job related advice.

On the other hand, Leonard-Barton and Kraus (1985) study opinion leadership associated with implementing new technology and find that opinion leaders have safety credibility, which means similar characters and common grounds to be trusted. Similarly, Yale and Gilly (1995) state that most human communication will occur in two similar parties in terms of certain attributes for example, demographic variables, beliefs, values,

etc. Furthermore, Leonard-Barton and Kraus (1985) also suggest that opinion leadership has two influences: positive vs. negative impacts on the technology dissemination.

Table 1. The comparison of OOLs in Marketing vs. Organizational studies

Influence	Marketing OL (MOL)	Organizational OL (OOL)
Knowledge Oriented	Innovativeness	Task OL
Status Oriented	Social status	Task OL
Personal Oriented	Friendship	Personal guidance OL
Inside story Oriented	N/A	Scuttlebutt OL

(Source: Rogers and Cartano, 1962; Peterson, 1972)

Both Marketing and Organizational OOLs are aware of status-oriented and personal oriented influences. On the other hand, Marketing Opinion leadership (MOL) focuses on innovativeness, while Organizational opinion leadership centers on task opinion leadership, in terms of knowledge-oriented influence.

The aim of this research is to figure out two assumptions: the first derived from critical perspectives that power struggles and identity are likely to have impact on the relations between Organizational Opinion leaders (OOLs) and Organizational Opinion seekers (OOSs) and the second derived from the perspective on the criteria of the selection of OOLs. This paper will compare the similarities and differences of opinion leadership between Marketing and Organizational studies as well as OOL and Distributed Leadership (DL). Moreover, the discussion of power, which is based on critical perspectives and of separating from power, which is rooted in distributed leadership will be carried out.

OOL AND POWER

Opinion leadership serves an important role in distributed leadership (Fitzgerald et al, 2013), separating from power (Hatcher, 2005). Distributed leadership opens the possibility of making all followers become autonomous leaders in organizations (Gronn, 2000). On the other hand, Collinson (2014) states that critical perspectives in studying

leadership can give an insight of the important dilemma in studying organizational issues, for example, power relations can overcome the disadvantages of the dichotomizing leadership. According to Reynolds (1998), the origin of critical theory comes from Frankfurt school and the famous scholars are Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno and the final goal for this approach is to achieve emancipatory and confronting the dominance.

In organizational studies, critical organizational theory provides “softer” approach to recognize employees’ needs and to appreciate their values and the action process is painful by overcoming inequality and unfair restriction in order to achieve emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Varghese, Edward, & George, 2017). In leadership studies, critical leadership theory gives not only the meaning of leadership in different circumstances but also power and domination related to leadership in different ideological and institution conditions (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). The critique of critical leadership indicates that critical theorist must go beyond identifying “bad leadership practice” and aim to create and support successful ethical frameworks for leadership (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012).

According to Fairclough (1989), discourse means that human beings think and communicate explicitly in texts in three contexts: social situation, institution, and society, where their relations and interaction occur. During the interaction, humans make sense to the texts through their cognitive resources, which are rooted in social origin. The society is distributed unequally due to social relations and struggles (Korstanje & George, 2020). Foucault (1980) asserts that power produces knowledge and human beings believe power over the facts, which makes things become truth. Fairclough and Graham (2010, p.302) believe that language should be taken into account in the inculcation of knowledge, which is a way to know one’s self and the world as identity and it related to a discursive formation means “what can and should be said” because of the power struggle (Fairclough, 2010, p.43). This research assumes that there are power struggles in the communication channel from bottom to up in seeking opinions from knowledge influence oriented OOLs.

On the other hand, Gronn (2002) propose a unit of analysis of distributed leadership (DL) in two dimensions: formal and informal. Informal synergy includes

friendship, which is noncontractual and depends on how actors can get benefits from the compatible personal attributes. There are four genres in formal synergy:

- (1) Cross-hierarchy: actors can blur or expand their role boundaries.
- (2) Trusteeship: the nature of the trusteeship is to inspect the corrupting power on executives.
- (3) Parity of relations: actors across hierarchical boundaries to share their roles.
- (4) Separation from powers: the segmentation of authority provides diverse sphere of actors.

Table 2. The comparison of DL and OOL

Influence	Distributed Leadership (DL)	Organizational OL (OOL)
Knowledge Oriented	Parity of relations	Task OL
Status Oriented	Weak: Cross-hierarchy & Separating from power	Strong: Task OL
Personal Oriented	Friendship	Personal guidance OL
Inside story Oriented	Negative: Trusteeship	Positive: Scuttlebutt OL

(Source: Gronn, 2002, Peterson, 1972)

The similarity between DL and OOL focuses on personal oriented influence. However, OOL shows stronger status-oriented influence than DL. In addition, OOL states the positivity of inside story-oriented influence, while DL treats it as a negative effect and deliberately use trusteeship to prevent the corruptions among the top management. Furthermore, Chen et al (2015) have already point out cognitive and affective trust (McAllister, 1995) as mediators in OOL. McAllister (1995) proposes two interpersonal trust: first, cognition-based trust, which is based on a person who trust their peers by their reliability and dependability. Second, affect-based trust, which is based on reciprocity by interpersonal care and concern. Therefore, trust is the key in friendship-informal synergy in DL and personal guidance OL.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopts in-depth qualitative approach to investigate organizational opinion leadership in critical perspectives. The semi-structured interview is utilized to

collect data from 19 informants in US and 9 out of 19 work in managerial positions. The demographic data show that 74% of interviewees are 21-30 years old and 79% of informants are female. 79% of interviewees only work 0-5 years in their companies.

There are two sets of informants: managerial and non-managerial in order to do the comparison and categorizes in-group and out-group by their positions. In terms of data collection, semi-structured interviews will be adopted to understand the “meaning” of the responses which relates to OOL. The interview questions are based on the researcher’s theoretical propositions (Flick, 1998; Silverman, 2000). A pilot study was conducted on July 8th, 2019 and collected from seven informants. The second data collection was conducted on August 23rd, 2019.

Data analysis adopts grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). Grounded theory analysis consists of three stages: *Open coding*: where the text is read reflectively to identify relevant categories for the nodes. *Axial coding*: categories are systematically developed and linked with subcategories. *Selective coding*: means the integration of concepts around a core category, and the filling in of categories in need of further development and refinement. The similarities and differences of categories are found.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The meanings of OOL

This research finds that both managerial and non-managerial OOSs expect OOLs who have status and knowledge-oriented influences, especially managerial OOSs emphasize on status as the most important criteria to be OOLs. The first person, who managerial OOSs seek information, opinions or advice in their work organizations, is their supervisor, on the other hand, the person, who non-managerial OOSs typically go to first for assistances, is their peers.

Q1 shows that managerial OOSs seeks opinions from their supervisors, who are status and knowledge oriented OOL. It confirms Peterson’s finding (1972): organizational members ask for help from their line-supervisors, while seeking task or job-related advices. It also confirms Foucault’s (1980) power and knowledge theory.

“My supervisor. IF she does not have the information. Then I follow the chain of command. I go to my supervisor because it is her job and responsibility to be there as a

resource for me and should be able to answer any questions that I have. She has been working in Human resources for a very long time and dealt with many things I deal with day to day. Also, my organization has a policy on following the chain of command.” (P, Interviewing manager, Aug.27, 2019)

By contrast, non-managerial OOSs seeks opinions from their peers first, as knowledge oriented OOL.

“First, I would check with my partner that I work with daily in the same department. If he isn’t sure. I would then check with my supervisor. I typically would follow the chain of command. Depending on the subject I may go to my supervisor first.” (D, Interviewing non-manager, Aug.23, 2019)

Q2 states that the essence of the OOL is knowledge oriented OOL. Both managerial and non-managerial OOSs believe that their OOL should have the knowledge, skills and abilities related to the task matter when it comes to seeking them out for information, opinions, or advice.

“Yes. The better knowledge a person has on a topic is great when doing a task because it gives them a little bit of guidance rather than doing a task you have no knowledge on. Already having knowledge on a task is good so you can figure out different ways to complete it.” (L, Interviewing non-manager, Aug. 23, 2019)

Q3 supports Q1 and indicate that managerial OOSs seek status and knowledge oriented OOL. Managerial OOSs believe the criteria they use in choosing the person who will have the most credibility with them are the skills, which they are working on.

“Field of the study, current position, years/experiences in that position, skill in the particular task I am working on.” (N, Interviewing, manager, July 8. 2019)

On the other hand, Non-managerial OOSs care about the characters of OOLs, such as easy to talk to, get along with, or work attitudes. Opinion leaders have safety credibility, which means similar characters and common grounds to be trusted (Leonard-Barton and Kraus,1985). OOL has a similar characteristic as distributed leadership-friendship (Gronn, 2002) in informal synergy.

“I have to be able to trust this person. I have to feel comfortable talking to you because people will try to downplay your feelings...” (K, Interviewing non-manager, July8, 2019)

OOL and power

The data from Q4 support a discursive formation, for instance, power struggles occur in bottom-up vertical communication channel, when both managerial and non-managerial OOs seek opinions from their supervisors, comparing with seeking opinions from their coworkers. Fairclough and Graham (2010, p.302) believe that language should be taken into account in the inculcation of knowledge, which is a way to know one's self and the world as identity and it related to a discursive formation means "what can and should be said" because of the power struggle (Fairclough, 2010, p.43).

"A: your supervisor: I can talk freely with my supervisor because of our conversation are confidential. I use a more professional attitude with our boss. B: your colleagues: I can talk freely with the other assistant managers, but the attitude is different than when with our supervisor. My attitude is more casual/laid back with them." (V, Interviewing manager, Aug.23, 2019)

Q5 shows power struggles in non-managerial OOLs, who could express their opinions freely with "respect" and "professional manners", when OOLs have lower organizational status than OOs. It is to say that OOLs are aware of their organizational statuses and identity.

"A: your supervisor: This is your boss so you can just talk freely to them, however, you want because if they are addressing a matter with you it is serious. You should have a more determined attitude in this situation and show you are going to get on and address the matter quickly. B: your colleagues: These guys are your friends, so they understand you and you understand them" (I, Interviewing non-manger, Aug.23, 2019)

Nevertheless, Managerial OOLs do not feel power struggles and it confirms that opinion leadership serves an important role in distributed leadership (Fitzgerald et al, 2013), separating from power and cross-hierarchy (Gronn, 2002; Hatcher, 2005).

"A: your supervisor: ...Yes, I can talk freely because I am over her other employees, so she respects my opinions. B: your colleagues: I also ask them in a respectful way and ask them for advice on managing other people. I talk freely because they want to be able to help me." (T, Interviewing manager, Aug. 23, 2019)

Q5 confirms Q1 and Q3, non-managerial OOLs could express their opinions without “sugar coated” in the horizontal communication channel with their peers as knowledge oriented OOLs.

“B: your colleagues: My colleague reaches out for my opinion on work related topics quite regularly and knows that I will express my honest opinion instead of “sugar coating it”. However, I am still respectful when I talk with my colleague.” (A, Interviewing non-manger, July8, 2019)

Q6 show that non-managerial OOSs seeks personal related opinions among peers, therefore, it is to say that personal oriented OOL only exists in the horizontal communication channel.

“I feel as though I could talk freely about my personal matter with some coworkers.” (E, Interviewing non-manger, Aug.23, 2019)

Q7 verify that 70% of non-managerial OOLs feel comfortable to give their opinions among coworkers. It agrees with distributed leadership-friendship in informal synergy (Gronn, 2002). Non-managerial OOLs identify themselves as in-group based on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner,1986) in horizontal communicational channel as personal oriented OOL.

“B: your colleague: I will listen but also give the best advice I could if they ask. If they do not ask, I do not express my advice or opinion.” (C, Interviewing non-manager, Aug.23, 2019)

Both Q6 and Q7 support the finding of Peterson (1972): organizational members tend to go to close friends to ask for personal advices.

Table 3. Managerial vs. non-managerial OOL

Influence	Managerial OOL	Non-managerial OOL	Organizational OL (OOL)
Knowledge Oriented	DL-Separating from power &Cross-hierarchy	Power struggles: (Supervisor OOSs)	Task OL
Status Oriented	Positive: opinions from authority	Negative: opinions from peers	Task OL
Personal Oriented	N/A	DL-Friendship	Personal guidance OL
Inside story Oriented	N/A	N/A	Positive: Scuttlebutt OL

There are two similar characters between DL and OOL in respect to knowledge-oriented influence, the first focuses on DL-separating from power and cross-hierarchy in managerial OOL and the second pays attention to DL-friendship and Personal guidance OL in terms of personal oriented influence. Non-managerial OOLs feel power struggles, when their supervisors seek opinions from them. Managerial OOLs prefer to seek opinions from their supervisors, while non-managerial OOLs prefer their peers to their supervisors.

CONCLUSION

The researchers conducted this research in order to answer two assumptions with in-depth qualitative research method. This research adopted Grounded theory data analysis to generate new findings, for example, non-managerial opinion leadership are from within and it suggests leadership theorists should explore non-managerial leadership. The findings were insightful for both theory and practice. Firstly, managerial OOLs seek status and knowledge oriented OOLs from their supervisors in top-down vertical communication channel, however, non-managerial OOLs seek only knowledge oriented OOLs among peers. Secondly, power struggles occur in bottom-up vertical communication channel, but there is no power struggle in managerial OOLs. Thirdly, non-managerial OOLs could express their opinions without “sugar coated” in the horizontal communication channel with their peers as knowledge oriented OOLs. Fourthly, personal oriented OOLs only take place in the horizontal communication channel among non-managerial OOLs. Finally, non-managerial leadership should be taken into account in studying leadership.

The result suggests that critical perspectives (Collinson, 2014), communication channels, organizational status and identity should be considered in studying informal leadership. Firstly, it is interesting to note that OOL has similar characters as distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002), for instance, separating from power and cross-hierarchy in formal synergy and friendship in informal synergy. Secondly, the organizational role of OOL has effects on power struggles, for example, managerial OOL shows no power struggles, while non-managerial OOL struggles power even though they are OOLs in the

bottom-up vertical communicational channel. Thirdly, this research suggests Leadership should take non-managerial leadership into consideration. Fourthly, the communication channels have big impact on OOL, for instance, managerial OOSs seek status and knowledge oriented OOLs in top-down vertical communication channel, while non-managerial OOSs seek only knowledge oriented OOLs in horizontal communicational channel. In addition, power struggles occur (Foucault, 1980) in bottom-up vertical communication channel, when both managerial and non-managerial OOSs seeks opinions from their supervisors. Finally, personal oriented OOLs only occur in the horizontal communication channel in non-managerial positions.

For the future research development in OOL, this research suggests that space and time should explore to find out where and when the activities of opinion seeking are happened in formal and informal settings, at first. Secondly, corporate culture, organizational structure and sectors should be taken into account. Thirdly, diversity should be considered for example, gender, age and race...etc. Fourthly, geographical location and economic development of the area should have impacts on the way of seeking opinions. Fifthly, technology change also has strong impacts on how OOSs seek opinions in an organization. Finally, it will be very interesting to see the international comparison on how national culture programs people's mind (socio-cognitive) in terms of seeking opinions and being opinion leaders in organizations.

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APPENDIX 1

1. Questions for Organizational Opinion Leadership Research:

1. When you are seeking out information, opinions, or advice while working in your organization, who do you typically go to first for assistance? Why do you go to that person?

2. Does a person's knowledge, skills, and abilities related to the task matter when it comes to seeking them out for information, opinions, or advice? If so, in what ways do the person's knowledge, skills, and abilities matter? If not, why?

3. When you are seeking out advice from, or the opinion of, someone with whom you are working, what are the criteria you use in choosing the person who will have the most credibility with you?

4. How do you talk to the following persons when you consult their opinions about work-related matters? Do you use same/ different attitude and why? Can you talk freely, why/why not?

A: your supervisor/B: you colleagues/C: your subordinates:

5. How do you talk to the following persons when they consult your opinions about work-related matters? Do you use same/ different attitude and why? Can you talk freely, why/why not?

A: your supervisor/B: you colleagues/C: your subordinates:

6. How do you talk to the following person when you consult their opinions about personal matters? Do you use same/ different attitude and why? Can you talk freely, why/why not?

A: your supervisor/B: you colleagues/C: your subordinates:

7. How do you talk to the following person when they consult your opinions about personal matters? Do you use same/ different attitude and why? Can you talk freely and why/why not?

A: your supervisor/B: you colleagues/C: your subordinates:

APPENDIX 2

Informant	Industry	Position: M vs. non-M	Age	Gender	Year of service
A	Healthcare	Non-M	21-30	F	6-10
B	Healthcare	Non-M	21-30	F	0-5
C	Banking	Non-M	21-30	F	0-5
D	Manufacturing	Non-M	21-30	M	0-5
E	Higher ED	Non-M	18-20	F	0-5
F	Healthcare	Non-M	21-30	M	6-10
I	Finance	Non-M	18-20	M	0-5
J	Legal	Non-M	21-30	M	0-5
K	Retail	Non-M	21-30	F	0-5
L	Food	Non-M	21-30	F	0-5
M	Healthcare	M	41-50	F	0-5
N	Gov.	M	21-30	F	0-5
O	Retail	M	21-30	F	0-5
P	Healthcare	M	21-30	F	0-5
R	Education	M	51-60	F	21-25
S	Food	M	21-30	F	6-10
T	Agriculture	M	21-30	F	0-5
U	Food	M	31-40	F	0-5
V	Food	M	21-30	F	0-5