

The Fourth Knot: A Lacanian-Winnicottian Framework for Holding in Complex Leadership

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Abstract

In an era defined by complexity, volatility, and symbolic fragmentation, traditional models of organizational leadership often fail to account for how coherence is sustained amid systemic disruption. Addressing this challenge, the present article proposes an integrative framework grounded in Lacanian and Winnicottian psychoanalytic theory. These paradigms illuminate the symbolic, affective, and structural dimensions underpinning organizational life, offering new ways to conceptualize coherence beyond functionalist or mechanistic approaches. Central to this framework is the notion of the *Fourth Knot*, a topological and relational function that binds together four foundational elements of organizational design: strategy, structure, culture, and management systems. Rather than treating these components as discrete or sequential, the model views them as interdependent domains whose coherence arises from dynamic tension and symbolic mediation. Within this grammar, leadership is reframed not as a set of individual traits or top-down directives, but as a collective holding function - enabling organizations to tolerate ambiguity, contain anxiety, and adapt meaningfully to change. Drawing on Lacan's concept of *object a* and the Borromean knot, alongside Winnicott's theory of the holding environment and transitional space, the article articulates a systemic approach to leadership attuned to complexity and emotional depth. Although primarily theoretical, the model invites future empirical research into leadership practices, crisis navigation, and symbolic infrastructure. Ultimately, the *Fourth Knot* offers a powerful metaphor and diagnostic tool for rethinking how organizations hold together - not through control, but through ongoing re-knotting of meaning, structure, and affect.

Keywords: Leadership, Complex Leadership, Relational Leadership, Holdership, Organizational Coherence.

Introduction

In recent decades, organizational environments have become increasingly marked by complexity, volatility, and unpredictability. Global crises, digital transformation, and socio-political disruptions have created conditions in which leaders are constantly challenged to maintain coherence and continuity within their institutions. Traditional managerial frameworks - while necessary - often fail to account for the symbolic, structural, affective, and unconscious dimensions that underpin organizational life. As noted by Stacey (2001), organizations are complex responsive processes that cannot be fully understood through linear, mechanistic models. There is, therefore, a pressing need to develop conceptual frameworks that provide symbolic and psychological containment - a form of organizational "holding" that supports resilience and adaptability.

In this context, psychoanalytic theory offers valuable insights into the relational and symbolic structures that govern leadership. Two post-modern foundational thinkers - Lacan and Winnicott - provide distinct but complementary perspectives. Lacan's use of the Borromean knot as a topological metaphor for the structure of subjectivity (Lacan, 2006) reveals how the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary are interlinked in a non-hierarchical, interdependent fashion. The strength of the Borromean structure lies precisely in the fact that if any one of the three rings is removed, the entire system collapses. This model has found resonance in various fields, including psychoanalysis, philosophy, and, more recently, organizational studies (Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008). It suggests that meaning and coherence in systems - be they psychic or

institutional - are maintained through complex relational interdependencies rather than through centralized control.

Winnicott (1965), by contrast, introduces the concept of the holding environment to describe the facilitating conditions required for the emergence of the self within a secure relational matrix. His emphasis on transitional phenomena, affective containment, and the space for potential creativity has profound implications for leadership and organizational development. As Kets de Vries and Miller (1984) have argued, organizations often mirror the psychological dynamics of their leaders and followers; thus, creating conditions for affective regulation and symbolic mediation becomes a critical leadership task.

Bringing these two perspectives into dialogue, this article proposes a conceptual extension of the Borromean topology: the inclusion of a “fourth knot” that functions as a holding element in organizational systems. While the original triadic knot addresses the interrelation of subjectivity’s core registers, the proposed fourth knot symbolizes the articulation of four essential organizational dimensions - Strategy, Structure, Culture, and Management Systems - which together sustain the integrity and evolution of complex institutions. This fourth element does not override the Borromean triad but rather operates as a stabilizing force, akin to Winnicott’s notion of a containing environment, without which organizational subjectivity may disintegrate under pressure.

The objective of this article is to articulate the theoretical foundations and practical implications of this fourth knot as a psychoanalytic and systemic function within organizational leadership. It asks how this concept can contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership dynamics under conditions of uncertainty and transformation. Specifically, it investigates how Lacanian topology can be expanded without compromising its formal integrity, and how Winnicottian holding can serve as a metaphor for organizational containment and resilience.

This article contributes to the field of organizational behavior by proposing a conceptual framework that integrates the symbolic, affective, and structural dimensions of organizational life, drawing from Lacanian and Winnicottian psychoanalysis in dialogue with relational leadership theory. By introducing the Fourth Knot as a metaphor for containment, mediation, and coherence within complex systems, the article expands our understanding of the unconscious and relational processes that sustain organizational coherence in contexts of high uncertainty.

To address these questions, the article unfolds in five sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 presents the theoretical background, exploring Lacan’s topological approach, Winnicott’s contributions to affective development, and the foundational literature on the four pillars of organizational design. Section 3 develops the conceptual model of the fourth knot, linking topological insights to organizational praxis. Section 4 offers methodological reflections, outlining possible empirical and theoretical pathways for applying the model. Finally, Section 5 discusses the broader implications for leadership practice in a world increasingly defined by ambiguity, complexity, and symbolic fragmentation.

Theoretical Background

Contemporary organizations operate in environments marked by volatility, complexity, and affective intensity. In these conditions, conventional models that prioritize linear causality, centralized authority, or rational alignment often prove insufficient for explaining how organizations maintain coherence amid uncertainty. Rather than viewing organizations as machines composed of separable parts, this article approaches them as living, interdependent systems where meaning, structure, and affect must be held in dynamic balance.

To theorize this systemic coherence, we turn to two converging traditions: organizational theory - which provides the formal grammar of strategy, structure, culture, and systems - and psychoanalytic topology, particularly Lacan’s Borromean knot, which models the

interdependence of symbolic, imaginary, and real dimensions of subjectivity. Both traditions challenge the notion of coherence as a static state, instead framing it as an ongoing negotiation among irreducible and often conflicting forces.

This section develops the theoretical foundations for the proposal of a “fourth knot” - a conceptual function that stabilizes organizational life not through consensus or control, but through structured tension and symbolic containment. Drawing first from classical and contemporary organizational literature, we analyze the four foundational elements of organizational functioning and their systemic interrelations. We then introduce Lacan’s Borromean knot as a topological metaphor for psychic and institutional coherence, highlighting the function of the *objet petit a* and the *sinthome*. Finally, we incorporate Winnicott’s concept of the holding environment, which complements Lacan’s structural model with a relational, developmental perspective on how coherence is emotionally sustained in transitional or crisis conditions.

By interweaving these lines of thought, we propose a transdisciplinary grammar of organizational coherence - one that accounts not only for strategic and structural logic but also for symbolic mediation, unconscious desire, and the emotional labor of holding complex systems together.

Organizational Core Components

Both classical and contemporary organizational theory identify four foundational components for understanding organizational functioning: strategy, structure, culture, and management systems. While these elements have often been treated in isolation, there is growing recognition that they operate as an interdependent system - where organizational coherence emerges not from alignment alone, but from the *dynamic articulation* among these domains (Galbraith, 2002; Burton et al., 2015).

Strategy refers to the organization’s long-term orientation and positioning in relation to its external environment. Michael Porter (1980) defines strategy as the deliberate choice of a competitive position based on differentiation and sustainable advantage. Henry Mintzberg (1994), in contrast, highlights the emergent nature of strategy, noting that it often arises through adaptive processes rather than top-down planning. In either view, strategy serves a symbolic and directional role, which must be translated into structural forms, cultural narratives, and operational practices to achieve coherence.

Structure denotes the formal architecture of the organization - the distribution of roles, hierarchies, authority flows, and coordination mechanisms (Chandler, 1962; Daft, 2015). The well-known adage “structure follows strategy” (Chandler, 1962) underscores how strategic intent must be institutionalized in formal arrangements to become actionable. However, recent perspectives also emphasize the reverse: that structural constraints shape strategic possibilities, especially in complex, adaptive environments (Snowden & Boone, 2007).

Culture encompasses the shared values, beliefs, rituals, and norms that guide behavior and sensemaking within the organization (Schein, 2010; Hofstede et al., 2010). Culture operates as a symbolic glue, providing emotional resonance and implicit rules of engagement. It influences how individuals interpret strategy and structure, and is itself shaped by historical practices, leadership, and external pressures. Cultures may support or undermine strategic and structural coherence depending on their alignment with other organizational elements.

Management systems refer to the formal and informal mechanisms through which the organization governs its operations - including policies, procedures, metrics, routines, digital platforms, and decision-making tools (Simons, 1995; Kaplan & Norton, 1996). These systems operationalize both strategic and cultural intent by embedding practices across levels. For example, performance management systems translate strategic goals into measurable targets; feedback loops and IT platforms structure how decisions are made and knowledge is shared. In

complex systems, management tools not only execute strategy but also shape behavior, institutional memory, and adaptive capacity.

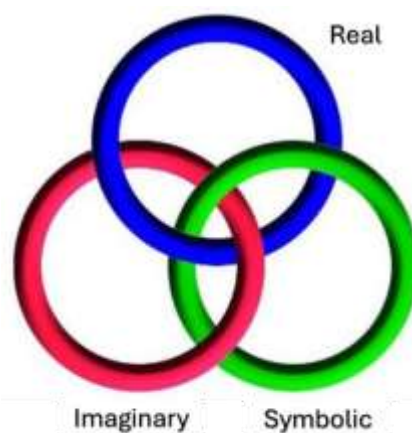
The interplay among these components is recursive: strategy sets direction, structure enables execution, culture modulates interpretation, and systems sustain or transform patterns of practice. Misalignment among these domains can lead to incoherence or dysfunction; conversely, dynamic coherence arises when each domain reinforces the others while maintaining distinct roles. This systemic perspective invites a shift from linear alignment models to topological thinking - where coherence emerges from ongoing negotiation among symbolic, material, and procedural logics.

Borromean Knot

The Borromean knot occupies a central place in Lacan's later teachings, serving as a topological model for illustrating the intricate interdependence of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary - the three fundamental registers that constitute subjectivity. Derived from an ancient heraldic symbol composed of three interlocked rings that collapse if any one is severed, the Borromean configuration expresses the fragile yet structurally interdependent nature of psychic life (Lacan, 2006). Each register plays a distinct but inseparable role: the *Imaginary* pertains to identification, images, and ego formations; the *Symbolic* encompasses language, law, and the structuring of meaning; and the *Real* designates that which is outside symbolization - what escapes or disrupts integration into coherent narratives (Fink, 1995).

While these three registers form the foundation of psychic life, Lacan's topology allows for a more nuanced reading through the introduction of the object *a* (*objet petit a*). This concept, present since his earlier work and carried into his topological phase, does not correspond to a ring within the knot. Rather, it circulates *between* the rings, functioning as the cause of desire - the irreducible lack around which the subject is constituted. The *object a* marks what is structurally impossible to symbolize, yet indispensable for the emergence of subjectivity and fantasy (Lacan, 1966). In topological terms, this function is implied in the configuration of the Borromean knot, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Borromean Knot According to RSI Grammar



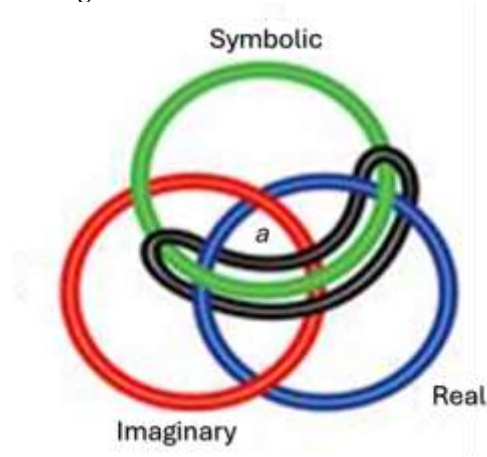
Source: Adapted from Lacan, 2005.

In organizational settings, the *object a* can be theorized as that which energizes desire, fantasy, and ideological investment - the unacknowledged force that sustains engagement, identity, and symbolic coherence, even amid breakdowns (Žižek, 2006). For instance, charismatic leadership or utopian organizational visions may operate as *object a*-like figures,

anchoring collective identification while never being fully representable or attainable (Stavrakakis, 2008). Such dynamics reveal the unconscious dimensions of organizational life - where coherence is not simply a matter of structure or strategy but also of fantasy and affect.

However, *object a* does not stabilize the knot; it functions as a hole - a structural void around which symbolic coherence circulates. To account for psychic stabilization, Lacan later introduced the *sinthome* in Seminar XXIII (2005): a fourth ring that binds the RSI registers in an idiosyncratic, subject-specific way. The *sinthome* is not a universal structure, but a singular solution - what holds together the psyche when the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real risk unraveling. This conceptual development is visually depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The Lacanian Fourth Knot



Source: Adapted from Lacan, 2005.

Extending this logic to organizational life, we might ask: What functions as a metaphorical *sinthome* for organizations? That is, what practice, role, or symbolic structure holds together disparate organizational elements - especially under conditions of instability or symbolic collapse?

In the following sections, we explore how this fourth knot interacts with Winnicott's theory of holding, and how these ideas converge to offer a psychologically attuned, topologically grounded framework for leadership and organizational analysis.

Winnicott and the Holding Environment

While Lacan (2005) provides a structural topology of subjectivity, Winnicott (1965, 1971) offers a developmental and relational perspective that enriches our understanding of the psychic foundations of organizational life. At the heart of Winnicott's contribution is the concept of the holding environment, originally developed to describe the caregiver's role in facilitating the infant's emotional development. In this context, "holding" refers not merely to physical containment but to the creation of a consistent, responsive, and emotionally attuned space that enables the infant to experience continuity of being and to begin differentiating self from other (Winnicott, 1965).

Transposed to the organizational realm, the holding environment serves as a metaphor for the psychological and symbolic spaces leaders and institutions can create to support emotional containment, trust, and resilience. As Hirschhorn (1990) has argued, leadership involves managing not only tasks and structures but also the anxieties and projections that arise in group life. A holding environment, in this sense, becomes essential for sustaining psychological safety and enabling individuals and teams to tolerate ambiguity, explore new possibilities, and manage change without fragmentation.

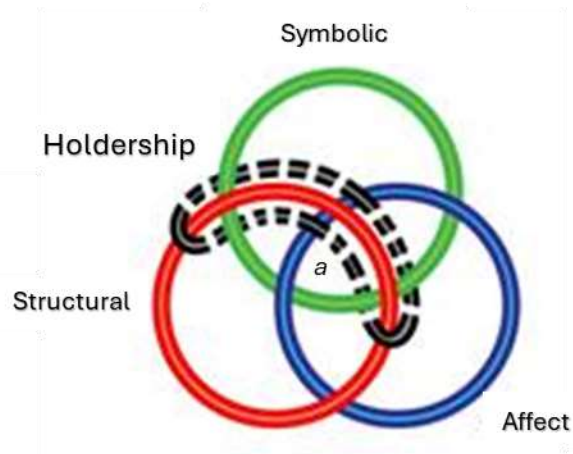
Winnicott's related concept of transitional space further deepens this analysis. Transitional phenomena emerge in the intermediate zone between inner reality and external reality - a space where creativity, play, and symbolic experimentation can occur (Winnicott, 1971). In organizations, such transitional spaces may manifest through rituals, narratives, or creative problem-solving processes that allow members to engage with uncertainty and transformation in meaningful ways. As Kegan and Lahey (2009) observe in their work on deliberately developmental organizations, the capacity to hold both challenge and support simultaneously is central to growth - not only for individuals but for the system as a whole.

The idea of holding also resonates with Bion's (1961) notion of containment, wherein a leader or group facilitator receives, metabolizes, and returns emotional content in a form that is tolerable and thinkable. These psychoanalytic insights highlight the relational dynamics that often remain invisible in purely strategic or structural analyses. They suggest that leadership is not merely about vision or execution but also about the capacity to create emotional and symbolic conditions where others can develop, take risks, and integrate complexity.

Importantly, the holding environment does not imply overprotection or rigidity. On the contrary, it functions as a dynamic container that adjusts to the evolving needs of the group, facilitating autonomy, accountability, and innovation. This aligns with Winnicott's belief that true development involves a gradual movement from dependence to independence, made possible by the reliability and responsiveness of the holding context.

In the organizational setting, then, the holding environment can be understood as an emergent property arising from the interplay of leadership behaviors, cultural norms, symbolic structures, and systemic practices. When absent or fragmented, individuals and teams may revert to defensive routines, paralysis, or dysfunctional conflict (Krantz, 2006). When well-established, however, the holding environment fosters the conditions for emotional maturity, collaborative engagement, and sustained innovation.

Figure 3. The Lacanian Fourth Knot



Source: Adapted from Lacan, 2005.

Integrating Winnicott's perspective with Lacan's topological framework, we begin to see how organizations are not only structured symbolically but also held emotionally. This dual perspective sets the stage for the introduction of the fourth knot, which seeks to formalize the holding function within the Borromean topology, linking strategic and structural components to their psychological and cultural substrates.

Conceptually, the Fourth Knot is best understood not as a literal topological structure, but as a metaphor for relational leadership and organizational holding. It names the function of *holdership* - the collective, dynamic capacity to sustain coherence across the four core domains

by mediating symbolic, affective, and structural tensions. In this framing, leadership becomes the act of “knotting” rather than controlling: a recursive, relational practice of holding difference without collapse.

Discussion

The Fourth Knot model offers a powerful analytical lens for understanding the dynamics of contemporary organizations, particularly in environments marked by instability, complexity, and rapid transformation. By articulating the interdependence of strategy, structure, culture, and systems as a Borromean configuration, the model reveals how organizational coherence emerges not from linear alignment or top-down control, but from the tensional holding of irreducible dimensions.

In volatile contexts - such as those shaped by digital transformation, hybrid work, and sociopolitical upheaval - organizations often experience disjunctions among these elements: strategic clarity may lack structural support; cultural narratives may drift from operational systems; or systems may evolve without alignment to symbolic identity. The Fourth Knot operates as a holding function, sustaining coherence through the active interplay and ongoing negotiation among the four dimensions.

This framework proves especially relevant for organizations navigating post-bureaucratic or networked structures, where traditional hierarchies give way to more fluid, participatory, or decentralized forms. In such settings, coherence becomes a dynamic achievement, continuously reknotted through dialogue, experimentation, and reflexive adaptation.

Moreover, the model aligns with topological metaphors drawn from psychoanalysis and developmental theory. Just as Lacan’s knot binds the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real, and Winnicott’s “potential space” sustains subjective integration through holding and play, the Fourth Knot provides an organizational topology in which difference is not dissolved, but held - productively, vulnerably, and creatively.

Thus, the model does not prescribe a static structure but invites diagnosis, design, and leadership attuned to complexity. It affirms that in the face of disruption, the task is not to restore order through dominance of one domain, but to sustain coherence through entangled balance. The Fourth Knot becomes not just a model of organization, but a practice of organizing otherwise.

Theoretical Contributions

The Fourth Knot model introduces a significant theoretical contribution to organizational studies by proposing a topological grammar of coherence that challenges linear, functionalist, and modular understandings of organizational life. Rather than treating strategy, structure, culture, and systems as discrete or sequential elements, this model theorizes them as mutually interdependent domains whose coherence arises not from integration or alignment, but from structural tension and recursive holding.

Drawing from complexity theory, psychoanalysis, and systems thinking, the model offers a non-reductionist ontology of organization - one that privileges relationality, incompleteness, and paradox over closure and control. In this sense, it aligns with and extends existing complexity-informed frameworks (e.g., Stacey, 2001; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) by introducing a formal topological structure - the Borromean configuration - that enables theoretical precision in describing interdependence.

The model also bridges disciplinary boundaries, integrating insights from Lacanian psychoanalysis (symbolic containment and structural lack), Winnicottian developmental theory (holding environments and potential space), and organizational design (governance, culture, and infrastructure). This transdisciplinary orientation challenges siloed approaches to theory-

building and supports the emergence of meta-theoretical frameworks capable of accounting for the affective, symbolic, and systemic dimensions of organizational life.

Furthermore, the Fourth Knot repositions organizational coherence not as an outcome of managerial optimization, but as a generative tension - a dynamic state of becoming that must be sustained through continuous renegotiation. This reframing has profound implications for leadership theory, change management, and organizational design, encouraging scholars to move beyond stability-oriented paradigms toward more fluid, processual, and interpretive models.

Ultimately, the Fourth Knot invites organizational theorists to rethink the foundations of coherence: not as equilibrium, alignment, or control, but as the capacity to hold difference without collapse, to sustain systemic integrity in the presence of contradiction. It opens new directions for theorizing the symbolic, affective, and structural complexities of organizing in the 21st century.

Methodological Insights

The *Fourth Knot* framework, while primarily theoretical, opens significant avenues for empirical inquiry that require methodological approaches sensitive to symbolic, affective, and systemic dimensions. Given its psychoanalytic and topological foundations, traditional linear or positivist methods may not suffice. Instead, the model calls for interpretive and abductive methodologies capable of capturing the recursive entanglements and symbolic mediations that constitute organizational coherence (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018; Czarniawska, 2004).

First, the metaphorical and transdisciplinary nature of the *Fourth Knot* suggests the use of qualitative and psycho-social methods, such as ethnography, narrative inquiry, and reflective interviewing (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). These approaches allow researchers to access unconscious dynamics, affective patterns, and symbolic ruptures - phenomena often neglected in functionalist organizational research. For example, psychoanalytic observation and projective techniques may uncover how leadership operates as a holding function during times of symbolic or structural crisis (Gabriel, 1999; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020).

Second, the model invites longitudinal and process-based designs that foreground the temporality and plasticity of coherence. Process tracing, action research, and complexity-informed system mapping are well-suited to examining how organizations reconfigure their symbolic and structural knots over time (Stacey, 2001; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). These methodologies can illuminate not only moments of breakdown but also the micro-practices through which organizations “re-knot” coherence amid ambiguity.

Third, the inclusion of the Real and the Imaginary registers foregrounds the subjective and affective dimensions of organizational life. This calls for reflexive and relational methodologies, where the researcher’s own positionality, transference, and affective responses are treated as data (Finlay, 2002; Sampson, 2008). Such approaches are especially relevant in settings marked by emotional volatility, political tension, or symbolic fragmentation - where leadership functions less as command and more as containment.

Finally, the *Fourth Knot* can serve as a diagnostic heuristic in case-based and comparative studies. By mapping the interdependencies and misalignments among strategy, structure, culture, and systems, researchers can assess how coherence is maintained, lost, or reconstituted across organizational contexts. This is particularly relevant for examining leadership during transitions, mergers, crises, or digital transformations (Raelin, 2011; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

In sum, the *Fourth Knot* invites a methodological shift: from measurement to meaning, from alignment to articulation, and from static analysis to dynamic inquiry. It encourages scholars to treat research design itself as a holding practice - capable of tolerating complexity,

mediating symbolic tensions, and giving voice to the undercurrents that sustain organizational life.

Practical Implications

The Fourth Knot framework also introduces a powerful lens for rethinking leadership in complex organizational contexts. Grounded in the Borromean logic of irreducible interdependence, the model proposes that strategy, structure, culture, and systems must be conceived not as discrete pillars of management, but as dynamically entangled dimensions whose coherence emerges through tension, not uniformity. This reframing has significant practical implications, particularly for contemporary theories of leadership that emphasize relationality, emergence, and emotional intelligence.

Relational leadership theorists argue that leadership is not a static role or set of competencies held by individuals at the top of a hierarchy, but rather a dynamic process of mutual influence, co-construction, and affective resonance embedded in social relations (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). From this perspective, leadership arises through everyday interactions, dialogic engagements, and the creation of shared meaning. The Fourth Knot offers a conceptual structure to support this view: by emphasizing that no single domain - strategic intent, structural design, cultural meaning, or technical system - can operate autonomously, it positions leadership as the function of holding these interdependencies in generative tension.

In particular, the notion of holding - inspired by Winnicott's concept of the "holding environment" (1971) - provides a bridge between psychoanalytic theory and leadership practice. Winnicott emphasized that emotional development depends on an environment that provides safety without constriction, containment without control. In organizations, this translates into the capacity of leaders to sustain spaces of psychological safety, creative ambiguity, and relational continuity amidst uncertainty and flux (Krantz, 2006; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). The Fourth Knot models this environment topologically: a space where the symbolic (meaning and narrative), the structural (roles and norms), the affective (trust and motivation), and the systemic (tools and governance) are not harmonized into artificial unity, but dynamically sustained in interdependence.

Practically, this implies that effective leadership in contemporary settings - especially under conditions of rapid digital transformation, hybrid work arrangements, and social volatility - requires more than technical expertise or strategic clarity. It demands the capacity to "host complexity" (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009), that is, to recognize and navigate competing logics, emergent tensions, and the emotional undercurrents of organizational life. Relational leaders function as custodians of coherence, not through imposition but through facilitation, enabling dialogue between domains that are often siloed in practice: systems and culture, affect and performance, structure and identity.

In this sense, the Fourth Knot provides a grammar for systemic relationality. It affirms recent developments in leadership studies that reject the trait-based, heroic models of the past in favor of distributed, dialogic, and embodied approaches (Raelin, 2011; Fletcher, 2004). It also aligns with insights from complexity leadership theory, which highlights the importance of enabling adaptive capacity through informal networks and emergent processes rather than centralized control (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Leaders, according to this model, must be capable not only of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) but of sense-holding: creating symbolic and affective continuity across changing structural and systemic conditions.

Moreover, the Fourth Knot invites organizations to reassess how leadership development is approached. Instead of focusing solely on individual competencies, leadership training should cultivate relational sensibility, emotional attunement, and the ability to work with paradox and incompleteness. This also implies rethinking organizational design: creating

architectures that allow for relational recomposition, rather than reinforcing fixed hierarchies or rigid functional boundaries. In times of crisis or rapid change, the resilience of an organization will depend not on the strength of any single domain, but on its capacity to re-knot - to reweave symbolic narratives, systemic tools, affective climates, and structural supports into new configurations.

In summary, the Fourth Knot contributes to the field of leadership studies by formalizing the conditions under which relational leadership can thrive. It renders visible the topological and affective dynamics often overlooked in managerial discourse, offering a model that resonates with contemporary organizational realities: distributed authority, emotional complexity, and continuous reconfiguration. By foregrounding interdependence, structural incompleteness, and symbolic mediation, the framework affirms leadership as a practice of care, containment, and collective becoming - less about control, and more about sustaining the knot that holds the organization together.

Future Directions

As organizational environments become increasingly volatile, fragmented, and interdependent, the *Fourth Knot* framework offers a robust foundation for navigating future theoretical and practical challenges. By articulating the interdependence of strategy, structure, culture, and systems as a dynamic topological entanglement, the model resonates with the principles of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) theory and the evolution of relational leadership. Central to both domains is a heightened sensitivity to context - as not merely background, but an active participant in organizational emergence and coherence.

Within CAS theory, context is not external to the system but immanent to its operation. Adaptive capacity, emergence, and resilience are functions of how an organization is coupled with its ecological, social, and technological environments (Cilliers, 1998; Holland, 1995). The Fourth Knot aligns with this view by showing how coherence arises not from isolated internal mechanisms, but from the ongoing modulation between organizational domains in response to contextual perturbations. For instance, a shift in market conditions (external context) might provoke symbolic renegotiation (purpose), structural adaptation (governance), and affective reorientation (motivation), mediated by the underlying management systems.

Future research can explore how contextual sensitivity is distributed across the knot's dimensions. Some organizations may prioritize structural responsiveness, while others leverage symbolic narratives or affective resonance to absorb environmental volatility. This invites comparative studies across sectors, geographies, and institutional logics, tracing how different contexts shape distinct knot configurations.

Contemporary leadership theory increasingly emphasizes contextual attunement as a core competency. In complexity-informed and relational paradigms, effective leadership is less about issuing directives and more about sensing, interpreting, and facilitating meaning-making within evolving environments (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Raelin, 2011). The Fourth Knot provides a heuristic for this form of leadership, positioning the leader not at the center of control, but as a custodian of entanglement - someone who sustains coherence across symbolic, structural, systemic, and affective dimensions in relation to contextual cues.

This repositions context not as constraint, but as co-actor: a shifting terrain that co-constitutes leadership practice. For example, during a crisis, the leader may need to recalibrate the symbolic register (narratives of hope or loss), adjust procedural infrastructure (emergency protocols), and manage emotional climates (fear, solidarity). Leadership becomes a form of knot work: recursive, embodied, and deeply responsive to environmental feedback (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020).

This view aligns with relational leadership theories, which stress mutual influence, dialogic space, and situated co-construction (Fletcher, 2004; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). The

Fourth Knot can be operationalized to study how leaders work within and across contextual layers - cultural, institutional, technological - to co-create viable paths forward.

Finally, future developments may involve extending the Fourth Knot into a contextual topology - one that visualizes how internal organizational configurations entangle with external systems. This could involve mapping how different environments (*e.g.*, digital platforms, political instability, ecological crisis) deform the knot's structure, requiring reconfiguration of internal relations. Such visualizations could support scenario planning, resilience assessment, and strategic foresight.

Empirically, this calls for methodologies attuned to context-in-motion: longitudinal ethnographies, complexity-informed process tracing, and participatory mapping techniques. Cross-sectoral comparisons may illuminate how knot dynamics adapt in different institutional ecosystems - *e.g.*, cooperatives *vs.* multinational firms, social movements *vs.* public administrations.

In sum, the Fourth Knot provides a generative framework for future research and practice by integrating context as constitutive of organizational coherence. It invites scholars and leaders alike to move beyond static models toward a dynamic, situated, and relational ontology of organizing - where stability is not the absence of change, but the artful holding of difference amid shifting grounds.

Conclusion

This article introduced the Fourth Knot as a conceptual and topological framework for reimagining organizational coherence in contexts marked by complexity, volatility, and structural incompleteness. Building on insights from systems theory, psychoanalysis, and organizational studies, the model articulates the recursive entanglement of four key dimensions of organizational life: strategy, structure, culture, and systems. Rather than treating these domains as discrete silos, the Fourth Knot positions them as interdependent strands whose coherence emerges not through uniformity or central control, but through sustained tension and recursive articulation.

One of the central contributions of the article is to offer a non-reductionist, transdisciplinary grammar for analyzing organizational dynamics. The Borromean-inspired model not only maps how coherence is achieved through symbolic, structural, and affective interdependence, but also highlights how this dynamic is grounded in a fourth register - management systems - which functions as a latent operator or holding environment. By drawing from Lacan's symbolic topology and Winnicott's concept of potential space, the model enriches current understandings of how meaning, affect, and coordination converge in contemporary organizing.

For organizational behavior studies, the core contribution of this article lies in formalizing a relational topology of leadership in complex contexts, where the act of "holding the knot" - sustaining symbolic, affective, and structural cohesion - becomes more critical than achieving linear alignment. The Fourth Knot thus offers a novel theoretical lens for examining phenomena such as symbolic resilience, emotional containment, and shared meaning-making practices within contemporary organizations.

However, this study is not without limitations. It remains primarily theoretical and conceptual in nature, offering a speculative yet formal topology without empirical testing. The absence of case-based or field research restricts its immediate applicability to specific organizational contexts. Furthermore, the metaphorical richness of the model, while generative, may pose challenges for operationalization in traditional management or leadership settings.

Future research should seek to empirically validate the model through case studies, action research, or participatory inquiry within diverse organizational forms - including cooperatives, NGOs, and post-bureaucratic structures. There is also potential for expanding the

framework into other epistemological territories, such as neuroscience (e.g., affective regulation and network integration), subjectivity studies (e.g., desire, fantasy, and unconscious dynamics in organizational life), and design research (e.g., participatory system mapping and adaptive infrastructures). Additional inquiries might explore how the Fourth Knot manifests across cultural contexts and organizational scales, or how it interfaces with digital transformation, hybrid work, and platform governance.

Ultimately, the Fourth Knot invites a shift in how we understand organizing - not as a process of achieving total alignment, but as a practice of holding structural incompleteness, symbolic contradiction, and affective multiplicity in dynamic relation. It opens space for a new language of coherence: one grounded not in closure, but in the creative re-knotting of difference under conditions of uncertainty and change.

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