

Isomorphism and 'Capability Trap' in the South African Public Service

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Abstract: As stipulated in sections 26, 27 and 29 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996, public institutions are mandated to legislative measures in delivering services to the public. This mandate has to be fulfilled by public institutions regardless of the enormous pressure by internal and external pressure. This pressure compels South African public service to willingly/unwillingly transform and adopt appropriate models for improved service delivery. When enhancing service delivery, government departments often than not unconsciously experience isomorphism, which is later explained in this paper. In some instances, isomorphism leads to 'capability trap', which results to an institutional failure exacerbated by the state of isomorphic mimicry. The purpose of this paper is to answer the question, to what extent is the South African public service experiencing isomorphism? Subsequently, it is important to ask whether isomorphism leads to capability trap that various public institutions are seen to be experiencing recently. These questions are explored by undertaking a critical literature review adopting a hermeneutic reading modality, which is grounded in qualitative studies. It is the intention of this paper to derive the meaning and understanding of the isomorphic state of the South African public service. This paper firstly conceptualises isomorphism and further identify and conceptualise the various forms of isomorphism. State capability trap is deliberated upon in order to demonstrate the extent of isomorphism in the South African public service. This section is followed by examples that indicate the influence of isomorphism in public administration. Concluding remarks summarise this paper and propose mechanisms that could be put in place to avoid isomorphism.

Keywords: Isomorphism, Isomorphic mimicry, Capability trap, Public service, Hermeneutic

1. Introduction

Public institutions are influenced by political and social contexts. Organisational change is deemed necessary to strike the balance between diverse contexts. Public institutions, specifically in South Africa, are confronted with multiple goals; hence, organisation change becomes inevitable. In the process of organisational change, adopted powerful internal and external actors diffuse public sector models and reforms in organisations. This diffusion leads to isomorphism. Isomorphism can be seen an intervention for transforming the public service in the drive of improving service delivery. Internal and external pressure imposed on organisations may result in improved organisational performance. Some of the public service reforms contribute to service delivery and are efficient and effective to a certain extent. Miterev, Engwall and Jerbrant (2017:11) attest to this when arguing that formalising institutional rules and procedures can enhance organisational performance. This is a view that has been highly contested due to its bureaucratic approach. Similar to this, most institutions are experiencing isomorphic pressure which does not

always improve organisational effectiveness and efficiency. Instead, it is established for conforming to norms and expectations set by other organisations (Walter-Drop & Remmert, 2018:548). The purpose of this paper is to answer the question: To what extent is the South African public service experiencing isomorphism? Firstly, this was achieved by conceptualising isomorphism. Secondly, this paper discusses the various forms of isomorphism. Thirdly, state capability trap is discussed in order to demonstrate the extent of isomorphism in the South African public service. This section is followed by practical examples that indicate the influence of isomorphism in public administration.

2. Conceptualising Isomorphism

Isomorphism depicts the idea that organisations can look alike, following 'prescribed policies and procedures' formulated using a top-down approach (Worth, 2012:63). Correspondingly, Pillay, Reddy and Morgan (2017:423) define isomorphism as "a similarity of processes or structure of one institution to those of another". The pressure from regulatory bodies exacerbates this similarity. Organisational

performance can be enhanced by formalising institutional rules and procedures (Miterev, *et al.*, 2017:11). This pressure is not always negative because in some instances, it can increase organisations' efficiency and effectiveness. In contrast, Pillay *et al.* (2017:424) argue that conforming to social and external pressures can limit the focus on technical efficiency and neglect the context. Beckert (2010:155) contends that actors in isomorphism are not pushed but act voluntarily. Institutions are enticed by a specific institutional solution that they see as a panacea to their challenges. The reviewed literature identifies three types of isomorphism, namely; coercive isomorphism, mimetic isomorphism and normative isomorphism (Walter-Drop & Remmert, 2018; Worth 2012). These types of isomorphism are discussed below.

2.1 Coercive Isomorphism

DiMaggio and Powell (1983:150) define coercive isomorphism as "formal and informal pressures exerted on organisations by other organisations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organisations function". Therefore, this form of isomorphism becomes persuasive and leads to 'forced' organisational change. This is evident when organisations have to comply with 'legal mandates or funding stipulations' (Carter, 2016:439) and constitutional mandate in public administration context. These pressures can include, "strict regulatory and legal requirements from employees, education training programmes that impart best practices on peer institutions across the field to encourage imitation, professional associations and bodies" (Pillay *et al.*, 2017:424). In addition, the external pressures can include legal requirements, contractual obligations, health, and safety regulations (Ashworth, Boyne & Delbridge, 2007:167). Teodoro (2014:984) acknowledges that coercive isomorphism emanates from "political influence and the problem of legitimacy". For example, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank to name a few, formulated policies that are internationally acclaimed (Beckert, 2010:153). The internal pressure confronting organisations include, "prescriptive guidelines and frameworks, assurance systems and internal audits and steering committees (Miterev, *et al.*, 2017:12). These pressures are not always bad because they are necessary. Krause (2013:2) argues that imitating good performers is not bad if institutions adapt these imitations to their own institutions to make it relevant. Similarly,

Levi (2018:609) argues that coercion is a necessary condition for a state to provide security and ensure compliance. This further ensures state fairness by punishing those who fail to comply. Chapter 12 of the National Development Plan 2030 acknowledges the importance of strengthening the criminal justice system which necessitates "cooperation between all departments in the justice system crime prevention and security" (National Planning Commission, 2011:350). This will require a form of coerciveness to ensure compliance. For example, public organisations are more often than not subjected to "coercive scrutiny, evaluation and regulation" and this results to 'isomorphic transformation' (Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004:284). These organisations find an escape route by adopting routines and structures as determined by regulatory bodies. This implies that organisations are constructed rather than being a 'product of natural interaction' (Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004:284). The results of this construction of organisations are clearly identified by Frumkin and Galaskiewicz (2004:284) when asserting, "organisations are subject to government pressure and embrace institutional myths and strategies and structures are disseminated and a homogenized organisational field is created". The communities that expect public institutions to implement appropriate actions can also exert these pressures (Miterev, *et al.*, 2017:12). Similarly, Pillay *et al.* (2017:423) acknowledge that isomorphism occurs when public institutions are pressurised to abandon 'traditional practices for new beliefs, operating systems, environmental forces, and individual behaviours'. This results to similar processes that are constructed by the organisational constraints. In addition, Beckert (2005:153) acknowledges that when institutions or organisations are experiencing a crisis, a strong external institution can exert influence and provide a new institutional design without encouraging experimentation of that design. This becomes a response to a power constellation exerted by the external institution that is seen to be successful.

Most organisations are experiencing isomorphic pressure. The latter does not always improve organisational effectiveness and efficiency. Instead, it is established for conforming to norms and expectations set by other organisations (Walter-Drop & Remmert, 2018:548). This isomorphic pressure can be internal (formal structures and standard procedures) or external (donors or funders). Moreover, local organisations are confronted with coerced conformity instead of developing most appropriate and sustainable institutions (Walter-Drop &

Remmert, 2018:549). This result in unintended and in some instances dire consequences that affect the beneficiaries (the public at large). Service delivery satisfaction is compromised because of the coercion facing these organisations.

Moreover, this form of isomorphism becomes dubious when public institutions satisfy donor demands due to isomorphic pressure instead of improving organisational performance and functions (Krause, 2013:2). Krause (2013:3) further maintains that as long as institutions are dependent on donors for their survival, "superficial best practices" are inevitable. Schnell (2015:277) asserts that these "best practices" are criticised by communities because they "increase international legitimacy and governments copy institutional forms that are not suited to the local context". Beckert (2010:155) calls this, "shop around for best institutional practices". This leads to international policy diffusion, where the choice of policies is influenced by what is happening in other countries (Schnell, 2015:277). Examples of such policy include policies that address the issue of human rights, democratic reforms and environmental policies that are universal and are being accepted (Schnell, 2015:277). Policy makers are experiencing pressure to implement successful policies to the betterment of the citizens. As they engage in policy making, they intend to propose some laws and legislation that are clear-cut and this is not always possible. On the contrary, Ashworth, Boyne and Delbridge (2007:169) argue that organisations can make necessary changes over time owing to a new model of the public service. Isomorphic pressures can cause the changes that confront an organisation. Organisations can start to converge with or without compliance.

2.2 Mimetic Isomorphism

The second form of isomorphism is mimetic isomorphism that occurs when institutions replicate practices (Carter, 2016:439). It is influenced by standard responses to uncertainty (Teodoro, 2014:985). In addition, it occurs when public institutions consider other public institutions as successful and they imitate those institutions without acknowledging their context and "institutional peculiarities" (Pillay *et al.*, 2017:429). When institutions are experiencing uncertainties, they tend to imitate what other institutions are doing in order to avoid failure and secure legitimacy (Masocha & Fatoki, 2018:3; Yang & Hyland 2012). Among the factors that contribute to this form of isomorphism is 'the limited number of

readily available models' that could be implemented to enhance organisational performance (Miterev, *et al.*, 2017:12). The non-availability of such models forces institutions to imitate ones that look successful. This implies that government institutions adopt "practices and institutional forms of social leaders and thereby are perceived by others and themselves as being advanced, progressive and morally praiseworthy" (Marsh & Sharman, 2009:272). Moreover, Pillay *et al.* (2017:429) argue that other institutions may introduce a new legislation that is less relevant. In some instances, the public institutions may be aware that the adopted policy is 'technically ineffective' (Marsh & Sharman, 2009:272). In a similar vein, Pitts, Hicklin, Hawes and Melton (2010:873) contend that "mimetic forces might encourage an organisation to change because the change is culturally supported and helps reduce uncertainty in the environment".

Various mimetic mechanisms are demonstrated in various organisations. Miterev *et al.*'s (2017:17) study used an in-depth ethnography-inspired case study. They found that managers who were deemed more successful and credible were imitated by temporary organisations. These managers were copied because of the perceptions not necessarily undertaking an intensive analysis to identify their failures. This form of isomorphism focuses on the success factors without acknowledging that they could be some failures within organisations. Krause (2013:2) contends that some form of mimicry is inevitable because problem-oriented institutional change requires some mimicry. In most instances, in mimicking other institutions that are seen as more successful and consistent, similar templates are used to gain legitimacy (Beckert, 2010:159). This process becomes repetitive because of new regulations and policies that are being implemented (Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004:286).

2.3 Normative Isomorphism

This form of isomorphism occurs through professionalisation, where formal education and participation by public servants in professional bodies/organisations is encouraged (Miterev *et al.*, 2017:12). During this professionalisation, "professional norms, organisational models, mind-sets and problem solving approaches" are adopted and infused in professionals (*ibid.*). These professional norms and organisational models, to name a few, are determined by the professional community (de Freitas & de Aquino Guimarães, 2007:39).

This process results in creating a pool of professionals who adopt the same cognitive base belonging in the same professional associations (Miterev, Engwall & Jerbrant, 2017:12). Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings (2002:62) identify three reasons that highlight the importance of professional associations:

- They are arenas through which organisations interact and collectively represent themselves. They allow organisations within the same community to interact and it is from these interactions that understandings of reasonable conduct and behavioural dues of membership emerge.
- Shared typifications develop not solely because of interaction within a community but also as a product of interactions with other communities. Professional associations act as negotiating or representative agencies, shaping and redefining appropriate practices of interaction for their respective memberships.
- Professional associations can play an important role in monitoring compliance with normatively and coercively sanctioned expectations. They serve as mechanisms of conformity and reproduction.

Considering the above reasons for establishing professional associations, they seem to serve as a positive influence in organisations while the opposite is normally observed in public institutions. The normative processes further "capture the ways in which organisations are expected to conform to standards of professionalism and to adopt systems and techniques considered to be legitimate by relevant professional groupings". Owing to normative forces, organisations can be motivated to change because of being moral and feeling obligated to do so (Pitts, Hicklin, Hawes & Melton, 2010:873). This may also result in convergence where organisations "may converge because of shifts in the normative environment (Pitts *et al.*, 2010:873). For example, public institutions may not be rational or strategic when implementing some policy such as affirmative action policy. They can do so because other organisations are implementing it. Because of the external actors, they end up implementing those policies because they are deemed to be socially acceptable. In an article entitled, "*When professionals lead: Executive management, normative isomorphism and policy, implementation*", Teodoro (2014) undertook an empirical study in an attempt to explain that normative isomorphism helps to explain

how professions shape executive management and, ultimately, public policy outcomes. Teodoro (2014:1000) found that public utilities headed by professional engineers "commit fewer regulatory violations other than those that are not". This indicates that professionalism is important; hence, in this finding, professional influence became evident. According to Teodoro (2014:985), conforming to dominant behaviour of professional communities is promoted by rewards and sanctions that are established. This influences individual professionals' behaviour.

Pillay *et al.* (2017:427) identify two sources of normative isomorphism which takes place when a university graduate obtains formal education then becomes involved in professional networks/associations/organisations. Pillay *et al.* (2017:427) further acknowledge that in South African government institutions, there is an increasing number of institutional professionals and professional associations.

Professionalisation takes place during professional training where people's perspectives on regulative goals are influenced. Sadly, this leads to "routines and taken for granted institutionalised practices" (Beckert, 2010:156). In most public institutions in South Africa, institutions are guided by a code of conduct and ethics that promote ethical standards. Pitts, Hicklin, Hawes and Melton (2010:873) provide an example of a diversity management programme to illustrate the importance of professionalism. They indicate that it could be learnt through formal education and the practitioners will be taught how to implement it. The formal education will influence the choices of the practitioners in implementing diversity management programmes. Convergence takes place in this instance because of the networking opportunities and exposure to formal education.

Section 195(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of South requires public servants to maintain a high standard of professional ethics. Public institutions have implemented a code of professionalism to enhance compliance. Chapter 12 of National Development Plan 2030 states that training for professionalism in the Police Services can be achieved by strengthening the capacity of detectives and investigators who are employed in special units (National Planning Commission, 2011:355). This will in turn enhance their skills and competence. A level of normative isomorphism is necessary.

Table 1: Common Types of Agenda Conformity

Types of Agenda Conformity	Description	Author's Own Interpretation
Inputs	Organisations request more financial inputs (budget)	Public institutions request more funds in their budgets at the beginning of a financial year in order to comply with political influence. This form of agenda conformity relates to coercive isomorphism.
Process of compliance and control	Claim to increase process compliance or increase management controls like information management systems	This is aligned to mimetic isomorphism where compliance to certain norms becomes prevalent.
Relabelling problems and solutions.	Adopting a solution whether it solves the problem or not.	This can be aligned to the three forms of isomorphism (coercive, mimetic and normative). Often when organisations are confronted with some form of uncertainty they mimic other successful organisations.
Intensification or best practice	Adopting new inputs or training or upgrades that appeal to internal constituencies independently of their impact on outputs and outcomes.	This relates to normative isomorphism where organisations are influenced by professional bodies and adopt solutions that are deemed to be best practices by professional associations. Best practices are not always best if they are not context-specific.

Public institutions often experience internal and external pressure for them to conform and comply. Such pressure is not evidence of high performance. This is evident in cases where state-owned enterprises have been involved in corruption and wasteful expenditure. Agenda conformity can lead to capability traps of public institutions.

Source: Andrews, *et al.* (2017)

3. State Capability Trap

A capability trap occurs when the primary focus of leaders is organisational survival through routine compliance and conformity to prescribed agendas neglecting the citizens they serve (Andrews, Pritchett & Woolcock, 2017:49). If organisations are not subjected to public scrutiny, this capability trap becomes worsened. The current political dynamics in South Africa demonstrates what Call (2008:1491) calls, "failing, fragile, stressed, and troubled states". The majority of citizens are made to believe that a democratic agenda (government capacity development) is a priority but the status quo demonstrates some dire weaknesses. Armstrong (2013:3) defines Government Capacity Development as "a process in which government organisations and agencies come to understand, harness, expand and retain the ability to craft and implement policy that enables the country to become healthier, wealthier and more resilient". This is a necessary development programme that becomes weakened when the eternally aided government capacity developments interventions result in unsatisfactory results owing to the failure to improve sustainable capacity (Armstrong, 2013:3). Best practices that

are borrowed from developed and rich countries are not always appropriate in developing countries. Goodman and Jinks (2013:43) call it 'decoupling within states'. This merely refers to the process where a state adopts "organisational structures and formal policies that are disconnected from internal demands and implementation". This form of isomorphism becomes problematic because of the variations in historical and social backgrounds.

Andrews *et al.* (2017:54) further argue that expecting "newly formed organisations to implement functions that similar organisations perform in rich countries" is an indication of weakness of premature load bearing and isomorphic mimicry. Pritchett *et al.* (2013:9) maintain that isomorphic mimicry is one technique that facilitates persistent failure of the state because institutions imitate forms of modern institutions without functionality. They further argue that this does not always produce the desired results. The capability trap might cause evidenced instability in the South African public service. In addition, Andrews, *et al.* (2017:38) identify several common types of agenda conformity (as captured in Table 1) which demonstrate state capability trap.

4. Isomorphism in Public Administration

This section of the article reflects on few examples that show the prevalence of isomorphic mimicry in public administration. For example, in public finance, employees yearn to maintain similar set of beliefs as other finance counterparts (Moynihan, 2004:225). This is done in an attempt to adhere to professional norms and professional standards for public finance practitioners. The Public Financial Management Act (PFMA) no 1 of 1999 influences these professional norms and standards. Maramura and Thakhathi (2016:243) argue that PFMA secures sustainable financial affairs in all spheres of governments and it outlines the budgetary norms and standards. In sections 38 to 43 of the PFMA, the responsibilities of accounting officers are stipulated. Public institutions are expected to adhere to accounting boards and bodies. If certain institutions are experiencing a time of uncertainty, they tend to imitate institutions that are seen as successful. This leads to public institutions to mimic other institutions without necessary delving into challenges that those institutions have faced to be successful. These public institutions end up employing a logic of appropriateness based on what they perceive to be professional norms and standards (Moynihan, 2004:225).

To achieve performance, public finance practitioners come up with more centralised systems and they use a top down approach (Moynihan, 2004:225). This is not always a bad decision; it becomes problematic when it is not context-specific. Moreover, Moynihan (2004:227) found that elected officials in Alabama believe that traditional financial systems assist public employees to behave appropriately, implement policies successfully avoiding failure and inefficiency. In contrast to Moynihan's finding, in the South African public service, there is a high rate of corruption, fruitless and wasteful expenditure regardless of the budgetary norms and standards (Maramura & Thakhathi, 2016:243). This is an indication that isomorphic mimicry in public finance does not always result in ethical behaviour among public finance practitioners. Isomorphism is used as way of justifying or defending why an organisation has adopted a policy that is similar to that of a successful organisation (Cook, An & Favero, 2018:5).

Another form of isomorphism in the public sector occurs when public institutions adopt new innovative frameworks such as e-government. Heeks

(2002:87) maintains that "e-government is an imported concept based on imported designs". In many developing countries, the World Bank and other donor institutions impose e-government without considering the costs that are involved in implementing such an initiative. Jun and Weare (2010:495) argue that economic development programmes can be costly when they are not well planned. They also acknowledge that e-government is "a generic set of technologies and services that can be employed by a wide range of public organisations... (Jun & Weare, 2010:496). Saxena (2005:501) identifies two aims of e-government, namely, (i) to improve the performance of public institutions and make them more responsive and (ii) to help build a partly virtual and completely joined-up administration in which the user knocks at the front door either virtually (electronically) or physically by going to a one stop service counter. Moreover, adopting e-government can be risky if public organisations lack resources because complex technological resources are needed to ensure effective service delivery, improved internal management and better political communication (Jun & Weare, 2010:497). Implementing e-government poses various challenges in the South African community; hence, there are still service delivery challenges in municipalities regardless of e-government models that are deemed to be effective. As already alluded to, these innovations such as e-government are adopted in Africa originating from the West where African realities are not experienced.

Another public reform that is externally imposed especially in developing countries is e-governance. Saxena (2005:502) argues institutions such as the World Bank imposed e-governance externally. Saxena (2005:501) further maintains that e-governance can pose some risks if "e-government initiatives are not well conceived and implemented, they can waste resources, fail in their promise to deliver useful services, therefore increase public frustration with government". Developing countries are confronted with unique challenges that cannot be addressed by adopting e-governance initiatives. These challenges, among others, include "poor infrastructure, corruption, weak educational systems, and unequal access to technology" (Saxena, 2005:501). This is evident in South Africa where corruption is prevalent and other municipalities cannot afford to provide equal access to technology. The Department of Public Service and Administration has initiated various e-governance strategies to accelerate service

delivery. These include electronic systems which are called e-services. Regardless of these e-services, Maramura and Thakhathi (2016:243) contend that it failed to fulfil e-governance's main objectives and goals. They further argue that this has effect on public service delivery owing to the politics-administration dichotomy. Moreover, Maramura and Thakhathi (2016:244) further state, "e-governance is competing with other priorities, such as housing and health services and where unemployment is high and where the government is abusing public funds. Therefore, e-governance is more than implementing e-governance tools and initiatives but it means planning for capacity building for the public good through relevant legislative framework and policies".

E-governance is not necessarily a bad initiative. However, its implementation seems to be problematic. It appears to be a necessary initiative in countries that have appropriate technology and infrastructure. Heeks (2002:87) argues that e-governance can result to partial or complete failure owing to the challenges experienced in the African continent such as the lack of e-readiness. This failure is worsened in countries where the national infrastructure is problematic. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is still a challenge in developing countries compared to industrialised countries where accessibility is enhanced and inexpensive (Saxena, 2005:502). For example, South Africa is currently experiencing major challenges in implementing e-governance owing to "problems of poverty, inequality, corruption, insecurity, illiteracy, and skills shortages (Mutula & Mostert, 2010:44). These challenges prohibit the general public in utilising e-governance models that are currently implemented. A worse challenge lies with various service departments such as Electricity Supply Commission (ESKOM). This is problematic owing to the deficit in electricity supply in South Africa. This is a clear indication that South Africa is still grappling to produce professionals with the sought after skills (technical and managerial skills) in order to improve ICT. Since these e-government projects are adopted in Africa, they seem to be adopted without ensuring the availability of human skills capacities to "manage, integrate and sustain them" (Mutula & Mostert, 2010:44). Some initiatives yielded positive results such as the South African Revenue Services e-filing system, the Department of Home Affairs Smart Identification Card System for citizens, the National Health Normative Standards Framework

(HNSF) and the Police Crime Administration System. These examples provided in this section indicate that isomorphic mimicry can lead to capability traps in public institutions if not adequately implemented. This shows that African countries can adapt the adopted initiatives to suit the African context.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has achieved to conceptually answer the question: To what extent is the South African public service experiencing isomorphism? This was achieved by first conceptualising the concept *isomorphism*, which depicts the idea of look-alike institutions. Three forms of isomorphism were identified and discussed in depth: coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism. These three forms of isomorphism are adopted in various public institutions as attested by the literature review. The reviewed literature indicates that policies from wealthy countries are adopted in African countries. This diffusion becomes more coercive especially if these wealthy countries provide financial aid to the developing countries. This leads to agenda conformity and compliance without addressing the current challenges that are faced by developing countries. Public institutions also experience isomorphic mimicry where they mimic other institutions for agenda conformity purposes. Three examples were provided to indicate the extent of isomorphic mimicry in the public service. First e-government was introduced, there was e-governance and recently mobile-governance is introduced. Sadly, these initiatives flourish in the metropolitan municipalities not necessarily in the municipalities that face difficulties with infrastructure. This isomorphic mimicry is exacerbated by the fact that these initiatives are internationally acclaimed. Developing countries are mostly concerned about their international standing and are often persuaded to adopt models/initiatives that emanate from the West. Therefore, it is recommended that the South African public service needs to first address critical issues such as poverty, inequality, corruption to name a few, before being lured by the initiatives that emanate from wealthy countries.

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