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Academic understandings of transformative leadership

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Setting out the chapter



Transformative leadership has not been clearly theorised and conceptualised, although frequently invoked. This essay offers a clear conceptualisation of transformative leadership by locating it within other approaches to leadership – transformational and transacting – and by tracing its use in literature over the past twenty years.

Transformative leadership is not only concerned with how leaders behave (transacting), but also on the impact that they have on fostering social change and social justice.

Methodology



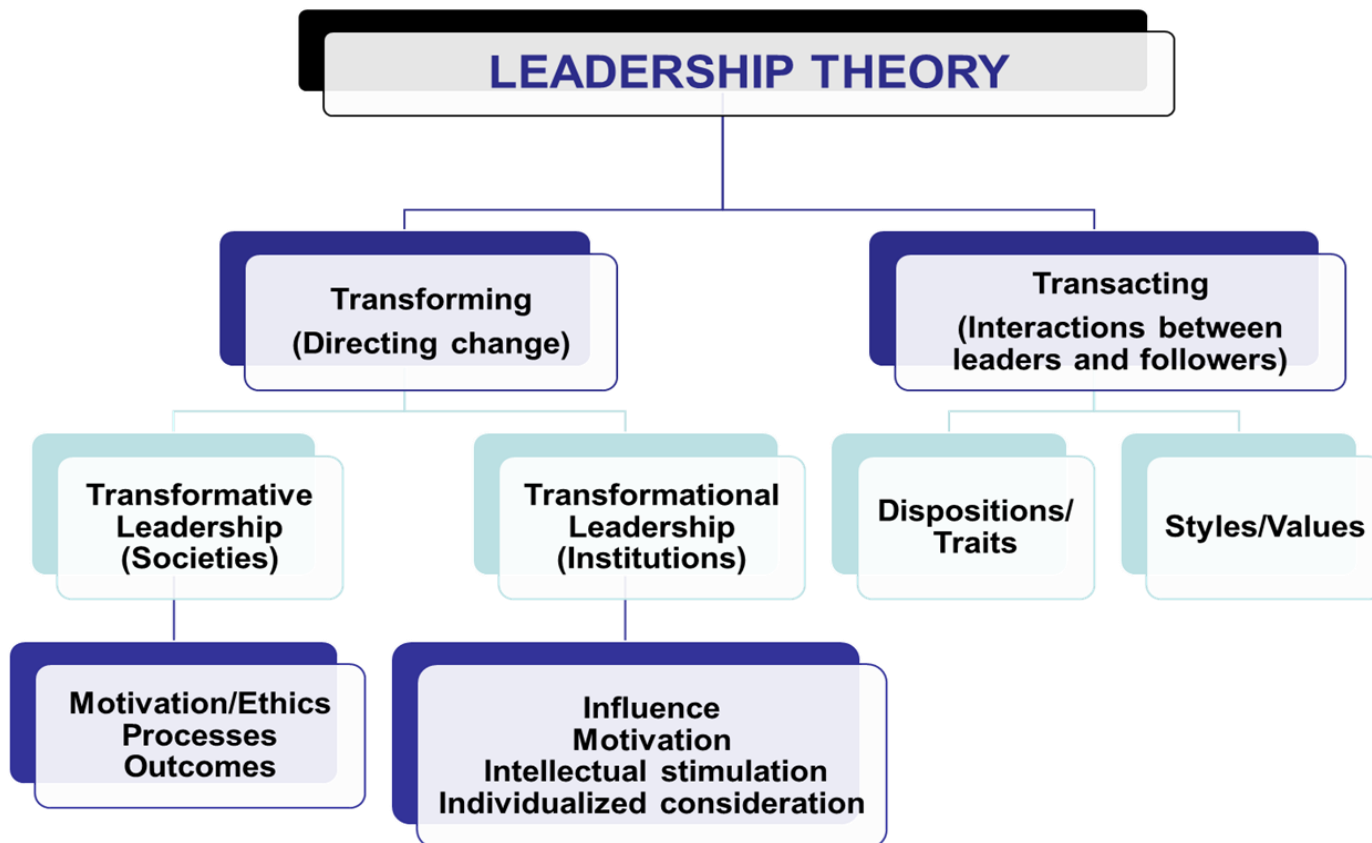
Literature review using designated key words and a three-stage sift process to move through 25 years of research into transformative leadership.

Tracing seminal theoretical works before branching off into research specific to leadership in and from African contexts.

Diversifying search criteria to include leadership practices such as 'social justice', 'ethical' and 'servant' leadership, as well as indigenous philosophies.

An initial sample of >100 resources narrowed down to about 50 at the time of this presentation.

Differentiating transformative leadership



Findings



1. **Both** transformative and transformational leadership are concerned with change and transformation, rather than merely transactional exchanges between leaders and followers.
2. **Both** emphasise the value of collaborative, dialogic and democratic decision-making and deliberative processes, with more complex lines of authority and influence.
3. **Transformational leadership** is primarily concerned with transforming and renewing organisations in order to enhance the scope and quality of outputs.
4. **Transformative leadership** focuses on transforming organisations, relationships and people to have societal impact – emphasising social justice, and dismantling structures of inequality and oppression.

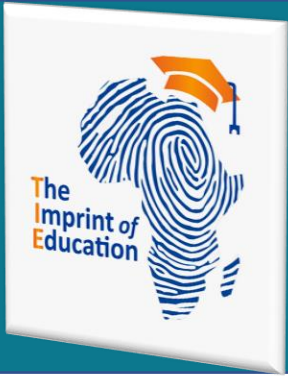
Findings



Transformative leadership is 1) outward-looking: focused on a broader social vision, rather than only an organisational one; and 2) concerned with the agential development of leaders, followers, and those they serve, supporting others to become leaders and change agents in their own right (Shields, 2010; Sun & Leithwood, 2012; Kappler Hewitt et al, 2014).

Draws on the work of Freire and Shields, located within the critical pedagogy school of thought.

Findings



Theme	Description	Proponents
Positionality as a driver	women-centred approaches, the value of a feminist ethic	Brown et al, 2019; Magoqwana, 2019
Critical humanism	deploying spiritual, religious and humanistic principles	Odora Hoppers, 2014; Tshililo, 2014
Indigenous approaches	informed by e.g. indigenous moral ecologies, such as Ubuntu or Ujamaa or Inimba;	Bosu et al, 2009; Mayanja, 2013; Chedondo, 2019
Definitional	Leadership as process, leadership as moral, leadership towards social justice outcomes	Amanchukwu et al, 2015; Bell, 2001; Rylander, 2010; Olonisakin, 2017

Findings



African scholars have extended the notion of transformative leadership in this review in a number of important ways.

- Understanding what ethical/socially-just leadership looks like in diverse contexts.
- Considering the role of the political in shaping understandings of justice and transformation.
- Critically deploying indigenous philosophies as resources.
- Recognising the impact of colonialism, conflict and inequality on the contours of 'the rules of the game'.

Findings



Three new perspectives:

- Looking at indigenous governance systems as a source of inspiration for transformative practices (e.g. *gada* in Ethiopia)
- The contribution of social movements to shifting discourses of justice in contemporary political dynamics
- Temple on *fragmented metaphysics* at the root of failure to transform African societies: the need to reconcile and address the fractured loyalties and allegiances that place the particular over the universal

Findings



Looking ahead, it is important to start developing a nuanced understanding of how causality operates in the application of transformative leadership, in order to be able to make concrete claims about its impact.

Also necessary to think about how historic and contemporary alternative conceptions of society and social obligation can expand current notions of what transformative leadership could look like, operate and the outcomes it can produce.

Rather than articulating this concept as something vacuous, able to be filled with a multitude of ideas and related ethics – a magic bag with no bottom – we instead reframe it as a comprehensive framework, elastic in its applicability to contexts with their own localised conceptualisations of what the universal pursuit of social justice could look like, and is founded upon.

IMPORTANCE



This chapter provides a comprehensive snapshot of research on leadership that demonstrates the importance of transformative leadership for driving robust social change.

It sets the scene for chapters to follow by offering a reason why these diverse fields and issues require a transformative approach, highlighting the many ways that leaders can act locally with a far-reaching impact.

We emphasise that the challenges facing us in the future demand a more dynamic, expansive approach to developing solutions and changing ‘the rules of the game’.

3 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. What are the issues that this chapter could have highlighted more, and how are these important to the debates on transformative leadership?
2. How could you apply transformative leadership principles to a challenge you have encountered in the communities you belong to?
3. Who would you describe as a transformative leader, and why?

REVIEW PROCESS AND HELP NEEDED



Overall review feedback was positive. We would welcome more inputs on additional literature to be used as well as the analytical value of including the review on leadership programmes, which was undertaken and then paused.