Opening Up Perspectives on Plural Leadership

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In their recent article, Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, and Shuffler (2012) argue that the current challenges of contemporary work may call for a renewed conception of leadership, one that is centered less on individual leaders and that relies more on the involvement of multiple individuals taking on leadership roles. From that starting point, they present five different approaches that view leadership as a collective phenomenon, considered both in terms of scientific foundations and practical implications. We share the authors’ interest for collectivistic leadership approaches—which we have named elsewhere (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012) leadership in the plural. This commentary is therefore sympathetic to the authors’ efforts. However, we wish to extend the authors’ discussion of collectivistic approaches to leadership and also to challenge some of the underlying assumptions on which they have based their work.

To the reader who may not be familiar with collectivistic approaches to leadership, Yammarino and colleagues’ article (2012) offers a helpful review of some of the streams of research on this topic. In the last 15 years or so, there has been a growing interest in such “shared” modalities of leadership, an interest that can be traced in a variety of labels—such as collective, distributed, and relational—that are now being used to describe this phenomenon. Unfortunately, inconsistencies in definitions and in the use of these labels parallel this interest. Hence, efforts like that of Yammarino and colleagues are much needed. Distinguishing approaches is useful to correctly identify key contributions and implications, and also to pinpoint areas that require further research. Moreover, by placing side by side these lines of inquiry, the authors highlight that, at least for the streams they have considered, there is clearly room for further empirical work, especially work that addresses the dynamic and emergent nature of collectivistic leadership approaches, a conclusion with which we agree.

Yet, the main strength of the article, its command of the literature in the field of organizational behavior, may also be its most limiting feature. Indeed, by anchoring their argument so strongly within one discipline, the authors fall into the trap of neglecting, if not completely dismissing, other relevant streams of research in
the broader management and organization studies field, which have been studying the same phenomenon.

**Historical Roots**

First, these approaches are not as new as one might imagine from reading Yammarino et al.’s article (2012). For example, mentions of collectivistic leadership conceptions can be found in works published as early as the 1920s. We believe that these historical roots should be better acknowledged. For example, Mary Parker Follett (1924) may be one of the first management scholars to formulate a collaborative view on leadership. In *Creative Experience* (1924), she proposed that leadership emerges from the dynamic relationships and interactions between organizational actors. For his part, Gibb (1954) argued that it is not specific personality traits that define leadership but the degree to which people perform leadership functions. Thus, he proposed that leadership can be conceived of as a “group phenomenon” shared by multiple individuals. Also—and particularly interesting—is Hodgson, Levinson, and Zaleznik’s (1965) detailed study of the top leadership team of a hospital, composed of a triumvirate of leaders who together covered multiple leadership roles. They showed how a form of collective leadership was exercised through a combination of specialization (each member had his area of expertise), differentiation (the roles they played were sufficiently distinct), and complementarity (together they covered all areas that needed to be covered). In a similar vein, Hollander and Julian (1969) suggested that leadership may be the property of a group of individuals. All these studies have influenced the emergence of collectivistic approaches to leadership. Indeed, these precursors are of interest not simply because they show that current conceptions are not as new as we might have thought but also because they often identified important features of collective forms of leadership that may sometimes have been forgotten and that might be worthy of greater attention and recognition as renewed scholarly interest for plural leadership develops.

**Neglected Streams of Study**

In addition, complete streams of research, influenced by sociology, management, or public administration, are not examined by Yammarino et al. (2012). Although most of these studies—many with an empirical basis—have not been conducted within the same epistemological and methodological paradigm as the studies Yammarino et al. (2012) have reviewed, we suggest that they offer valuable insights into the practice and challenges associated with sharing leadership positions in various contexts.

A first body of literature that is neglected in Yammarino et al.’s overview (2012) is the approach we have labeled elsewhere as “pooling leadership” (Denis et al., 2012). These studies focus on organizations where top management is formally structured not around a single individual but around a dyad, triad, or small group (for examples, see Alvarez & Svejenova, 2005; Court, 2004; Reid & Karambayya, 2009). In a series of studies examining how collective leadership groups evolved in hospitals, Denis, Langley, and Cazale (1996), Denis, Langley, and Pineault (2000), and Denis, Lamothé, and Langley, (2001) examine how the top leadership group’s collective behavior may contribute to strategic change but how at the same time this behavior might subsequently result in the dissolution or contestation of the leadership group. These studies emphasize the fragility and dynamic nature of plural forms of leadership, something that is missing from most of the research reviewed by Yammarino et al. (2012). Similarly, studying organizations marked by the presence of competing logics (like arts organizations and hospitals), Fjellvaer (2010) showed how the structuring of top management of the organization around two individuals may be a way to deal with and manage the tensions that characterize these
A second stream of studies neglected in Yammarino et al.'s overview (2012) of collectivistic approaches to leadership concerns what is often referred to as “distributed leadership.” This view of leadership stems from research in the field of education (e.g., Gronn, 2002, 2008; Spillane, 2006) but has also been studied in the context of interorganizational collaborations (e.g., Chreim, Williams, Janz, & Dastmalchian, 2010; Davis & Eisenhardt, 2011; Huxham & Vangen, 2000). These studies all investigate how leadership is exercised over time—and sometimes, over organizational boundaries—by a series of individuals, who each in turn take on the leadership responsibilities in the achievement of important organizational outcomes. This stream of research also includes some more critical studies investigating how “distributed leadership” may be difficult to translate into practice because of its clashes with institutional norms already in place (e.g. Currie, Lockett, & Suhomlinova, 2009). Some authors argue that in some contexts, the notion that leadership should be widely distributed or collectivized has become a normative discourse, a rhetorical tool that may not produce the results it promises because of tensions between it and other discourses related, for example to efficiency and accountability (see for example Bolden, Petrov, & Gosling, 2009; Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006).

A more radical departure still from Yammarino and colleague’s streams of research is represented by socioconstructionist studies of leadership. These studies start by fully problematizing the individual bases of leadership, conceiving it as a relational process unfolding over time, enacted between a number of organizational actors who may or may not be labeled as leaders. Hence, in this conceptualization, leadership does not reside “in” people but is being produced through their recurrent interactions. Leadership is viewed as collectivistic because it is the result of these interactions and social processes. Contributions belonging to this stream are varied and include Drath and colleagues’ (2008) DAC (direction, alignment and commitment) framework, Lichtenstein and Plowman’s (2009) use of complexity theory, and other practice-based and communicational approaches to leadership, defined as emergent (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010; Lindgren, Packendorff, & Tham, 2010; Vine, Holmes, Marra, Peifer, & Jackson, 2008). By proposing a different definition of what leadership is, these studies aim at understanding how leadership is elaborated through complex interactional dynamics.

**Issues Overlooked**

In their article, Yammarino et al. (2012) mainly consider research that looks at teams, focusing on how people lead each other, or what we have identified as the mutuality of plural leadership. Yet collectivistic forms of leadership may be more varied than this. As other studies have shown, plural leadership may also be coalitional; that is, a group of people may collectively serve as leaders for and over a group of others (as in the situation of pooled leadership described above). Or, a leadership coalition may also emerge in the fashion of a relay, as a succession of leaders who each contribute in moving initiatives forward over time, as has been documented in the case of interorganizational collaborations by Crosby and Bryson (2010) and Davis and Eisenhardt (2011). In addition, the modes of collective leadership invoked by Yammarino et al. (2012) all treat organizational life as if it were consensual, where organizational goals and objectives are seen as convergent. Yet, studies of pluralistic contexts—contexts that are defined by professional autonomy, knowledge-based work, multiplicity of objectives, and diffuse power (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2007), such as professional service firms, hospitals, and universities—reveal that organizational reality is much more complex. Because power and influence are not concentrated in the hands of an established core, leadership is de facto pluralistic. Objectives tend to remain divergent, and if consensus can be obtained, it
is through a complex influence processes. Multiple leaders are naturally present, but there is no a priori reason why their influence might necessarily converge.

This leads us to another critical issue that is overlooked in the streams of research identified by Yammarino et al. (2012): the fact that in many contexts, such as knowledge-based organizations or interorganizational collaborations, there is an inherent pluralism embedded in their structures and modes of working. Sharing leadership is not a question of choice but is rather a practical solution devised to cope with the plurality already present in these contexts. The key concern is not to collectivize or pluralize leadership, but to channel preexisting pluralism. As we argued,

In such circumstances, plural leadership is likely to be seen as “effective” (i.e., influential) when it is coalitional, and succeeds in overcoming the natural tendency towards disintegration or inertia that plagues such organizational settings (Denis et al., 2007). Here leadership is taken, not given, and a plurality of leaders is needed because no single individual alone could conceivably bridge the sources of influence, expertise and legitimacy needed to move a complex social system forward constructively. (Denis et al., 2012: 66).

As such, these settings provide fertile grounds for exploring the ins and outs of collectivistic approaches of leadership.

We should note that many of the additions and extensions we have suggested may be more difficult to access with traditional quantitative methods such as those favored in the literature reviewed by Yammarino et al. (2012). The complex settings described above, the focus on organizational dynamics, and the analysis of leadership emergence suggest a need for more constructivist epistemologies and qualitative methods.

Finally, we wish to underline two dangers that may accompany the whole idea of collectivistic leadership. First, as collectivistic approaches to leadership are gaining in popularity, there is a risk that this conceptualization of leadership falls prey to its own form of “romance.” Meindl, Ehrlich and Dukerich (1985) called attention to the “romance” of leadership as the tendency to see individual leaders as heroes and thus “leadership” as central in the successes and failures alike of organizations. With the growing popularity of collectivistic forms comes a variety of promises, like the potential to improve organizational processes and to promote democratic ideals. Although collectivistic models of leadership constitute a fascinating empirical phenomenon, researchers and practitioners need to avoid the trap of idealizing these forms of leadership beyond their capacity to deliver. Second, there may be a danger that opening up notions of leadership and pluralizing it could lead to the dilution of the notion of leadership altogether. Indeed, concepts like empowerment, teamwork, patterns of power and influence, coordination and organizing can appear as almost interchangeable in some studies of collectivistic leadership. Although modes of sharing leadership roles between individuals can exhibit some variety, we warn researchers and practitioners that generalizing leadership to whole collectives may ultimately lead to the disintegration of the concept of leadership itself. This is not what either we or Yammarino et al. (2012) intend to advocate. However, we suggest that there may be a limit to the elasticity of the concept of leadership. When all are leaders, where are the followers? Without followers, where is leadership?

References


Plural leadership


