Networks: The Way Forward for Collectivistic Leadership Research

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Networks: The Way Forward for Collectivistic Leadership Research

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We applaud the move toward ''we'' approaches to leadership and agree that progress in this new area of inquiry may require new tools and techniques. Faster progress can come from taking a network analytic approach to collectivistic leadership research—but not necessarily the network approach described in the focal article. Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, and Shuffler (2012) offered too narrow a view into how ''we'' leadership research can draw from the social network field. The focal article presents one approach to leadership research that incorporates the network of social relationships a leader is embedded within: network leadership theory (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006; Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006). Although network leadership theory offers many valuable insights into the study of leadership, it is not collectivistic. Network leadership theory focuses on examining how a *leader* impacts and is impacted by the network he or she is embedded within. In other words, network leadership theory still focuses on single leaders, evaluating *leaders in networks.* In fact, leadership *in* a network is an evolutionary idea remnant held over from past views of leadership as formal and positional. To fully make the leap to ''we'' approaches and reap the benefits for theory and practice from doing so, we need to move from leader-focused analytic approaches toward collective-focused approaches. The critical thought shift that theories of collectivistic leadership demand is for us to reconceptualize collectivistic leadership AS a network.

In other words, collectivistic leadership *is a network* of dynamically shifting patterns of leadership relationships involving multiple actors. Figure 1 illustrates this important distinction. In this commentary, we recast the definition of collectivistic leadership offered by Yammarino et al. (2012) into this advanced view of leadership as a network and describe how taking a network perspective provides a tool that can facilitate future empirical research on ''we'' leadership.

Leaders IN Networks

Yammarino et al. (2012) describe collectivistic leadership as a process through which ''multiple individuals interact through a variety of formal and informal structures, broadly defined, and take on a variety of leadership roles, both formally and informally over time.'' Theories of collective leadership extend Yukl's (1998) basic catchall definition of leadership as ''influence processes'' to acknowledge that some or all members of the collective can enact influence processes simultaneously or over time. However, network leadership theory as articulated in the focal article retains the traditional notion of leadership as enacted by one or a few individuals. Network leadership theory focuses on the way in which a single leader's individual differences and cognitions interact with the broader environment he or she is nested within. There's no doubt that a leader's position within
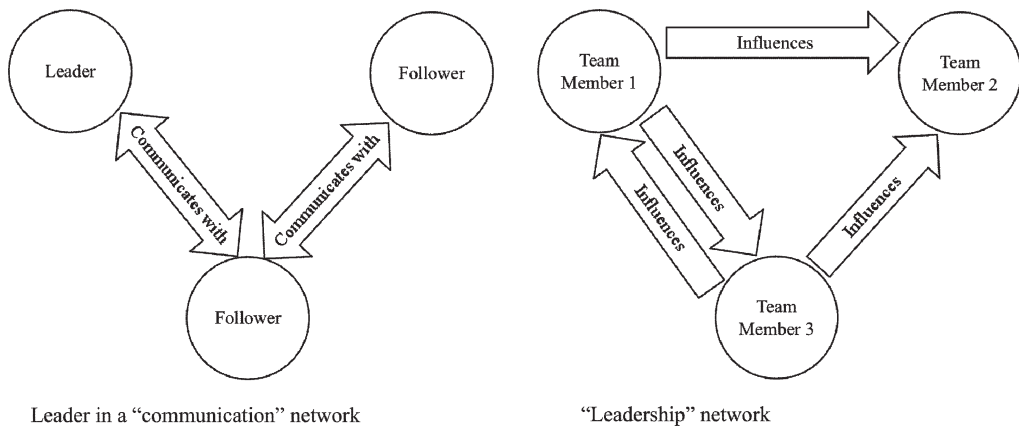
Figure 1. Differentiation between leaders in a network and leadership as a network.

a variety of social networks (e.g., organizational, interorganizational) plays an important role in his or her leadership effectiveness. Yet this particular way of looking at networks and leadership does not accurately reflect the definition of collectivistic leadership presented in the focal article. Furthermore, grouping this theory together with the other four collectivistic theories mentioned in the focal article may lead to more confusion than clarity.

Collectivistic Leadership AS a Network

A more promising method of incorporating networks into collectivistic leadership research is to view the leadership processes that link group members to one another as a series of influence relationships. In fact, the way the focal authors conceptualize the collectivistic leadership phenomena—as leadership enacted by some or all members of a collective—aligns well with how the social network field conceptualizes social relational phenomena. Generically, a network is a set of individuals (i.e., actors) and the relationships (i.e., ties) among them (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Social network analysis (SNA) examines the patterns of social relationships that exist in groups (e.g., friendship, communication, advice) and seeks to identify how or why certain

patterns of interactions develop over time and in what outcomes these patterns result. Rather than extending SNA to examine the impact of various social ties (e.g., communication, advice, friendship) surrounding preordained leaders, the SNA-based approach more suitable for "we" leadership is to examine the leadership phenomena itself as a network. Leadership networks describe a set of individuals and the patterns of *influence* relationships connecting them. The direction and patterning of these influence relationships provide insight into the patterns of leadership enactment in groups.

Each of the four other theories mentioned in the focal article incorporates the notion that some or all members of the collective can engage in the leadership role. Team leadership theory argues that leadership can be distributed in teams and that teams develop their collective capacity for an optimal distribution of leadership over time. Shared leadership theory views leadership as a shared responsibility among multiple team members. Complexity leadership theory views leadership as a socially constructed phenomenon involving informal influence processes that emerge through the interactions between actors. Finally, collective leadership theory provides concrete suggestions for how a formally defined leader (or set of leaders) can optimize their group by distributing elements of the

leadership role among multiple members. In other words, each of these theories views leadership as a process that can be distributed among and/or enacted by multiple people within a network of actors. Using SNA techniques to evaluate emergent patterns of leadership distribution enables empirical evaluation of each of these theories' central tenets.

Five Questions for the Future

Leadership networks in teams, units, or entire organizations can be captured using sociometric surveys wherein every group member rates the degree to which they perceive every other group member is a leader. Leadership networks could also be captured using more implicit methods. For example, researchers could track evidence (e.g., email chains, chat logs) of interactions reflective of leadership and create leadership networks based on these observations. Leadership networks open up new possibilities for the study of collectivistic leadership. We offer the following five research questions as illustrative examples of how viewing leadership as a network can facilitate empirical evaluation of collectivistic leadership theories.

1. **Which patterns characterize the leadership distribution in teams?** SNA techniques allow us to describe patterns characterizing the myriad of relationships (e.g., leadership ties) that emerge among group members. For example, Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson (2006) categorized visual representations of emergent leadership networks into four leadership forms ranging from strictly hierarchical to simultaneously shared. Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone (2007) used a more quantitative approach, calculating the *density* of team leadership networks (i.e., ratio of observed/possible leadership ties) and using this index as a proxy for shared leadership.

2. **Which outcomes are related to patterns of leadership distribution?** After describing leadership networks, researchers can begin to link these (qualitative and/or quantitative) descriptions to various group- or individual-level outcomes. Both Mehra et al. (2006) and Carson et al. (2007) examined the relationships between leadership networks and team performance. However, as work by Bavelas (1950) indicated years ago, certain leadership distributions may facilitate performance (to some degree) at the expense of more affective group-level outcomes (e.g., commitment, team viability). More work is needed that identifies both the benefits and drawbacks of various patterns of leadership distribution.

3. **Which factors enable optimal emergent patterns of leadership?** Research is needed identifying factors related to the emergence of effective distributed leadership. For example, work linking individual differences, team or leadership interventions, or other factors (e.g., organizational climate, team emergent states, or other processes) to the emergence of optimal leadership distributions can better reconcile collectivistic leadership theory with practice.

4. **How should leadership distribution patterns change over time?** Networks are not assumed to be static (Snijders, 2005). On the contrary, SNA techniques and statistical packages (e.g., Ripley & Snijders, 2011) offer us the ability to capture the structural patterning of relationships as they emerge and change over time. Examining the way in which leadership networks develop and shift enables the incorporation of time as a boundary condition for our hypotheses. For example, team performance might be facilitated if teams can shift from one leadership structure to another depending on the phase of team task performance.

5. **How do these structures change dynamically?** Once researchers have identified optimal leadership structures and the way that these structures *should* shift over time, we can begin to investigate the mechanisms through which leadership distribution patterns change and the obstacles teams face when attempting to flexibly adapt their leadership structures to meet changing environmental demands.

To summarize, identifying the impact of social networks on preordained leaders does not fully capture the nature of collectivistic leadership. We can more accurately capture collectivistic leadership by conceptualizing the different types of influence relationships among all possible leaders (i.e., team members) as leadership networks. Leadership as a network enables more comprehensive empirical evaluation of the central tenets of collectivistic leadership theories.

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