

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP RESEARCH WORKSHOP (NYC, SEPTEMBER 2016)

Methodological Challenges in Collective Leadership Research

Collective leadership is a slippery, shape-shifting, contested phenomenon. How do we capture it methodologically? This is a timely question, as leadership theories shift attention from models focusing on the individual ‘heroic leader’ to the relational dynamics of ‘collective leadership.’

Scholars have long suggested that the model of an individual, heroic leader is flawed and inaccurate. Using terms like shared, distributed, and collective leadership, the field refers to “leadership in the plural” as an alternative to simplistic individualistic models (Denis et al., 2012).¹ In fact, some argue that relational models of leadership have become widely aspirational in the practitioner world as well, though they are difficult to realize (Fletcher, 2012). Indeed, we see these models presented in articles like *In Praise of the Incomplete Leader* from Harvard Business Review (Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski, and Senge, 2007) and *The Dawn of System Leadership* from the Stanford Social Innovation Review (Senge, Hamilton and Kania, 2015).

But theory – whether in research or practice – has outpaced empirics. In fact, defining, measuring and documenting collective leadership has proven quite challenging. It is not easy to translate the assumptions of a collective lens on leadership into sound research design decisions and practices. Traditional methodologies may be less successful once the assumptions of a collective lens on leadership are taken seriously.

Methodological concerns identified by a group of scholars participating in the NYU/Wagner Collective Leadership Workshop (2014) included: challenges associated with the nature of collective leadership, like the need to consider and disentangle its individual and collective dimensions or its multi-level nature, incorporating time, and capturing process; challenges associated with the methodological implications of theory, such as lack of conceptual clarity, or problems of theory-methods fit like matching ontological with analytical units of analysis; and challenges associated with

¹ In addition to the umbrella construct of leadership in the plural (Denis et al., 2012), other scholars use terms like “relational leadership” (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Gittel and Douglass, 2012), and “collectivist approaches to leadership” (Yammarino et al., 2012). Scholars position specific streams of research with labels such as leadership as practice (Raelin, 2011), distributed (Gronn, 2015), discursive (Fairhurst, 2007), interdependent (Drath, McCauley, Palus, Van Velsor, O’Connor and McGuire, 2008), integrative (Crosby and Bryson, 2010), and collective leadership (Ospina and Foldy, 2015) among others.

measurement, such as how and what to measure when trying to capture the unobservable.²

Competing collective leadership research streams complicate these challenges. Despite a shared concern with the collective dimensions of leadership, the underlying assumptions (and the consequent implications for conducting collective leadership studies) vary significantly, reflecting distinctive paradigms and perspectives of leadership. These, in turn, guide choices around research goals, theoretical frameworks and design decisions (Ospina and Uhl-Bien, 2012).

Addressing the methodological challenges of collective leadership requires exploring intentionally the close connection between the assumptions we bring to the research act and the way these are wrapped into our inquiry (Creswell, 2013, p. 15). It also requires developing an intentional effort to match lens and method as research decisions are pondered. This exercise deepens the quality of the dialogue across perspectives, while enhancing the internal consistency of research on collective leadership, a key feature of good scholarly research, what some call *indication of method* (Gaskell and Bauer, 2000; Ospina, Dodge and Foldy, 2005).³

Call for proposals

The goal of this Workshop is to explore in-depth the challenges faced in designing and implementing an empirical research agenda on collective leadership, and efforts to address them. We invite papers from leadership scholars of various persuasions and diverse perspectives who have taken a “relational turn” and thus use a collective lens to study leadership. The aim is to feature work of those who have empirically undertaken this challenge and/or those interested in writing conceptual pieces on how to match lens to method.

Scholars may propose papers on one of the following categories of articles to be considered for the Special Issue:

1. Empirical papers reporting leadership research that genuinely captures the *collective* dimensions of any form of leadership in the plural, and in which the research can be viewed as an example of how the challenges were successfully addressed;

² From the document “Biggest methodological challenges today”, Collective Leadership Research Workshop: Fruitful Intersections or Parallel Play? (New York, 2014)
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BzzQh4lulcgobVlqSzVJWU1maDg/view?usp=sharing>

³ This refers to the researcher’s aspiration that the methods chosen, are, indeed, the best indicated for the goals, theories and questions explored, in the same way that a medicine a physician chooses for a patient is the best indicated for his or her condition, carefully and deliberately diagnosed before prescribing it.

2. Conceptual, reflective papers that discuss the challenges of matching lens and method in doing leadership research by unpacking a particular methodological challenge (such as determining unit of analysis or capturing group processes) associated with research on collective leadership. These papers should also propose viable solutions to address the challenge within the context of discussing the implications of the theory-methods connection.
3. Conceptual, reflective papers that take a specific theoretical framework highlighting the collective dimensions of leadership (eg. complexity theory, leadership as practice, the DAC model, network theory, discursive leadership, distributed leadership, collective leadership) and propose ways to address methodological and measurement challenges associated with such framework.
4. Conceptual, reflective papers that explore methodologies intended to disentangle the individual-collective dialectics or tensions associated with approaching seriously the methodological challenges of taking the relational turn.

Process:

1. Express interest in submitting a one page proposal for participation in the workshop; express interest in participation in the workshop even if not planning to submit a paper proposal;
2. Submit one page paper proposal by March 24
3. Proposals accepted are announced by April 4
4. Register for the conference (as a paper presenter or as participant) by April 30th

References

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