

Research Statement for Rich DeJordy

As a PhD student, I have been fascinated by the macro/micro divide in organizational research. In particular, I am intrigued that social conformity phenomena manifest at different levels of analysis appear to receive little integrated attention. This seems at odds with my experience as an IT professional where I saw common patterns of social conformity in individuals (e.g., all racing to master the latest development tools), companies (e.g., all converging on the same software systems), and industries (e.g., all embracing the hottest standard). My research agenda explicitly investigates the commonalities of social conformity processes across varying levels of analysis. My interest is specifically on those aspects of the nature and consequences of identity, network, and institutional mechanisms of social conformity that transcend levels of analysis.

Social Conformity Across Levels of Analysis

My dissertation research examines how individual agents actively perpetuate institutional mechanisms of social conformity. Specifically, I look at the role of individual agency in institutional conformity, departing from institutional theory's traditional emphasis on organizational conformity to institutional pressures. Further, while recent work in institutional entrepreneurship addresses individual agents who actively work to effect institutional change that serves their interests, less research focuses on the role of agents who actively fight for the status quo. My dissertation examines an institutional context in which existing arrangements are championed despite threats to the institution's legitimacy. In particular, I analyze the US stock market in the early 1930s, an institution that had suffered a crisis of legitimacy and confidence after the crash and decline that started in 1929. I focus on the actions of principle players (e.g., the president, congress, investment bankers, stock exchange officials), elaborating the mechanisms they use to restore confidence in and preserve that institution. Using grounded theory, I uncover patterns of institutional guardianship in which various actors lay claim to institutional preservation based on perspectives tied to their institutional role.

My research contributes to both institutional theory and the broader topic of social conformity. For institutional theory, my research highlights a form of institutional agency that has received little systematic attention – the use of agency to preserve and propagate institutions. Further, as the persistent nature of institutions transcends the “old” and “new” institutionalisms, focusing on the role of institutional guardians represents a potential point of integration between them. From the perspective of social conformity, I identify mechanisms employed by individuals to preserve structures that support broad-level conformity. I plan to subsequently compare these mechanisms to those that work within a single level of analysis or across other levels.

At the individual level, my forthcoming article “Just passing through: Stigma, passing, and identity decoupling in the workplace” (*Group & Organization Management*, In-Press) examines the unintended consequences experienced by individuals with invisible stigmatized identities who choose not to reveal those identities in the organizational context. This work opens the door to another relatively unexplored but common organizational phenomenon, “passing,” and identity information management more generally. Although there has been a growing body of research around invisible stigmatized identities, the focus is predominantly on the (generally positive) consequences for individuals who reveal their identities; less work has focused on the experiences of those who present an identity that conforms to societal identity assumptions through passing. As part of the research agenda for understanding the phenomenon of passing set in this article, I am working with Doug Creed (URI) to investigate the interaction between institutional contexts and identity information management decisions.

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Social Conformity, Networks, and Leadership

Inherent in the phenomenon of social conformity is a social network perspective: Social conformity requires a structured, social object (e.g., an organizational context or institution) to which one is related and conforms. While implicit in the research above, this perspective is more explicit in my work with Alan Daly (UCSD School of Education). Our focus is on the leadership networks of several school districts across the nation, examining, among other things, how individuals and organizations are affected when leaders conform (or not) to the perceptions of the professional networks in which they are embedded. Although data collection for this longitudinal study is ongoing, we plan to present initial results and methodological innovations at the International Network for Social Network Analysis (INSNA) annual meeting next year.

Social Conformity in Management Research

Social conformity behavior can also be found in academia. Institutionalists have noted how early research in a particular area can influence how subsequent research is approached (e.g., DiMaggio, 1988; Mizruchi & Fein, 1999). One result is that questions not well suited to that particular approach may remain unasked, which is the premise behind the All Academy Symposium I organized for the 2008 Academy meeting. For example, in my role as the inaugural doctoral fellow at the Winston Center for Leadership and Ethics, I worked with Mary Ann Glynn to review empirical studies of leadership in the three top organizational journals, combining content and network analysis. In our forthcoming chapter (Leadership through and Organizational Behavior Lens, in R. Khurana & N. Nohria (Eds.) *Leadership*, HBS Press, forthcoming), we found that leadership research is typified by quantitative studies focused on the relationship between individual leaders and performance using variance models in unspecified settings. This research raises the uncomfortable question of whether research which does not conform, at least partially, to the archetype enumerated above can easily survive the publication process and taken-for-granted expectations of reviewers and editors.

Social conformity can also affect academic research in the predominant use of specific methods with specific data or for specific theories. In other collaborative research (Visualizing Proximity Data, *Field Methods*, 2007, 19(3):239), I explore one case when a particular tool (network visualization) can be useful in examining data on which it is not traditionally used (aggregate proximity matrices and correlation tables). One of my goals in that paper is to highlight the potential benefits of, at least to occasionally, taking a valid but unconventional (i.e., non-conforming) approach to analyzing data. A similar goal informs my Academy Proceedings publication, "A vision for overcoming challenges in cross-cultural management research and practice" (*Academy of Management Best Papers Proceedings*, 2005), which examines the validity, ethical, and practical considerations of conforming to mainstream management research practices when conducting management research in multi-national/multi-cultural settings.

Conclusion

Taken together, my publications and research agenda advance our understanding of the consequences and mechanisms of social conformity in and of organizations by contributing to institutional theory and social identity theory. It also begins to stimulate new streams and forms of research by addressing questions which have remained unasked, or at least unanswered, and highlighting potential consequences of conformity in our research methods and designs and offering alternative perspectives and approaches.