THE LOOSENESS OF LOOSE COUPLING: THE USE AND MISUSE OF “LOOSE COUPLING” IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The term “loose coupling” has been widely employed in higher education research. Building partly on the “garbage can model” of decision-making, it proposed an alternative to rational and linear views on organizing and governing, emphasizing instead ambiguity and complexity. The review of higher education research literature presented in this chapter demonstrates that the concept of loose coupling has frequently been used as a background concept, often taken for-granted either as a point of departure for studies of organizational processes in higher education or as a diagnosis of the complexity of higher education organization that inhibits implementation of reforms. This chapter provides systematization and critical examination of how the term “loose coupling”/“loosely coupled systems” has been employed in journal articles focusing on higher education in the last 40 years. It presents a broad mapping of 209 articles and a more detailed qualitative review of 22 articles, which employed loose coupling as more than a background concept.

Keywords: Loose coupling; organization; higher education; loosely coupled systems; differentiation; fragmentation

INTRODUCTION

The concept of organizations as loosely coupled systems is widely used and diversely understood. While this statement effectively summarizes one of the key points of this chapter, it is actually almost 30 years older. It is the opening
sentence of the 1990 article in which Orton and the “father” of loose coupling, Weick (though the fatherhood of the concept is rather more complex), review how the concept has been used since its original publication in 1976 (Orton & Weick, 1990, p. 203). Weick’s 1976 article, “Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems,” along with Clark’s “organisational saga” (1972), Cohen, March & Olsen’s “garbage can decision-making model” (1972), and Meyer & Rowan’s “myth and ceremony” (1977) constitutes a key set of 1970s publications advancing widely used conceptual and theoretical insights based on analysis of (higher) education organizations.

Not only has loose coupling become a staple ingredient of social science research, it has also become a widely used and taken-for-granted description of university organization. Given that the initial article marked its 40th anniversary in 2016, it is timely to systematically examine how the concept has been used in higher education research and what kinds of empirical insights have been developed regarding the loosely coupled nature of higher education.

Consequently, the chapter will:

1. introduce the concept of loose coupling based on Weick (1976) and Orton and Weick (1990);
2. map how the idea of organizations as loosely coupled systems has been used in higher education research, in particular with regard to breadth and depth;
3. review articles that have foregrounded the concept; and
4. discuss the relevance and possible future avenues for research concerning loose coupling.

LOOSE COUPLING ACCORDING TO WEICK (AND ORTON)

While this chapter takes a starting point in Weick’s conceptualization from 1976, it should first be noted that the actual terms “loose coupling” or “loosely coupled” did not originate from Weick. In his 1976 article, Weick himself points to at least three prior instances of use of these terms: (1) a 1973 article by Glassman on persistence and loose coupling in living systems (Glassman, 1973); (2) an unpublished manuscript by March and Olsen from 1975 titled, “Choice situations in loosely coupled worlds”; and (3) another unpublished manuscript by Salancik from 1975 titled, “Notes on loose coupling: linking intentions and actions.” Moreover, while the 1976 article is attributed to Weick, it is in essence a report of a National Institute of Education workshop organized in early 1975 in California, which gathered other organizational scholars, including March. In a short note explaining the origins of the article (http://garfield.library.upenn.edu/classics1989/A1989T566900001.pdf (accessed on January 29, 2019)), Weick also implies that the report was published in Administrative Science Quarterly effectively without peer review, apparently facilitated by the proximity of Weick’s office to the office of Lodahl, then editor of ASQ. Thus, while Weick is often cited as a primary reference for “loose coupling”/“loosely coupled” concept, it seems that quite a number of people contributed to its creation. This
origin story of the 1976 article perhaps explains its content and structure, comprising: (1) a literature review; (2) a report of discussions on promises and pitfalls of loose coupling; (3) a critical reflection on methodology; and (4) an outline of a research agenda.

Second, the context in which this article was published is also of relevance. Namely, it was a part of a countermovement within organizational research, which at the time strongly assumed rationality. Together with the other three articles highlighted in the introduction, as well as (among others) work by March and Simon on ambiguity and bounded rationality, the key message was that there is a “substantial unexplained remainder” of organizational dynamics which is “intractable to analysis through rational assumptions” (p. 1). It argued that it is not possible to answer some of the key questions — including what holds organizations together — unless light is shed on previously taken-for-granted aspects. In this respect, the concept of loose coupling is expected to act as a “sensitizing device,” or a new (better) pair of glasses which allows the researcher to see elements of organization that would otherwise remain in the dark.

However, when it comes to how such a sensitizing device is to be defined, the article is somewhat less clear. It refers to “loose coupling imagery,” as well as “idea of loose coupling” and “coupling mechanisms” — technical and authority based. It identifies no less than 15 different “connotations of loose coupling,” some of which are rather abstract and applicable beyond the specific empirical context of educational organizations — for example, loose-coupling between means and ends, intentions and actions, organizational structure and organizational activity, lack of coordination, slow spread of influence/change through the organization, planned unresponsiveness, and absence of regulations. Other connotations remain rather close to the school setting that initiated the discussion in the first place — for example, “curricula or courses in educational organizations for which there are few prerequisites” (p. 5). Some of the connotations as formulated by Weick appear to be conceptually rather close to each other; compare, for example, “any one of several means will produce the same end” and “no matter what you do things always come out the same” (p. 5). Some other connotations appear to resonate with related concepts which originated around the same time, for example, garbage-can decision-making which argues that problems and solutions are not necessary causally linked (cf. Cohen et al., 1972), or decoupling between “talk” and “walk” in organizations (cf. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In total, these connotations essentially present a multifaceted image of coupling, going well beyond structural aspects of organizations.

Compared to the ambiguity concerning what exactly is (or is not) loosely coupled in (educational) organizations, the article is much clearer with regard to the promises and pitfalls of loose coupling. The basic premise here is that loose coupling in general serves a positive function in an organization, but that it also constitutes a liability. A loosely coupled organization is better at sensing the complex environment, but runs the risk of “producing faddish responses” (p. 6). At the same time, loose coupling allows for localized adaptation which does not affect the whole system, and thus shields the whole organization from too quick
a response to negative signals from the environment, effectively contributing to organizational perseverance. And while being able to “seal off” a problematic part of an organization is good in that respect, it also poses obstacles for repair. A loosely coupled organization is thought to be more creative with regard to novel solutions but, given that change spreads slowly and weakly through the organization, the benefits of such novel solutions may not arrive where and when they are needed. Loosely coupled organizations are organizations characterized by high professional autonomy, and as such it may be easier and cheaper to coordinate them in a manner that resonates with these characteristics, but that also comes with a “non-rational system of fund allocation” (p. 8) suggesting that funding is, reportedly, not an effective incentive for change in such organizations.

With regard to the research agenda, the 1976 article advocates for an inventory of elements in (educational) organizations that could be (loosely or tightly) coupled and for a mapping exercise of patterns of coupling, as well as functions and dysfunctions that arise from such patterns. It stresses that such endeavors should be based on context rich methodologies as well as longitudinal and comparative studies, so that what was previously invisible can be seen. It also links to Weick’s other work, arguing that more attention should be made on how people make sense of their loosely coupled organizations (Weick, 1995). However, the research agenda section actually starts with a suggestion that “more conceptual work has to be done before other lines of inquiry on this topic are launched” (p. 16). This effectively serves as an admission that the concept is ambiguous, in particular given that it comes with the following warning: “if researchers start stalking the elusive loosely coupled systems with imperfect language and concepts, they will perpetuate the blandness of organizational theory” (p. 16).

Yet, it seems that the concept rapidly got a life of its own. In late 1980s, Orton and Weick conducted a review of approximately 15 years of studies utilizing the concept of loose coupling/loosely coupled systems and found that “like a linguistic Trojan horse, the loose coupling concept has preceded loose coupling theory into various strongholds of organizational studies” (Orton & Weick, 1990, p. 203). They admit that the concept is “underspecified” and that its face validity comes coupled (!) with significant imprecision, but argue that such imprecision may have abetted its wide use. In an almost ironical manner, the rather open conceptualization (or, loose definition) of loose coupling is likely what also led to its success and spread.

Reflecting the initial context in which the 1976 article appeared, they reiterate that the term “loosely coupled” should allow researchers to simultaneously acknowledge (and see) rationality and order in an organization (hence “coupled”), as well as indeterminacy and independence of its elements (hence “loosely”). They also postulate two distinct interpretations of the concept. On the one hand, there is a unidimensional notion of loose coupling — a scale ranging from tightly to loosely coupled elements in a system. On the other hand, there is a dialectical notion that is based on the extent to which elements are distinctive from each other, and responsive to signals external to them (which includes signals from other parts of the organization). This yields a $2 \times 2$ matrix
(Table 1), which not only highlights that loosely coupled systems are those in which both responsiveness and distinctiveness are present, but also links the idea of coupling through one other often cited concept, that is, decoupling which originates from Meyer and Rowan (1977).

Orton and Weick also classify the different studies they reviewed (reportedly around 300 of them) into five distinct “voices.” Voice of causation comprises studies focusing on why one finds loose coupling or not. The three identified explanations include: (1) causal indeterminacy, which relates to ambiguity circumstances which give rise to garbage can decision-making approaches; (2) fragmented external environment which, among other matter, concerns decoupling talk from walk; and (3) fragmented internal environment which highlights fluidity of participation and dispersion of interest and involvement. Voice of typology focuses on what can be (loosely) coupled: (1) individuals, (2) subunits, (3) organizations, (4) hierarchical levels, (5) organizations and their environments, (6) ideas, (7) activities, and (8) intentions and actions. These eight types at similar levels of abstraction constitute a leaner and sharper typology, compared to the 15 connotations identified in 1976, some of which were rather context-dependent. Voice of direct effects focuses on (supposedly) desirable effects of loose coupling on organization as such, including increased modularity, variety, and discretion. This is distinct from voice of organizational outcomes or indirect effects, which highlights how specific loosely coupled organizational aspects affect organizational performance, resistance to change, buffering of problematic areas, adaptability, member satisfaction, and effectiveness. The voices of effects (direct and indirect) correspond clearly to the discussion of promises and pitfalls of loose coupling that Weick presented in 1976. Finally, the voice of compensations highlights different approaches through which negative aspects of loose coupling can be redressed, namely leadership, focused attention and shared values. These five voices constitute building blocks of what Orton and Weick label “a preliminary model of loose coupling theory”.

Orton and Weick admit that such a schematic representation of the five voices oversimplifies relationships between and importance of different elements, and does not necessarily correspond to how different researchers utilizing the concept would see it. Nevertheless, Orton and Weick maintain that loose coupling, specifically if understood dialectically and as more than a negative definition, allows for simultaneously grasping connectedness and autonomy (order

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and disorder) in organizations, thus being particularly well-suited for addressing how organizations are socially constructed. They posit that the concept of loose coupling will motivate researchers to consider structure as “something that organizations do, rather than merely as something they have,” suggesting that “loose coupling may be able to do for the study of organizational structure what bounded rationality did for the study of decision making” (Orton & Weick, 1990, p. 218).

In sum, in both the original article from 1976 and the re-conceptualization from 1990, the idea of loose coupling is presented as relevant for different dimensions (individuals, subunits, environment in general, other organizations, etc.), and as having both beneficial and potentially harmful consequences for organizations and their performance. Already in 1976 Weick stresses the importance of deeper engagement with the concept, while in 1990 Orton & Weick order the different strands of research. Both of the articles have a conceptual aim, but do not complement conceptual discussions with a specific empirical examination of university organization.

LOOSE COUPLING IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH: A BROAD PICTURE

Approach

In order to examine how the term, “loose coupling” has evolved over time, a literature review was conducted — with specific focus on journal articles. The review draws inspiration from systematic review approaches (Tight, 2019), with some adjustments. The starting point for selecting the studies to be analyzed was Google Scholar citation records of the Weick 1976 article and the Orton & Weick 1990 article, from 1976 until the end of 2016. Within the set of over 11,000 citations, we selected articles that were published in: (a) journals specific to higher education research, and (b) more general social sciences, provided that article focused on higher education (the list of journals is provided in Appendix 1). This yielded a total of 238 articles that were subsequently analyzed in terms of their focus and use of the term, loose coupling. In the screening process, articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria (e.g., they actually referred to other work by Weick) were removed from the database. Three articles were removed due to technical problems (e.g., corrupted files). Thus, the final database includes 209 articles. The screening of the articles focused on the following aspects:

- journal and year of publication;
- which of the loose coupling articles is cited: Orton & Weick (1990); Weick (1976), or both;
- what is the nature of reference to loose coupling, distinguishing between the use of loose coupling as (1) a background description (e.g., “universities are loosely coupled” without any further engagement) or (2) a foreground concept (discussed in more detail or part of the analytical framework); and
• whether loose coupling is described in more detail (the what) and whether there is a discussion of antecedents and/or consequences (the how and why) of loose coupling.

The articles were divided between the two co-authors equally, with an overlap of 25 articles that were screened by both co-authors, in order to ensure the consistency of analysis.

**The Screening Results**

The results of such “broad picture” screening is presented in Table 2.

While it is expected that many articles analyzing loose coupling in higher education are published in higher education journals, a bit more than one-fifth of articles were published in general social science journals. This remains a trend in recent years too, despite a proliferation of journals specializing on higher education. Moreover, despite its age, the concept of loose coupling as conceptualized in Weick (1976), and re-conceptualized in Orton and Weick (1990), seems to maintain relevance for higher education researchers, with the highest number of citations coming from the latest 10 years. Compared to the original contribution, the 1990 re-conceptualization of loose coupling by Orton and Weick has received far less attention. Only two articles cite both contributions.

Most of the studies use loose coupling only as a background concept. Loose coupling is a foreground concept in approximately one-fifth of the studies, though in general social science journals, this proportion is somewhat higher. Some of the studies provide detailed descriptions of the specific instance of loose

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<th>Table 2. Broad Overview of Use of Loose Coupling Concept.</th>
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<td>Number of Articles</td>
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*Source: Authors.*
coupling and, though somewhat less prominently, discuss the antecedents and consequences of loose coupling.

Frequently, loose coupling is also associated with Meyer and Rowan’s decoupling argument, and in some instances, decoupling and loose coupling are used interchangeably. Moreover, the garbage can decision-making model and view of organizations as organized anarchies by Cohen, March and Olsen is used along with loose coupling to describe enduring characteristics of universities, in several instances even the same sentence, for example:

the general structure and design of institutions of higher education is much more adaptive and restorative than are traditional bureaucracies and hierarchical systems. That is, they are loosely coupled (Weick, 1976), fluid systems (Cohen & March, 1974) that have a great capacity to survive environmental disruptions. (Boffo, Dubois, & Moscati, 2008; Cameron & Whetten, 1983)

the situation can be summarised as follows: both in France and Italy the model of governance which prevailed until recently can be defined as a mix of the political model (Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958; Pfeffer, 1982) and the anarchy model and derived versions, one of which might prevail over the others, according to times and specific situations. (Cohen & March, 1974; Cohen et al., 1972; Weick, 1976). (Boffo et al., 2008, p. 15).

In general, a substantial share of the articles use loose coupling as a background concept and thus only superficially explore the concept itself. The references to Weick, 1976 (and far less to Orton & Weick, 1990), can often be found in introductions to describe specific characteristics of higher education organizations, without necessarily unpacking what these characteristics actually entail and very rarely discussing the implications of this explicitly. This is somewhat ironic given that Weick himself launched the notion of loosely coupled systems precisely with a view that things which were before just assumed — at that time rationality in organizations — will be questioned and that the sensitising device of loose coupling will make previously invisible aspects of organization visible (Weick, 1976, p. 3).

It is conceivable that preoccupation with rationalized, tidy, efficient, coordinated structures has blinded many practitioners as well as researchers to some of the attractive and unexpected properties of less rationalized and less tightly related cluster of events.

While such limited engagement with the concept may be an indication that the messages from both cited articles — concerning conceptual clarity as well as the need to empirically identify patterns of loose (or tight) coupling — have not been taken aboard in the higher education research community, a small number of articles foreground the concept to some degree.

LOOSE COUPLING IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH: A MORE DETAILED PICTURE

Approach

In this section, we focus on the studies that foregrounded the concept (see Table 2). Given that the notion of loose-coupling concerns intra-organizational characteristics of higher education institutions, the studies that used it to reflect
on policy processes or university hospitals were not included, leading to a final set of 22 articles that were the focus of the review.

We took Orton and Weick’s model of loose coupling theory and its five voices as the starting point for classifying articles. This way we identified that the large majority of the articles (p. 17) reflect the voice of typology and focus on what is being loosely (or tightly) coupled to what. Specifically, these articles address the relationship between structure and action, the differentiation of tasks and authority, and horizontal and vertical fragmentation. A much smaller set of studies (six; note that some of the articles appear under more than one heading) focuses on different outcomes of loose coupling, thus reflecting voices of direct effects, compensations and organizational outcomes, but not explicitly referring to any of these three (hence grouped together). Similarly, five studies which explore how loose coupling within higher education emerges reflect the voice of causation, but they actually do not explicitly refer to causes. We also identified five studies which provide some insights into methodological approaches for studying loose coupling. Some studies – for example, Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori (2015), Kondakci and Van den Broeck (2009), Rhoades (1990) – belong to more than one of these categories. In the following section, we present each of these categories.

**Types of Loose Coupling: Structure and Action**

Articles in this group explore the coupling between: (a) formal structures or principles, and (b) practices and activities within organization, often referring to Weick’s loose coupling concept as well as the decoupling argument by Meyer and Rowan (1977). For example, Townley (1997) refers to loose coupling as a concept to describe ceremonial conformity, including adoption of formal requirements while these remain decoupled from practices. Others, for example, Rhoades (1990) see loose coupling and decoupling as related but different processes, constituting one of the four analytical perspectives employed to analyze change and continuity in higher education (the other three being resource dependence, rational-bureaucracy, and organizations as political arenas).

The relationship between formal structures and actual practices is also the focus of Barron’s analysis of the Berlin Principles on Ranking Higher Education Institutions (2017), suggesting a clear decoupling with a clear reference to Orton and Weick (1990). Similarly, Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) analyze the role of meetings in the social practice of strategy, and the opportunities strategy processes provide for emergence of loose coupling. They refer to both de-coupling and re-coupling between durable organizational structures and temporary meeting structures, albeit without explicitly discussing this in relation to loose coupling. Blaschke, Frost, and Hattke (2014) take a different approach and juxtapose macro loose coupling of organizations and tight coupling of the micro patterns of communication, stressing how this view is in line with the “dialectical nature of loose coupling” (Orton and Weick, 1990).

One of the few studies that explicitly constructs their whole analytical framework around the concept loose coupling is Sapir and Oliver (2017) study of
introduction and framing of regulations. They specify that loose coupling exists in situations in which (1) practices do not neatly match organizational structures or (2) organizational responses do not clearly reflect external pressures. They clearly contrast the notion of loose coupling to both decoupling and tight coupling. In their view tight coupling concerns “full compatibility among external requirements, organizational structures, and work activities,” while decoupling is a specific strategy to maintain an image of compliance (p. 712). Similar to Blaschke et al. (2014), they discuss the dialectical notion of loose coupling, emphasizing simultaneous processes of coupling and decoupling.

Overall, several of these studies suggest the relevance of adopting a processual view on coupling processes, and either explicitly or implicitly hint at the dialectical view of coupling, where processes of decoupling and recoupling take place on a continuous basis.

Types of Loose Coupling: Differentiation of Tasks and Authority

Studies that focus on the differentiation between different sub-systems within higher education in particular address authority structures of academic and administrative work.

In one of the earliest analysis of loose coupling, Telem (1981) distinguishes between formal organizational structure and functional structure, suggesting that the two do not necessarily overlap. At the same time, Childers (1981) analyzed decision-making in universities, specifically the political aspects of bureaucratic and collegial decision-making. While she argued that the loose coupling concept (as well as the garbage can model) reflects the existing unstructured relationships between authority and tasks, structured relationships also existed, that is, “bureaucratic strength does not necessarily decrease collegial strength” (p. 41). A bit later, Lutz (1982) explored the basic tenet of four theories that had emerged in the end of 1970s – loosely coupled systems, garbage can organization, organized anarchies and contingency theory – all of which suggest that flexible organizations are more adaptable and resilient. While his empirical material was based on a set of limited personal observations, he noted that universities are rather bureaucratic in many aspects of their organization, thus also characterized by inflexibility. Hence, he argues that universities would better be explained by concurrent tight coupling and decoupling, in this manner also emphasizing the dialectical characteristic of loose coupling.

Differentiation of tasks and authority within higher education has also been explored more recently. Bleiklie et al. (2015) juxtapose “two alternative models of control. That is hierarchical-bureaucratic and the loosely coupled one” (p. 876), stressing that control in universities (as knowledge-intensive professional organizations) is, by necessity, a combination of both. They analyze intra-organizational control in relation to two dimensions: (1) centralization of power and (2) formalization of social relationships. In this context, loosely coupled organizations are those organizations with low levels of centralization of power and formalization of social relationships. Similarly, Thoenig and Paradeise (2016) examine why some universities have more capacity to operate
as strategic actors, suggesting that coupling concerns interdependence, specifically interdependence between heterogenous academic units, and between the academic and administrative sphere.

Overall, these articles seem to consistently emphasize the co-existence of tight and loose coupling between different authority structures within universities, in particular between academic and administrative sides. In terms of loose coupling, this suggests that a fruitful area for future research would be to identify the conditions and practices of coupling between these two subsystems.

Types of Loose Coupling: Horizontal and Vertical Organizational Fragmentation

Rather than viewing loose coupling between structure, action or tasks, here loose coupling is an organizational feature, being placed in the structural rather than human side of organizations (Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Birnbaum (1989), for example, highlights loose coupling between subunits of an organization, stressing that while these subunits may have weak linkages between themselves, they are characterized by strong linkages (tight coupling) internally (interestingly, while Birnbaum does refer to Weick elsewhere in the article, he refers to work by Cyert and March (1963) and Simon (1964) when discussing internal fragmentation). Loose coupling within universities — here understood as organizational fragmentation — is a starting point in several of the articles (Kondakci & Van den Broeck, 2009; Simsek & Louis, 1994). Specifically, Bleiklie et al. (2015) see loose coupling as low levels of decentralization of power and formalized relationships, while Thoenig and Paradeise (2016) consider loose coupling to comprise segmented nature of universities with heterogenous subunits.

Change in terms of increasing or decreasing fragmentation also features prominently. Ogawa’s (2002) study identified how reform processes in Japan shifted universities from having virtually no linkages to what could be characterized as loosely coupled organizations. In contrast, Pilbeam (2006) identifies a process of change from tight to loose coupling in UK in relation to increased pressure for generating additional revenue streams. Specifically, he highlights lack of “common language that permits shared understanding between disciplines,” “differences in objectives and goals” between departments and that “one element can adapt and develop independently from the rest of the organization” (p. 308) as examples of loose coupling. While in the case of the UK, this concerns weakening of horizontal linkages between academic subunits, Ogawa (2002) stresses strengthening of vertical connections between graduate schools and top administration.

While most of these studies focus on organizational units, loose coupling — in terms of horizontal linkages — has also been used studied on the individual level. In study of how performance management had altered individual behaviour, Teelken (2015) examined policy, organizational as well as individual level, contrasting loose coupling and tight coupling between individual academics.

In sum, articles that concern organizational fragmentation represent a diverse set of arguments. While horizontal fragmentation is already a rather often used
example of loose coupling, vertical coupling, the relationship between horizontal and vertical coupling, and relationships between organizational and individual levels could be promising avenues for further research.

**Outcomes of Loose Coupling**

In one of the earliest articles reviewed here, Ecker (1979) argues that an important aspect of universities being loosely coupled systems is that leaders need to be comfortable with ambiguity and accept that organizational efficiency must be a “subordinate goal” to organizational creativity. Ellström (1983) identified organized anarchies, garbage can decision-making and loose coupling as three distinct imageries of what he labelled as the anarchistic model of organization. In his conceptualization, in the anarchistic model one can expect unclear organizational goals and ambiguous organizational processes, characterized by foolishness, randomness and play. Both of these studies thus emphasize loose coupling as a source for disorder and ambiguity within higher education institutions.

Others have explored the consequences of loose coupling for a change process. Simsek and Louis (1994) take as their starting point loosely coupled organizations, and explore how they respond to challenges of strategic planning. They identify that both revolutionary and evolutionary changes take place simultaneously. Kondakci and Van den Broeck (2009) also assume loose coupling as a starting point, stressing that this leads to less interdependency, increased specialization, reduced predictability and increased authority in sub-units; thus enhancing improvisation, self-reflection, and individual translation of practices (p. 461).

Loose coupling has been also identified as one of the conditions for organizational adaptiveness. Specifically, Tahar, Niemeyer, and Boutellier (2011) propose organizational ambidexterity as a concept to reconcile organizational loose coupling and centralized authority. Similarly, Kezar and Eckel (2004) argue that loose coupling presents a number of benefits for organizations regarding their responses to environment, leading to “greater organizational learning, flexibility, and ability to respond to external conditions, leading to improved decision making” (p. 381).

Overall, studies that discuss the outcomes of loose coupling refer to loose coupling leading to increasing ambiguity, whereas this ambiguity also represents a space for adaptability and flexibility. Yet, in very few of these studies are these causal arguments explicitly analyzed.

**The Emergence of Loose Coupling**

Among the articles selected for review, very few explicitly concern why and how loose coupling of universities emerges. Cameron (1984, p. 136) used “Janusian” thinking as a means to describe the notion, where loose coupling is a means for “organizations to cope better with unpredictable environmental events.” In this manner, loose coupling is implicitly viewed as a means to manage
environmental demands. Townley (1997) expanded on this, arguing that the environments in which institutions are embedded are complex and consist of multiple logics rather than one stream of pressures pushing toward conformity and isomorphism. At the same time, as argued by Rhoades (1990), not all environments are equally relevant, and this variance would also lead to varying patterns of loose coupling within higher education institutions.

While the previous studies emphasize institutional environments as a source for loose coupling, others have suggested that loose coupling is a consequence of multiple goals and objectives. For instance, Birnbaum (1989) in his model of cybernetic higher education institutions, dedicates a whole section to discussing loose coupling, and how universities address tensions between multiple and conflicting goals by “assigning responsibility for these goals to different subunits” (p. 247). In this manner, loose coupling becomes a means to address multiple tasks in organizations without necessarily determining who specifies these tasks. Ogawa (2002) also analyzed the emergence of coupling, and traces it back to the nature of the reform that introduced and proliferated graduate schools and research centres.

It is obvious that the studies in this review do not present a full range of possible sources for loose coupling, and that this remains an area where additional connections within literature can be made, e.g., toward discussions of disciplinary differences.

Some Notes on Methodology

Most of the studies reviewed are qualitative case studies, often interview-based and with a smaller number of comparative studies. Jarzabkowski and Seidl (2008) also utilize observations of meetings and in this manner identify coupling processes. Barron (2017) also relies on observations of ranking related conferences, involvement in a university rating, media articles, and other documents related to rankings. Bleiklie et al. (2015) analysis is an autoethnography in several institutions.

Quantitative approaches are an exception. Childers (1981) employed a quantitative quasi-experimental design, using a survey instrument. Blaschke et al. (2014) analyze micro foundations of leadership, governance and management in universities by focusing on communication of strategic issues between university governing bodies. Methodologically, to identify loose coupling between governing bodies and strategic issues, they identify which governing structures are mentioned in relation to which strategic issues. To identify tight coupling between bodies and issues, they perform hierarchical cluster analysis to identify five significant clusters.

This suggests that analysis of loose coupling is a subject to a variety of methodological approaches. This is also not surprising, given the varied and multiple (or sometimes lacking) operationalizations of loose coupling in existing literature.
OUTLOOK FOR LOOSE COUPLING RESEARCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

It is clear that, despite the lack of explicit conceptual and empirical advancement, loose coupling has become a classic in higher education research. From a critical viewpoint, one could argue that being a classic could also mean that the term obtains a more ritual purpose. Specific references can become a signaling device for legitimating a claim that one is a part of a specific research community (for ritual and other uses of “the classics,” see Stinchcombe, 1982). Such ritual use is not necessarily problematic in itself. However, in this case, it seems to be the predominant use and as such has implications for advancement of organizational studies in higher education. A minority of 209 articles identified in the broad review engage with the concept in a more encompassing way, by analyzing coupling patterns, by describing what loose coupling actually entails or discussing its consequences for intra- or inter-organizational dynamics. The overall impression in this analysis is that explicit conceptual engagement with the notion of loose coupling has been reduced over time. The original article by Weick is far more cited than the reconceptualization by Orton and Weick that aimed to tighten up some of the ambiguities from the original article. The qualitative review suggested that, while there are a small number of studies that explicitly build their conceptual framework around loose coupling (Sapir & Oliver, 2017), the concept is clearly defined and explicitly operationalized only in rare cases.

Loose coupling of higher education organizations seems to have become a taken-for-granted empirical fact, given the extent to which it is used as a background concept to describe specific characteristics of higher education. It seems to provide more of an “imagery” than a precise concept for empirical analysis. In that sense, the use is perhaps ironically matching the ambiguity of the original article, which also presented loose coupling as imagery with a range of connotations. In higher education research, loose coupling seems to denote the disconnected, unstructured, informal and sometimes chaotic relationships in higher education institutions. In this context, there is also a danger of loose coupling becoming a normative notion that is expected to highlight the benefits for the flexibility and adaptability of organizations. When associated with a temporal argument, it can also become a means to describe a specific kind of the past, which is viewed as more desirable than the more managerial and tightly coupled university that is being facilitated by recent change processes. Voices of warning against normative use of the concept were also expressed in early literature (Lutz, 1982).

Recent studies that emphasize universities as more complete organizations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Seeber et al., 2015) or organizational actors (Krücken & Meier, 2006) challenge this taken-for-granted view of enduring loose coupling in universities. Given that both some of the earlier and later studies that engage with the concept (see, for example, Bleiklie et al., 2015; Childers, 1981; Ecker, 1979) pointed out that multiple couplings co-exist and that there is a complex co-existence of academic and administrative steering, it is timely to revisit what loose coupling in higher education really entails, both in
conceptual and empirical terms. Having this in mind, loose coupling is an issue which remains empirically unresolved.

One way to address these issues is to shift focus from loose coupling to coupling, where loose coupling is one possible form of coupling in higher education institutions. This requires clarification vis-à-vis other adjacent concepts that entail coupling — including tight coupling, decoupling and recoupling. One possible solution is to revisit Orton and Weick’s dialectical conceptualization that uses the dimensions of distinctiveness and responsiveness to delineate different patterns of coupling (see Table 1). Moreover, to unpack the dynamic nature of coupling patterns, coupling should also be viewed as a specific organizational process rather than a property of an organization. This would require analysis of the conditions under which specific patterns of coupling are maintained (or change). In other words, the questions that should be asked are: what kind of internal and external drivers stabilize specific coupling patterns? What kind of drivers lead to loose coupling transforming into full organizational fragmentation (or even dissolution)? What kind of drivers tighten organizational coupling? This implies that it would be relevant to examine horizontal coupling as well as vertical coupling between levels of governance. This processual focus requires attention to both the causes as well as the effects of loose coupling.

In addition, it would be fruitful to consider whether and how multiple coupling processes interact, given that recent analysis of organizations emphasizes hybridity, with multiple organizational forms and practices side by side (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011). If loose coupling can be identified according to one dimension, it should not be taken as a given that this is applicable for all dimensions. Instead, organizations can be expected to sustain multiple coupling patterns. However, we need more empirical knowledge of the conditions under which such hybridity of couplings takes place.

This kind of analysis requires considerable precision regarding the definitions and operationalizations of coupling and the specific elements that are being analyzed. Higher education research would benefit from going back to the basics — revisiting what are the different elements that are coupled, empirically identifying the patterns of coupling and theoretically accounting for specific antecedents and consequences of such patterns. Unless this is done, we will remain superficial in the analysis of how specific coupling patterns change. Such opaqueness is also an important limitation for international comparisons of organizational change processes in higher education. After all, merely calling something “loosely coupled” is a rather generic description, and not very informative for analytical purposes.

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References


APPENDIX 1: JOURNALS EXAMINED FOR THE REVIEW

Journal specializing on higher education

- Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education
- European Journal of Higher Education
- Higher Education
- Higher Education Policy
- Higher Education Quarterly
- Higher Education Research and Development
- Journal of Higher Education
- Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management
- Minerva
- Quality in Higher Education
- Research in Higher Education
- Review of Higher Education
- Studies in Higher Education
- Tertiary Education and Management

General social sciences journals, only articles focusing on higher education

- American Journal of Sociology
- American Sociological Review
- Academy of Management Journal
- Academy of Management Review
- Annual Review of Sociology
- Administrative Sciences Quarterly
- Educational Administration Quarterly
- European Journal of Education
- Governance
- Journal of Education Policy
- Journal of European Integration
- Journal of European Public Policy
- Journal of Management
- Journal of Management Inquiry
- Journal of Management Studies
- Journal of Organizational Behavior
- Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory
- Journal of Policy Management and Analysis
- Management Science
- Organization
- Organization Science
- Organization Studies
- Policy & Politics
- Policy Sciences
- Policy Studies Journal
- Public Administration
- Public Administration Review
- Public Management Review
- Public Organization Review
- Regulation and Governance
- Research Policy
- Science and Public Policy
- Strategic Management Journal
- Strategic Organization