

# On the Parable of the Management Scholars and the Russia–Ukraine War

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**We invoke the parable of “the blind men [sic] and the elephant” to argue that conflicting perspectives from scholars across management subfields preclude a comprehensive understanding of the Russia–Ukraine war. To address this problem, we argue for the need to develop programmatic theories that provide better explanations and predictions and guide empirical research by adopting multilevel and multimethod approaches.**

*A group of management scholars attended a conference and discussed the Russia–Ukraine war. One of them issued a challenge by saying, “this is an awful thing going on. But, fortunately, we have done research that allows us to understand the situation.” The others agreed. So, they decided to offer explanations using management theories. The first one to speak up was an organizational behavior scholar. “Of course,” she said, “it’s all about leadership. Putin’s behavior is explained by research on political maturity and confirms the notion that politics will challenge assumptions of rationality. Further, his actions, and those of Russia, are also explained by theories on how incentives permeate from the individual to the collective.” Another researcher disagreed with what the first one said. Instead, she offered her own explanation: “You need to think bigger – this is a problem of resources, agency, and transaction cost economics. Russia seeks to maximize the political-military strategic value of the region through reintegration and control.” After a heated discussion, a third researcher chimed in: “To truly understand what is going on, we need to conduct qualitative research including in-depth interviews with policy-makers, in-the-field observations, and critical comparisons to similar historical events. We should conceptualize this situation from multiple angles, including a Russian viewpoint, and not just a Western perspective.” And a fourth management scholar offered yet a different perspective: “To understand the Russia–*

*Ukraine war, we need to conduct quantitative research: How do Ukraine’s ethnic and economic ties to Russia make it such a target since its independence? I’m certain we can gain important insights from census and trade databases since the 1990s and earlier.” In the end, the management scholars did not agree on what was a good explanation and how to conduct research on the issue. Consequently, they were unable to provide convincing explanations for the causes and dynamics that led to this conflict or recommendations for policy-makers on how to end it.*

The preceding story resonates because it is representative of conversations taking place among management scholars around the world. It is based on extrapolating the parable of “the blind men [sic] and the elephant” described in Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain texts, and it illustrates the importance of complete context. Although there are several versions, the story goes as follows: A group of blind men heard that a strange animal, called an elephant, had been brought to the town, but none of them knew its shape and form. Out of curiosity, they said: “We must inspect and know it by touch, of which we are capable.” So, they sought it out, and when they found it, they groped about it. The first person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said, “this being is like a thick snake.” For another one, whose hand reached its ear, it seemed like a fan.

A free video abstract to accompany this article can be found online at: <https://youtu.be/PYtXk4jGvYw>

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Another person, whose hand was upon its leg said, “the elephant is a pillar, like a tree trunk.” The blind man who placed his hand upon its side said, “it is a wall.” Another, who felt its tail, described it as a rope. The last felt its tusk, stating the elephant is “that which is hard, smooth and like a spear.”

We rely on this ancient story to argue that our parable of the management scholars and the Russia–Ukraine war illustrates several schisms in the field of management along disciplinary divides such as micro, which focuses mostly on the individual and team levels of analysis, versus macro, which focuses mostly on the firm and industry levels (and also nation and region). The parable also illustrates the methodological divide between qualitative and quantitative ontological perspectives and approaches.

Of course, there is empirical evidence that all of the scholars involved in our parable are right—to some extent. Theories on leadership, incentives, and other micro domains can be useful in explaining the war (e.g., Doldor, 2017). Macro theories on agency, resources, and transaction cost economics can also allow us to understand the war (e.g., Crook *et al.*, 2013). But all of these theories are also insufficient in that each conceptualization is only partial (i.e., only accounts for a small fraction of variance in outcome variables) and does not address the complete picture. The moral of the parable is that *all of us management scholars view reality based on our own specific experience, training, and theoretical and methodological lenses—just like each blind person had only a partial perspective on what an elephant looks like.*

We strongly believe that management scholarship can offer timely, important, and useful solutions for society—such as understanding the reasons for the Russia–Ukraine war, and how to hopefully prevent similar conflicts in the future. But, to do so, we also believe we must adopt a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach that combines unit theories into programmatic theory, uses multiple methods, and adopts a multilevel perspective. We describe each of these proposed actions and then offer suggestions on how to make them a reality.

## The need for programmatic theory

Unit theories such as those about leadership, incentives, resources, agency, and transaction cost

economics are concerned with explaining a specific phenomenon. In contrast, programmatic theory organizes unit theories into a broader sense-giving structure that clarifies (a) how the unit theories coherently relate to each other, and (b) which part of the focal phenomenon each unit theory seeks to explain (i.e. boundary conditions) (Cronin *et al.*, 2021). In other words, programmatic theory is made up of unit theories, and a key benefit of programmatic theory is to communicate what the unit theories on a topic collectively support as “settled science” (Cronin *et al.*, 2021, p. 675). Integrating unit theories originating from different management subfields would result in a broader programmatic theory that organizes and reconciles prior research, thereby providing more comprehensive and superior explanations than any single unit theory (Aguinis & Cronin, 2022). Let us consider each of the illustrative unit theories we mentioned earlier.

First, as noted by Yukl (2012, p. 66), “The essence of leadership in organizations is influencing and facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives. Leaders can improve the performance of a team or organization by influencing the processes that determine performance.” So, if leaders engage in the right behaviors, their organizations can benefit greatly. On the other hand, leaders can also negatively impact their organizations—or countries. For example, leaders lacking honesty, altruism, compassion, fairness, courage, and humility will engage in behaviors that can be highly detrimental for internal and external stakeholders.

Second, incentive theory proposes that both internal and external influences act as motivational drivers (Gerhart & Fang, 2015). Specifically, extrinsic incentives such as money and other financial rewards can motivate people to work towards attaining goals. Intrinsic incentives can also motivate people to achieve their goals.

Third, resource theory suggests that organizations with more and better resources and capabilities outperform others (Barney *et al.*, 2021). Thus, organizations seek to gain resources that will afford them a competitive advantage. These resources come in different types and they include physical resources (e.g., land, oil and gas reserves) and other types (e.g., social, information).

Fourth, agency theory is the canon of conceptual frameworks that drives research in corporate governance. It addresses and resolves problems

involving corporate principals and their agents (Dalton *et al.*, 2007). Specifically, agency theory explains that “there is potential for mischief when the interests of owners and managers diverge. In those circumstances, and for various reasons, managers may be able to exact higher rents than are reasonable or than the owners of the firm would otherwise accord them” (Dalton *et al.*, 2007, p. 1). This fundamental agency problem can potentially be mitigated by aligning the interests of the agents and the owners.

Finally, transaction cost economics (TCE) “focuses on transactions—transfers of goods or services across workgroups where one stage of economic activity ends and another begins” (Crook *et al.*, 2013, p. 63). Transaction costs are those involved with searching for exchange partners, negotiating, and constructing agreements, establishing dispute resolution systems, and negotiating when parties amend agreements to fit dynamic changes. To enhance effectiveness, TCE argues that leaders “should select the alternative that minimizes transaction costs, which are expenses that arise from identifying qualified exchange partners, negotiating contracts, monitoring performance, and adapting to changing conditions” (Crook *et al.*, 2013, p. 63).

So, consideration of each of the preceding unit theories leads to the following possible explanations.

- Putin’s values are driving his behaviors and explain the choice of Russia to invade Ukraine (i.e., leadership theory).
- Putin’s desire to acquire personal gains, including power, serves as an incentive that explains the Russian invasion (i.e., incentives theory).
- Russia’s wish to acquire resources to become a world superpower once again explains why Russia invaded Ukraine (i.e., resources theory).
- Competing goals by the agent (i.e., Putin) compared with the owners (i.e., Russian citizens) explain the war (i.e., agency theory).
- Transactions costs between Russia and NATO countries resulted in the choice of Russia to invade Ukraine (i.e., TCE theory).

Developing and testing programmatic theory would involve integrating these and other unit theories and, consequently, increasing their value in

terms of their ability to explain as well as predict phenomena (Cronin *et al.*, 2021). This integration involves consideration of both coherence (i.e., usability) and boundaries (i.e., usefulness).

When we consider the illustrative five unit theories that could be used to explain the Russia–Ukraine war, what would a programmatic theory look like (Aguinis & Cronin, in press; Cronin *et al.*, 2021)? First, it would integrate and synthesize unit theories by discarding components that are not empirically validated. Second, it would establish clearly defined boundaries within and among the unit theories and harmonize constituent unit theories. Third, it would provide a better and more comprehensive explanation than any of the unit theories separately.

But it is not sufficient to propose a programmatic theory that integrates, for example, leadership, incentives, resources, agency, and TCE. Such a theory would be a *potentially* good theory, but not necessarily a good theory yet. A proposed programmatic theory is merely speculative until it is tested empirically, as described next.

### The need to test programmatic theory with multimethod and multilevel approaches

Our parable in the opening vignette includes management scholars expressing a preference for using qualitative or quantitative methodological approaches. In our view, gathering evidence regarding the validity and usefulness of programmatic theory requires the adoption of multiple methodological perspectives and tools.

Multimethod research relies on McGrath’s (1981) notion that there is no perfect research design. He concluded that there is no “one true method or set of methodological choices that will guarantee success... no one ‘best’ strategy or set of choices... all research strategies and methods are seriously flawed” (McGrath, 1981, p. 179). Thus, the solution for addressing unavoidable trade-offs, for example between internal and external validity, is to use multiple methodological approaches—what is commonly referred to as triangulation.

For example, to test the validity of a proposed programmatic theory, mixed-methods designs incorporate at least one qualitative and at least one quantitative study. The mixed-methods paradigm proposes that the combination of qualitative and

quantitative methods provides more opportunity for useful insights than either method on its own. But this qualitative and quantitative integration is not just the stacking of two studies—it is two fully integrated studies. For example, a mixed-methods approach to understanding the Russia–Ukraine war could begin with indexing news media mentions of major Russian lines of effort in Ukraine, identifying which events had the most significant media reaction, and then correlating those events with public opinion polls or third-party actor activity, such as government pledges for material or monetary support or sanctions enacted. Then, results could be used to guide further data collection involving an ethnographic approach aiming at understanding why and to what extent key events resulted in the outbreak of the war. The mixed-methods design provides more opportunity for in-depth analysis than independently conducting quantitative and qualitative studies. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to test a programmatic theory comprehensively without using multiple methodological approaches.

In addition, the multilevel paradigm acknowledges that outcomes at a given level result from antecedents not only at that level but also from levels above (i.e., top-down effects) and below (i.e., bottom-up effects). For example, based on the consideration of our five illustrative unit theories, our programmatic theory posits that countries are nested within higher-level collectives such as economic blocs or treaty organizations (NATO), resulting in inherent top-down effects (e.g., from an economic bloc to a member country) as well as bottom-up effects (i.e., from member countries to the bloc). The multilevel paradigm likewise provides a framework to analyse the behaviors of citizens in Russia and Ukraine within their own political and cultural contexts, implying the existence of bottom-up as well as of top-down effects (e.g., the influence of the Russian government on Russian citizens, the influence of Ukrainian citizens on the Ukrainian government).

## Conclusions

In some variations of the “blind men and the elephant” parable, the Rajah questioned the validity of the blind men’s depiction of the elephant based on the limited parts they felt. He then described the elephant and suggested that they work collec-

tively to fit their parts, so that perhaps they will discover the “truth.” So, too, can we adopt the Rajah’s approach in conducting management research with the goal of developing and testing programmatic theory that will result in more comprehensive, accurate, and useful explanations as well as predictions.

First, we should “prune the theoretical landscape,” which is currently filled with a very large number of unit theories across management subfields. Leavitt *et al.* (2010) metaphorically described the situation as a very large garden with so much growing that the desired plants cannot be distinguished from the weeds. In other words, we have too many unit theories, which need to be integrated into a stronger, falsifiable, and more comprehensive programmatic theory.

Second, there is a need to take advantage of multiple methods and multilevel research that involves diverse ontological perspectives. The use of multiple methods and multilevel modelling is no longer a rarity. Clearly, testing programmatic theory will require the use of multiple imperfect methodological approaches, which combined will result in more trustworthy conclusions.

In closing, management scholarship has produced important theories that can help us understand not only the Russia–Ukraine war but also other global conflicts, as well as management and organizations in general. But to be able to contribute to our understanding and prediction, we need to improve our theoretical and methodological toolkit with the goal of developing and testing programmatic theories that will allow us to make clearer and more useful recommendations to leaders and policy-makers. The time is now.

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