

RESEARCH PAPER

Willing unwillingness. A Luhmannian perspective on followership and leadership in organizations

Augusto Sales^{1,2}  | Juliana Mansur¹ | Vladislav Valentinov^{2,3}  | Steffen Roth⁴

¹FGV EBAPE – The Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration of Getulio Vargas Foundation, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

²Next Society Institute, Kazimieras Simonavičius University, Vilnius, Lithuania

³Department of Structural Change, Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies, Halle, Germany

⁴CERIIM, Excelia Business School, La Rochelle, France

Correspondence

Augusto Sales, FGV EBAPE – The Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration of Getulio Vargas Foundation, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
Email: augusto.sales@fgv.br

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Abstract

This paper examines how organization theorists within social systems theory in the tradition of Niklas Luhmann view hierarchical steering and seek to adapt Luhmann's ideas to the complexities of contemporary organizations. We contribute to this debate by linking it to leadership and followership literature, introducing the paradox of 'willing unwillingness' to describe personal engagement in organizations. From this concept, we develop a typology of organizational roles: leaders, role shifters, followers and outsiders. Through in-depth interviews with Brazilian public servants and thematic analysis, our findings reveal that these roles are shaped by emotional experiences and variable psychic engagement, rather than hierarchical structures, offering new insights for systems-theoretical exploration of organizational roles.

KEYWORDS

deparadoxification, false distinctions, membership, social systems theory, tetralemma

1 | INTRODUCTION

Niklas Luhmann is renowned not only as a prominent sociologist and systems scholar but also as a significant figure in organization theory (cf. Luhmann, 2018). His understanding of organizations is embedded in his broader view of social systems distinguished by operational closure. As operationally closed systems, organizations do not include human beings. Instead, their boundaries are tied to the notion of membership: human individuals become members by consenting to meet specific behavioural expectations, such as adherence to the organization's rules. The exclusion of human beings

means, among other things, that organizations cannot be supposed to 'automatically satisfy personality needs' (Luhmann, 2020, p. 426). Another implication of operational closure of organizational systems is the impossibility of hierarchical steering (Luhmann, 1997; Luhmann, 2018). Accordingly, to Luhmann, organizations are self-steering systems. Especially in view of the voluntary nature of membership in organizations, the conventional top-down view of hierarchy becomes something of an illusion. Notably, Luhmann's critique of hierarchical steering predates his systems-theoretical work and goes back to his early volume exploring how employees master the art of directing their superiors,

which he called 'Subtvision' (Luhmann, 2018/1962). As Seidl and Mormann (2014) acknowledge, these tenets of the Luhmannian view of organizations break with a lot of widely held assumptions, and remain subject to critique as well as misunderstandings.

The present paper is concerned with how these tenets continue to be debated within the circle of Luhmannian scholars. One of such debates centres on the applicability of Luhmann's understanding of membership within formal organizations. Luhmann's understanding, some argue, may not fully capture the dynamically evolving nature of contemporary organizations. Grothe-Hammer (2020) takes aim at this perceived shortcoming, contending that Luhmann's model struggles to account for modern organizational forms like activist groups, hacker collectives and tech startups. These entities often forgo traditional membership structures, opting instead for inclusive decision-making processes that bypass preselection of participants (Grothe-Hammer, 2020). Consequently, Grothe-Hammer (*ibid*) calls for a more dynamic and process-oriented approach, urging the adaptation of Luhmannian organizational concepts to reflect the fluid realities of today's organizational life.

This emphasis on fluidity in modern organizations finds resonance with Stenner and Andersen (2020) as well as Andersen (2013), who argue that as societal complexity increases, traditional bureaucratic organizations are seeking greater flexibility to enhance their environmental sensitivity. Drawing on Andersen's (2013) notion of organizations as 'intensity machines' powered by psychic systems, Stenner and Andersen (2020, p. 452) discuss 'the change in the form of membership... as a move from formal membership to membership by self-enrolment'. They posit that 'the person is expected to enrol herself and to do so recurrently within an organizational context framed as ever-changing' (Stenner & Andersen, 2020, p. 452). In this context, human emotions acquire a newfound significance as a source of motivation, responsiveness and vitality, defying the Luhmannian distinction between role and person (Stenner & Andersen, 2020). As Andersen (2013) proposes, this harnessing of emotions within psychic systems generates novel organizational semantics, including play, pedagogy and love (Stenner & Andersen, 2020). Further enriching this discussion, Valentinov and Roth (2021) explore how a Luhmannian perspective on membership can be productively informed by Whiteheadian organismic philosophy emphasizing the embeddedness of individual members within their broader social life context, which often presents multiple and potentially conflicting moralities (*ibid*).

Overall, we see a broad consensus within Luhmannian scholarship about the continuing need to adapt the Luhmannian organization theory to the complexities of a

knowledge-based society defined by globalization, technological disruption and a dismantling of traditional hierarchies (Roth et al., 2017; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Stenner and Andersen's (2020) concept of 'self-enrolment' certainly presents a promising adaptation strategy, aligning with Luhmann's critique of rigid hierarchical authority. On the one hand, as Stenner and Andersen (2020) argue, self-enrolment blurs the lines between role and person, ushering in a renewed 'emphasis on authenticity' that compensates for the diminished authority (Stenner & Andersen, 2020, p. 452). On the other hand, these authors (*ibid*) promote a predominantly positive view of authenticity, which prioritizes emotions as a source of unwavering motivation and engagement. We are however reminded by Luhmann (2020) that organizations cannot be expected to universally fulfil individual needs. We therefore argue that self-enrolment's authenticity might not always translate into positive emotions and that the spectrum of emotional associations could range from highly positive to deeply negative. Therefore, we want to examine the implications of this understanding of authenticity for the nature of organizational roles, revealing how these roles mediate the range of positive and negative emotional connections with the organization.

Toward this end, the present paper will leverage the rich scholarship on leadership and followership within organizations. Given that leadership and followership embody authentic forms of organizational engagement, they offer a potentially versatile semantic framework for analysing a diverse array of organizational roles. Building on this foundation, we propose a Luhmannian perspective on leadership and followership, examining their place within the context of the modern functionally differentiated society, which inherently challenges hierarchical structures. Our framework is supported by an empirical study utilizing a series of in-depth interviews with public servants from a Brazilian federal agency, followed by thematic analysis. The narratives captured regarding leadership and followership experiences illuminate the individual challenges associated with authentic engagement within organizations, lending fresh insights to Luhmann's assertion that organizations cannot universally fulfil individual needs (Luhmann, 2020, p. 426).

2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Leadership, followership, and the Luhmannian critique of hierarchy

While scholarship on leadership and followership is extensive and proliferating, one of its key messages is the

mutually constitutive relationship of these phenomena. Leadership, as DeRue and Ashford (2010) posit, arises from a shared interest among those who follow, encompassing dynamic social interactions between leader and follower identities. These interactions are forged through the interplay of socially constructed claims and the granting of legitimacy by followers. Followership, in turn, is defined by a similar confluence of shared interest and the conscious choice of who (or what) to follow, when and where (Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019). Just as leadership is shaped by follower response, follower behaviour is influenced by the leader's claims and actions. This recognition underscores the inadequacy of studying leadership in isolation. Followers have now come to be widely understood as the essential partners in the pursuit of organizational goals.

Followership studies remain nascent compared to the vast literature on leadership, yet the field has made significant strides. Recent scholarship (Aghaei et al., 2023; Carsten et al., 2010; Carsten et al., 2018; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Stegmann et al., 2020; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) has shed light on the crucial roles followers play, the contextual factors that shape their behaviour, the diverse styles of followership and the social construction of these dynamics within organizations. This newfound emphasis on followership promises a richer understanding of leadership itself, revealing it not as a singular force, but as a product of the complex interplay between leaders and those who choose to follow. From a Luhmannian perspective, broad streams of current scholarship on leadership and followership are remarkable not only for their recognition of the inherently relational and communicative construction of these phenomena but also for their critique of hierarchical authority (cf. Luhmann, 1997).

With regard to leadership studies, we want to mention several key contributions emphasizing the relational and discursive construction of leadership and adding valuable substance to the Luhmannian critique of hierarchical authority. Central to these contributions is the idea that, rather than being vested in a single individual, leadership emerges from the collective agency of individuals engaged in ongoing interactions. This idea is vividly illustrated in Raelin's (2016) concept of collaborative agency, which reimagines leadership as a shared endeavour where authority is dispersed across the system. Similarly, Clarke's (2018) relational leadership framework posits that leadership is embedded in the network of relationships and cannot be reduced to the actions of a singular leader, being instead the product of the continuous and reciprocal interactions that define the social fabric of the organization. Spillane's (2005) distributed leadership model articulates how leadership tasks and responsibilities are spread across various actors within the organization. This model aligns closely with Luhmann's idea of

operational closure, where the system sustains itself through a web of communicative acts rather than relying on hierarchical commands. Pearce and Conger (2002) exploration of shared leadership similarly challenges the hierarchical paradigm by demonstrating how leadership can be effectively exercised by teams rather than by individuals. Denis et al.'s (2012) concept of plural leadership exemplifies how leadership is distributed among multiple actors, further questioning the efficacy and necessity of hierarchical authority. In their view, leadership emerges from the collaborative efforts and interactions of diverse individuals, each contributing their unique perspectives and skills. This plurality of leadership mirrors Luhmann's critique of centralized authority, highlighting the strengths of a self-steering view of organizational governance. Alvesson's work, combining institutional theory with discourse analysis, also supports the critique of hierarchical authority by revealing that leadership is not merely a function of individual authority but is deeply influenced by the communicative processes that occur within and around the organization (cf. Alvesson & Spicer, 2019). Langley's process-oriented studies further dismantle the notion of hierarchical leadership by focusing on the emergent and adaptive nature of leadership processes (cf. Langley et al., 2013).

The Luhmannian theme of the critique of hierarchical authority is even more clearly expressed in the burgeoning field of followership studies. Traditionally, the leader-follower relationship has been painted in stark hierarchical strokes, with leaders wielding authority over their subordinates. However, a growing body of research (Carsten et al., 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Blom & Lundgren, 2020) exposes the limitations of this hierarchical view. Studies have shown that followers, far from being passive recipients of orders, can exert influence through feedback, dissent or even resistance (Carsten et al., 2010). Furthermore, follower-leader interactions can forge shared meaning and identities, fostering a more dynamic relationship (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Blom and Lundgren (2020) further challenge the notion of fixed leader and follower roles, suggesting that they are instead fluid and situational, shaped by context and communication. Importantly, this emerging scholarship compels us to differentiate between followers and subordinates, a distinction often blurred in earlier works (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). Conflation of these terms is not only misleading but also problematic, as it implies a passive or obedient follower who simply complies with directives. The reality, as recent research suggests, is far more nuanced.

Recent scholars have proposed different definitions and criteria to distinguish between followers and subordinates, based on their behaviours, attitudes or motivations. For example, Kellerman (2008) defines

subordinates as those bound by formal power structures, typically, but not always, falling in line with superiors. Followers, on the other hand, are seen as active participants, wielding influence and shaping the dynamics of the leader–follower relationship (Kellerman, 2008). Building on this distinction, Bastardo and Van Vugt (2019) define followership as a strategic approach to solving coordination problems, involving conscious choices about who (or what) to follow, when and where. Followers, in this view, are individuals who actively coordinate actions with others, including leaders and fellow followers, to function effectively within a group. Unlike subordinates, followers are not necessarily confined by formal hierarchies; rather, as Plachy and Smunt (2022) suggest, ‘as goes leadership, so goes followership’.

The distinction between followers and subordinates mirrors the one between managers and leaders. Managers are traditionally seen to wield legal and formal authority, granting them superiority. Leaders, in contrast, draw on social, personal and moral authority, inspiring recognition and identification. While managers can occasionally act as leaders, their primary role is defined by their formal position (Plachy & Smunt, 2022), obliging them to plan, organize and deploy resources to achieve organizational goals (Plachy & Smunt, 2022). The literature often equates leadership with the formal leader's ability to influence goal achievement. We argue, however, that ‘formally designated leaders’ are essentially managers, whereas leadership emerges through personal interactions and an initiating communication style that fosters the accomplishment of organizational vision, goals and processes (Valentinov & Roth, 2024). Thus, we see managership to be associated with ‘supervision, bosses and budgets’, while leadership is linked to ‘inspiration, encouragement and guiding’ (Kniffin et al., 2020). This reframing suggests that leadership may be less about formal authority and more about the informal aspects of a manager's role, those that extend beyond budgets and planning, as highlighted by Kniffin et al. (2020). In our interpretation, managership prioritizes the formal position, whereas leadership prioritizes the informal, potentially connecting to the notion of authenticity explored by Stenner and Andersen (2020).

2.2 | The paradox of ‘willing unwillingness’

The interplay between followership and leadership highlights that these concepts must be understood as constituting a voluntary partnership between leaders and followers (Plachy & Smunt, 2022). Voluntariness is the essential characteristic here. Followership has been

defined as a voluntary deference process, wherein individuals possess a flexible followership psychology, enabling them to make choices related to leadership, including who or what, where and when to follow (Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019). Being a follower is widely considered a voluntary decision (Lapierre, 2014), free from fear-based or blind obedience (Blom & Lundgren, 2020; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). However, some scholars question the voluntariness assumption in followership, arguing that the interplay between followership and leadership emerges within social interactions that construct new meanings potentially undermining voluntariness (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012). For example, Blom and Lundgren's (2020) constructionist approach to followership problematizes the nature of voluntary compliance, acknowledging different degrees of compulsion, ignorance and obligation. They admit that modern organizations usually contain elements of these factors, pushing subordinates towards compliance, which is often mistaken for followership.

We see a possibility for the debate about the voluntary nature of followership to be enriched by Luhmann's understanding of the paradoxical nature of decision-making in organizations. To Luhmann, every decision implies alternatives, leading to a recursive need for further decisions. Traditional bureaucratic organizations have historically managed this paradox through rules, norms and hierarchical structures (cf. Andersen, 2013). However, as societal complexity increases, these methods become less effective (ibid). Post-bureaucratic organizations, as studied by Andersen (2013), use self-enrolment and new semantics—play, pedagogy and love—to manage the paradoxes of decision communication, offering greater flexibility and responsiveness. But we see this self-enrolment and its semantics to suggest an overly positive view of authenticity within organizations. To balance the positive and negative dimensions of authenticity, we introduce the paradox of ‘willing unwillingness’, illustrating the complex nature of voluntary followership. This concept captures the dual nature of human engagement in organizations, where individuals voluntarily join and participate, yet their experiences and emotional responses can range from highly positive to deeply negative. ‘Willing unwillingness’ specifically problematizes the notion of voluntariness, aligning with the constructionist approach of Carsten and Uhl-Bien (2012), as well as Mingers' (2003) argument, that, by voluntarily gaining organizational membership, individuals sacrifice aspects of their individuality and autonomy. Finally, Uhl-Bien's shift from traditional leader-centric models to complexity leadership and followership theories underscores the evolving nature of leadership as a relational and adaptive process within dynamic systems, which aligns

with our analysis of contemporary organizational contexts.

The key implication of willing unwillingness is that authentic self-enrolment in organizations, while fostering a sense of autonomy and engagement, can lead to a spectrum of emotional experiences, encompassing both positive and negative emotions. These experiences may arise due to unmet expectations, conflicts or organizational pressures. The paradox of 'willing unwillingness' reflects that while individuals voluntarily choose to become members or followers, their experiences are shaped by the organizational context, which includes both empowering and constraining elements, and this may hold for leaders as well as followers.

2.3 | From deparadoxification to cross-tabulation

Luhmann (2018) argues that organizational paradoxes are pervasive, but must be deparadoxified if organizations are to remain viable and capable of action. We suggest that leadership and followership provide semantics that serve to deparadoxify the paradox of 'willing unwillingness' by constructing a narrative of voluntary engagement that conceals the reality of non-voluntariness. This deparadoxification process maintains a coherent organizational narrative, allowing organizations to function effectively despite the tensions following from the paradox. This deparadoxification works through framing followership as a voluntary process where individuals choose to follow based on respect and recognition of the leader's abilities, and can adapt their level of engagement and deference based on the context and their own judgment. The semantics of followership construct a narrative of willing engagement, emphasizing positive aspects such as trust, respect, and mutual goals, and obscuring the less voluntary aspects of organizational life, where individuals might follow due to fear of repercussions, social pressure, or lack of alternatives.

In order to practically demonstrate how the semantics of leadership and followership can help to deparadoxify the paradox of 'willing unwillingness', we draw inspiration from Roth's (2024) suggestions on how deparadoxification can be supported by the method of cross-tabulation (see Roth et al., 2023). Building on Spencer Brown's and Luhmann's theories of distinctions, Roth argues that distinctions are fundamental systemic operations that create mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive categories. According to Roth (2024), cross-tabulation involves the systematic juxtaposition of these distinctions in such a way as to turn 'false' distinctions, which are not mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive,

into 'true' ones which correspond to these criteria. In our present context, we acknowledge the distinction between leaders and followers as a false one and, accordingly, decompose it into the two true distinctions of 'leader/not-leader' and 'follower/not-follower'. This strategy coincides with the transformation of a dilemmatic binary distinction into a tetralemma (Fritzsche, 2024; Roth et al., 2023). A tetralemma is an ancient matrix structure used in traditional Indian logic (Jayatilleke, 1967), where was used as a framework to infer additional decision-making options when faced with dilemmatic decisions (see Roth et al., 2023; Sales et al., 2023).

The basic structure of a tetralemma is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that a dilemma resulting from the tough choice between one option ('this') and another ('that') can be translated into two choices between 'this' and 'not-this' on the one hand and 'that' and 'not-that' on the other hand. As a result, an observer initially caught in the dilemma of having to in favour of either this or that option has now the additional choices of opting for 'both this and that', as well as 'neither this nor that' (and thus perhaps 'for something completely different').

This principle can be applied to any dilemmatic distinction, which is why Table 2 shows how the leader/follower distinction can be translated into two true distinctions, thus creating the *tetralemma of leadership and followership* (Table 2).

Table 2 shows that cross-tabulating the two true distinctions of follower/not-follower and leader/not-leader helps to infer additional role concepts beyond the binary leader/follower distinction, thus also highlighting the complex and often hidden dynamics between leadership and followership. This approach shows that individuals can occupy multiple roles simultaneously, experiencing both voluntary and non-voluntary engagement, while

TABLE 1 This/that tetralemma.

	This	Not-this
That	Both this and that	That
Not-that	This	Neither this nor that

TABLE 2 The tetralemma of leadership and followership.

	Follower	Not-follower
Leader	Both follower and leader	Leader (and not follower)
Not-leader	Follower (and not-leader)	Neither follower nor leader

mapping out different scenarios where individuals may identify as leaders, followers, both or neither. This nuanced understanding helps in identifying the conditions under which voluntariness is genuine or compromised, thus balancing the ideal of voluntary engagement with the reality of organizational pressures.

Table 3 then translates Table 2 into a typology of four distinct leadership/followership: individuals who encompass both leadership and followership, those who are exclusively leaders, those who are purely followers and those who fit into neither category.

This way, we identify four potential types of actors within the leadership/followership distinction:

1. **Role shifters:** These persons occupy boundary positions, exhibiting an in-between role. They transition between leadership roles concerning subordinates and followership roles concerning superiors in their daily activities. A typical case of this role profile are middle managers.
2. **Primary leaders:** This category includes persons who primarily exercise leadership roles, such as founders, entrepreneurs, and senior level executives, to some extent.
3. **Primary followers:** These are persons in roles like entry-level staff or support staff positions who predominantly assume followership roles.
4. **Outsiders:** This category comprises persons within the organization who reject or transcend both leadership and followership roles. They neither lead nor follow and instead maintain a certain indifference or neutrality towards formal and informal manifestations of leadership and followership within organizations. (Temporary in-house) Consultants, rebels or work-to-rule-workers who have withdrawn from the organization within the organization, thus cultivating an attitude of ‘inner immigration’, belong to this profile.

Note that the positions representing these roles examples of organizational roles rather than an exhaustive list.

TABLE 3 Enhanced taxonomy of leadership/followership roles in a typical organization.

	Follower	Not-follower
Leader	Role shifters (e.g. middle managers)	Primary leaders (e.g. top management, entrepreneurs)
Not-leader	Primary followers (e.g. support staff, trainees)	Outsiders (e.g. consultants, rebels, work-to-rule-workers)

3 | METHOD

3.1 | The research design

We employed a qualitative theory-driven methodology, following a thematic analysis based on the systems theory and the paradox of ‘willing-unwillingness’ and a need for further investigation of the dynamics between leadership and followership. As such, the research was designed to investigate how public servants from Brazil can be described in terms of their expression of engagement (e.g. negative and positive emotions) along our proposed paradox of ‘willing unwillingness’, further leading to the proposed typology of organizational roles: top managers, middle managers, pure followers, and outsiders. The choice of this particular organizational setting was strategic. In the Brazilian public sector, the virtual impossibility of exclusion or dismissal for public servants minimizes the traditional pressures associated with authority. This unique environment allowed us to examine the dynamics of leadership and followership more accurately, without the confounding influence of job security threats.

Participants were sampled from two federal-level public organizations in Brazil related to general advocacy and control for the Union, which are known by its formality and hierarchic positions (AGU, CGU). The participant population were servants who have had assumed management positions within the past 4 years from 2018 to 2022 (a government cycle) or have declined the role, maintaining the original position. The criteria to participate were (a) having been or currently occupying a management position; (b) not being interested in returning to a management position, in the first case, and considering leaving the position currently occupied, in the second. Additionally, servants from other public organizations (state or municipal level) who voluntarily asked to participate were also included because they have similar work structure and demands.

Participants were recruited through institutional email and snowballing. Potential participants were given a letter of introduction of the research and detailed consent form including confidentiality and anonymity terms along with the absence of risks. No financial or institutional incentives were offered for participating in the study. Participants were requested to agree with the consent form prior to participation in this research. From the total of 112 servants, 31 decided to participate and 14 were interviewed. Individual interviews lasted between 48 and 74 min (average: 61 min), totalizing nearly 112 h of audio data for transcriptions. Participants consisted of 10 men and four women, seven currently in management positions, with ages ranging from 36 to 48.

3.2 | Data collection

A series of in-depth individual interviews were carried out at times and places convenient for participants, conducted between October 2022 and February 2023. Most interviews were conducted virtually, through Zoom platform. After participants had provided oral consent to participate, they were asked to inform basic demographic questions. The interview protocol consisted of nine open-ended questions, beginning with: 'Can you describe me what is your role, what you do today on a regular basis?', followed by 'How do you perceive the roles of leading and following in your reality?' and 'What do you think/feel about being a leader/follower?'. Other questions were designed to understand the participants behaviours in their specific roles, and what he/she thought about others' roles. For example, participants were asked about their decisions to accept, decline or resign the leadership position and also asked to further explore their own experiences of leadership and followership, providing as much detail in the narratives as possible in open discussion. Finally, they were invited to talk about their thoughts, perceptions, judgements and affective states, around their reality. The interview schedule was designed to provide guidance and structure for consistency in approach. First, we piloted the interview guide. Following the piloting, we adjusted some of the wording. All interviews were audio-recorded (with permission) and transcribed in its integral version.

The interview questions specifically asked participants about leadership and followership, which raises methodological concern. To mention the terms during the interview process might impose a particular frame of reference and influence participant responses and actually create new perceptions about the phenomena. Acknowledging that, while developing the interview guide and collecting data, we decided not to ask participants specifically about leadership and followership in the very beginning. Participants were asked about their experiences with management positions, to hierarchical roles with direct supervision, in both 'sides', and their perception of the roles leading and following.

3.3 | Data analysis

In this article, we seek to show that leading and following are expressed and perceived by public servants in different ways, at different levels, and demonstrate how this was identified in participant responses. First, we familiarize with the data by listening to the recordings while reading transcripts. We checked for accuracy, and added paralinguistic features (e.g. pauses, laughter). The

analysis was conducted using pre-coding, by highlighting words or sections of text that appeared significant, triggering associations with leading and following. Then, a second step consisted of writing notes and suggesting connections about how the pre-coded text revealed categories. The analytical process involved a deeper reflection on how leadership and followership concepts emerged in the practical setting, comparing to the theoretical framework. The coding and reflection included both what participants said and how they said it. All possibilities of the 'false distinction' were considered main categories, which were coded as direct (when participants were asked to talk about leader/followership) and indirect (when participants included insights during their narratives). Such differentiation helped us to deeper explore explicit/conscious/ideal and tacit/unconscious/real understandings of the leadership/followership systems. Then, further analysis were used to answer the 'how' and 'why' the different categories can establish new understandings of the paradox of 'willing unwillingness'.

4 | DISCUSSION

The empirical findings of our study reveal a crucial insight into authentic human engagement within organizations: such engagement does not necessarily translate to uniformly positive emotions but instead encompasses a spectrum of emotional associations ranging from positive to negative. Among positive associations, we have identified personal satisfaction, empowerment, and a sense of purpose. Many participants articulated personal satisfaction by highlighting a sense of fulfilment and accomplishment stemming from their leadership roles. The ability to make decisions, inspire others and enact change fostered a sense of empowerment. Purpose emerged as a significant theme, with participants connecting their leadership roles to a larger legacy and personal values.

'Leading is also about personal satisfaction. I believe that when you are in a leadership position you have a little more power to take the projects you believe in and go for it. Engage people. It is also a matter of legacy purpose (...) of changing things'. (Leader).

Among negative associations, we have identified isolation, fear and detachment. Top managers, in particular, described feelings of isolation due to the high stakes and pressures of decision-making. There was a significant presence of fear among both leaders and followers, stemming from the responsibilities of leadership roles and the potential repercussions of decisions.

'Being a leader is terrifying. It terrifies anyone to assume any leadership (manager) role. It is all about

having to make decisions. Hard and difficult ones. All the time. People don't sleep to make the decision'. (Leader).

On the other hand, outsiders and some followers expressed a sense of detachment and lack of meaning in their roles, reflecting a disengagement from both leadership and followership dynamics.

'There is this idea of a guy who goes, sits down, makes that 'rice and beans' without committing to anything. When it is time to leave, he leaves and that's it, it's over'. (Outsider).

We see these negative emotional associations as providing a practical illustration of Luhmann's (2020, p. 426) argument that organizations cannot be expected to 'automatically satisfy personality needs'. The experiences of isolation, fear, and detachment among participants reveal that while organizations can provide a framework for engagement, they cannot ensure that this engagement will address the diverse emotional and psychological needs of individuals. In contrast, positive emotional associations, such as personal satisfaction, empowerment and a sense of purpose, are significant as they provide a novel substance to Stenner and Andersen's (2020) analysis of how authenticity compensates for the diminished role of authority in contemporary society. We interpret the responses of our interviewees as an indication that empowerment and personal satisfaction are derived from their authentic engagement, which compensates for the diminishing role of traditional authority. It is supposedly in view of this diminishing role that our interviewees find meaning and direction through their authentic engagement rather than through traditional hierarchical structures.

Our research adds yet another layer to the Luhmannian critique of hierarchical steering. The very typology we propose—'Leaders', 'Role Shifters', 'Followers' and 'Outsiders'—might be seen to resemble classic hierarchical categories. However, the significance of our findings lies precisely in its ability to reveal the limitations of such a view, thus pushing the boundaries of established theoretical frameworks. These roles are not abstract theoretical constructs but are deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the individuals within these organizations.

Role shifters, for instance, are exemplified by persons who frequently oscillate between leading their teams and following directives from upper management. One participant described this dual role vividly: 'As a middle manager, I am constantly navigating between implementing the strategies set by our top leaders and managing the expectations of my team. It feels like walking a tightrope, where I must lead and follow simultaneously'. This quote underscores the fluidity of the Role Shifter category, highlighting how these persons embody both leadership and followership depending on the context.

Leaders were identified among top-level executives who consistently take on leadership roles within the organization. These persons, often founders or senior executives, described their roles as being heavily focused on strategic decision-making and vision-setting. One executive noted, 'My role is to guide the organization, setting the direction and ensuring we stay on course. It's about making the big decisions, but also about inspiring others to follow that direction'. This reflects the more traditional view of leadership but is contextualized within a dynamic organizational environment where even leaders must be responsive to their followers.

Followers emerged as those who predominantly engage in followership roles, particularly among support staff and entry-level employees. These persons often expressed a preference for stability and consistency, focusing on specific tasks rather than seeking leadership opportunities. A support staff member shared, 'I prefer to concentrate on my tasks, ensuring everything runs smoothly. I'm not interested in taking on leadership roles, as I find satisfaction in doing my job well and supporting the team'.

Outsiders represent a more complex category, including persons such as consultants or internal critics who neither lead nor follow in the traditional sense. These participants often described their roles as being on the periphery of the organization's core activities, allowing them to maintain a degree of independence. One interviewee remarked, 'I come in with an outsider's perspective, which means I don't get caught up in the internal politics. My role is to provide objective advice, not to lead or follow'. This role highlights the presence of persons who operate transcending conventional organizational structures, further challenging the traditional leader/follower distinction.

Namely, our findings show that what may appear as a clear-cut hierarchy is, in reality, a complex semantic construct shaped by variable levels of psychic engagement. These levels arise through the unfolding of the paradox of 'willing unwillingness', where individuals willingly take on roles but experience a range of emotional responses, from satisfaction to reluctance.

"For those who are a little less knowledgeable than I am about certain limits, it is terrifying. People don't want to take on a leadership role, they don't want to take on a role... People think: 'I don't want a headache, so I'll avoid it'." (Follower).

We argue that the leader/follower distinction helps to unpack this paradox by providing a framework for analysing how individuals navigate their roles within the organization. In this way, the roles of primary leaders, role shifters, primary followers and outsiders are shown to arise from the relational and communicative dynamics

inherent in organizational life. For example, role shifters experience both positive and negative emotions as they navigate the dual roles of leading and following. Their satisfaction and empowerment from leading are often balanced by the pressure and isolation from following higher directives.

‘As a middle manager, I am constantly navigating between implementing the strategies set by our top leaders and managing the expectations of my team. It feels like walking a tightrope, where I must lead and follow simultaneously’. (Role Shifter).

This quote encapsulates the simultaneous empowerment and pressure experienced, highlighting the paradox where individuals willingly assume roles that also bring about challenges and negative emotions. Additionally, we observed that authentic engagement can come from the sense of public interest and duty.

‘I have a hard time influencing my peers, my day-to-day colleagues because they are all in the comfort zone. For me, I don’t think it’s even a comfort zone. For me, they are under the tree in the shadows waiting for everything to pass. I follow the public interest. I have my duties while leading’. (Role Shifter).

Primary leaders often feel empowered by their strategic decision-making roles but also isolated and fearful due to the high stakes and lack of clear followership support. Primary followers typically find satisfaction in their specific tasks and roles but may also experience fear and detachment when faced with the prospect of leadership responsibilities.

‘I prefer to concentrate on my tasks, ensuring everything runs smoothly. I’m not interested in taking on leadership roles, as I find satisfaction in doing my job well and supporting the team’. (Follower).

This quote demonstrates the willingness to engage in followership while expressing an unwillingness to partake in leadership, reflecting contentment coupled with avoidance of potential leadership-related stress.

In contrast, outsiders exhibit a high degree of detachment and lack of emotional engagement, focusing on routine tasks without the emotional highs and lows associated with leadership and followership. The semantics of these roles are not just about the tasks and responsibilities but also about the relationships and communications that define them.

‘I come in with an outsider’s perspective, which means I don’t get caught up in the internal politics. My role is to provide objective advice, not to lead or follow’. (Outsider).

From a practical point of view, our reconstruction of an apparent hierarchy in terms of relational and communicative dynamics inherent in organizational life suggests several actionable insights for management practice.

First, recognizing that organizational roles are dynamic and influenced by varying levels of engagement suggests that organizations should allow and promote role fluidity. Encouraging employees to move between leadership and followership roles as needed can enhance organizational responsiveness and innovation.

Also, leadership development programs should focus on building adaptive leadership skills that allow managers to navigate both leadership and followership dynamics effectively. This can help individuals manage the emotional complexities of their roles and foster a more resilient organizational culture. Second, managers should acknowledge the emotional spectrum experienced by employees in different roles. Providing resources such as counselling, peer support groups and open forums for discussing emotional well-being can help address feelings of isolation, fear and detachment. Also, creating an environment where authentic engagement is valued over strict hierarchical adherence can lead to higher job satisfaction and reduced stress. Encouraging open communication and providing opportunities for employees to express their concerns and aspirations can build a more supportive workplace. Finally, our findings suggest that collaborative models of management, such as holacracy or team-based structures, can align better with the semantic construction of organizational roles. Organizations should thus prioritize relationship-building activities and ensure that communication channels are open and transparent. Regular feedback and open dialogue about role expectations and experiences are practical ways to deparadoxify the ‘unwilling willingness’ paradox.

These practical implications are noteworthy as they abandon the assumption of self-interest and opportunism that underlies the principal-agent paradigm, which is widely applied to today’s formal organizations. This paradigm assumes that the principal and the agent have divergent goals and preferences, and that the agent will act in his or her own interest at the expense of the principal unless properly incentivized or monitored. We found that none of the actors who were interviewed mentioned opportunism as a motive or a problem in their leader-followership relationships. Instead, they expressed various other factors that influenced their perceptions, feelings, and motivations, such as public interest, civic duty, quality of life, salary, responsibility, and fear.

‘In fact, it is quite a myopic view, right? There is a myopia in people, they see only the position. Superficially and do not balance the interests. I see what I see about following the public interest, so let me do my job here and follow what I believe, my ethos, my motivations’. (Follower).

These factors suggest that the actors are not driven solely by self-interest, but also by other-regarding or pro-

social considerations. Therefore, these findings imply that the principal-agent paradigm may not adequately capture the complexity and diversity of the leader-follower relationship, underscoring the superior relevance of the Luhmannian approach, which sees leadership and followership as emergent and situational outcomes of the interactions and meanings created by the organizational system.

5 | CONCLUSION

Today's Luhmannian scholars share Luhmann's critique of hierarchical steering but seek to adapt his concept of membership roles to the increasingly complex and fluid realities of organizational life. As Stenner and Andersen (2020) aptly discern, the growing emphasis on authenticity in organizational life suggests that the increasing intensity of human engagement makes it more challenging to uphold a clear role-person distinction. We engage with this debate by connecting it to the literature on leadership and followership. This literature shares important parallels with Luhmann's thinking, such as questioning traditional hierarchical steering and emphasizing a relational and communicative understanding of organizational life. However, this literature has struggled with the issue of how voluntary followership actually is, given its influence by social pressures and structures.

We address this issue by drawing on Luhmann's ideas about paradoxical decision-making in organizations, suggesting the paradox of 'willing unwillingness'. This paradox indicates that even though people may voluntarily choose to take a followership or even a leadership role, they may still experience negative emotions like frustration or disappointment. We explore the deparadoxification of this paradox by cross-tabulating the distinction between leadership and followership, arriving at a typology of organizational roles, including top managers, middle managers, pure followers, and outsiders. We validate this typology through a series of in-depth interviews with public servants from a Brazilian federal agency, followed by thematic analysis. Our findings show that these roles are associated with a spectrum of emotional experiences, ranging from positive (such as personal satisfaction, empowerment and a sense of purpose) to negative (such as isolation, fear and detachment). As examples of authentic engagement, these roles highlight the practical sense in which authenticity takes the place of authority, shaped not by hierarchical structures but by variable psychic engagement associated with the semantics of leadership and followership. Our findings align with the main tenets of Luhmann's organization theory and open new avenues for systems-theoretical theorizing on how the

definition of organizational roles may reflect the ambivalence of human engagement arising from the paradox of 'willing unwillingness'.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This manuscript has not been published and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. Also, the data presented in the present article have not been examined in any previous or current articles. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript. We also certify that we have complied with the APA ethical principles regarding research with human participants in the conduct of the research presented in this manuscript.

ORCID

Augusto Sales  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9636-3372>

Vladislav Valentinov  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4247-0364>

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