**Sociological Approach to Leadership**

The study of leadership is most often thought to be relegated to the fields of psychology or business, when in fact the study of leadership was most prominent in sociology until the 1970s (Guillén, 2010). Until 1969, sociologists published more articles related to leadership than psychologists or researchers in business management. A popular focus of leadership within sociology, especially in the 19th century, was leadership in organizations, parties, and nation states. Today, sociology focuses on three main aspects of leadership: (a) the relationship between leaders and those people following the leaders, or the led; (b) how people come to be leaders, the paths that are taken; and (c) how elites circulate. One of the most important differences between the study of leadership in sociology as compared to other fields is that leadership is a relationship between two groups of people, the leaders and the led. Other fields tend to view leadership in terms of the characteristics of a leader, as is especially seen in psychology.

Four main types of leadership exist within sociology. The types include Weberian, institutional, neo-Marxist, and relational. The following paragraphs discuss each type of leadership in detail.

Weberian leadership focuses on the themes of authority, power, and elites. With Weberian leadership, there are three types of authority, or three ways in which leaders justify their power or authority. Personal or charismatic authority is authority some person has because of his or her unique skills, charisma, powerful influence, divine inspiration, and so on. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. is thought to have been a personal or charismatic leader because of his excellent speaking skills that influenced people during the Civil Rights Movement. Cult leaders are also said to be charismatic leaders because although they do not have legitimate authority, they are able to convince people to follow their lead due to their
charisma and specific personality traits. A second type of authority is traditional authority. With this leadership, authority is traditionally passed down through lineage or a tribe. There tends to be no questioning of traditional authority because it is the way things have always been. An example of a traditional authority figure is a king or queen. The final type of authority is legal-rational. This type of authority is regulated; leaders are elected according to specific rules and a set process, so the authority generally seems to be seen as more legitimate. The President of the United States represents a rational authority because he is elected through a legitimate process and is expected to have specific qualifications.

Institutional leadership is based on Emile Durkheim’s work and is the idea that the leader and the led depend on one another. Without one, the other cannot exist. As Guillén (2010) explains, “Leaders exist because there is a need for order and integration; absent leadership, there is chaos or anomie” (p. 232). Leaders and the led have reciprocal relationships because as leaders communicate and try to motivate their people, the followers decide whether or not they will cooperate and continue following the leader. It is believed that humans find meaning and purpose through their leaders, although this can be a negative aspect. For example, Nazi rule could be characterized as institutional leadership because so many blindly followed along and created “mass societies.”

The third type of leadership, Neo-Marxist, is most often attributed to C. Wright Mills. Neo-Marxist leadership focuses on the direct link between leadership and social classes in society. Leaders are those of higher class and the led belong to lower classes. Neo-Marxists believe that leadership comes from the constant class and economic struggle.

The fourth type of leadership, relational, is based on Georg Simmel’s work with networks. Relational leadership follows that leaders and the led have different connections and
relationships. It is believed that leaders have more connections and are better able to network with people of higher status and power, whereas the led have fewer connections and are less likely to network with people in higher positions. Relational leadership also discusses the specifics of dyads and triads and the role of power in those relationships.

In conclusion, sociology discusses leadership in terms of its hierarchical nature. The leader is always above the led. Also, sociology distinguishes itself from psychology and other fields in that leadership is seen as a relationship between sets of people, not specific characteristics that describe a person.
References