



Just how multi-level is leadership research? A document co-citation analysis 1980–2013 on leadership constructs and outcomes

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ABSTRACT

The use of multi-level theories and methodologies in leadership has gained momentum in recent years. However, the leadership field still suffers from a fragmented and unclear evolution and practice of multi-level approaches. The questions of how and to what extent multi-level research has evolved in both leadership phenomena and leadership outcomes, and which informal research networks drove this evolution, remain vastly unexplored. In this study, the extent of literature published between 1980 and 2013 is analyzed using a document co-citation analysis and invisible colleges' framework. This allows us to map the evolution of the multi-level intellectual structure of the leadership field. Specifically, we identify a number of distinct colleges – their conceptualization of leadership and outcomes – and trace their evolution paths over thirty years. We find a considerable fragmentation of the field, with the usage of multi-level leadership conceptualization mostly embraced by more peripheral clusters. Finally we discuss implications for further research with regard to a set of distinct trajectories for the future evolution of multi-level approaches in the leadership domain.

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Introduction

“Understand the whole and keep an eye on the parts.”

[(Kozlowski & Klein, 2000, p. 53).]

In the last two decades, multi-level management studies (Eggers & Kaplan, 2013) have surged in numbers and the multi-level paradigm has permeated virtually every sub-discipline of management (Mathieu & Chen, 2011). Leadership researchers have also increasingly adopted a multi-level approach, focusing on multi-level theory and multi-level data analytical techniques (Hsiung, 2012; Markham, 2010; Olsson, Hemlin, & Pousette, 2012; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2011). With this scholars aim for an understanding of how leadership and its outcomes unfold within and across different levels of organizations (Kozlowski & Klein,

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2000). This research focus likewise represents practical leadership challenges in organizations, such as goal-setting, alignment, adaptation, efficiency or effectiveness, which typically involves simultaneously various analytical levels in organizations (e.g. individuals, groups or units) and includes bottom-up emergence or top-down cascading (Chen, Mathieu, & Bliese, 2004). Therefore, multi-level studies about leadership as a phenomenon and the outcomes of leadership can offer greater theoretical progress, predictive power and real-world relevance (Bamberger, 2008).

Nevertheless, the leadership field shows fragmented theorizing and application of multi-level thinking and therefore exhibits an inconsistent evolution of multi-level approaches (Yammarino, Dionne, Uk Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). The majority of leadership research shows only scant theorizing and operationalizing of multi-level frameworks (Liden, Wayne, Zhao, & Henderson, 2008; Schriesheim, Wu, & Scandura, 2009; Taggar & Ellis, 2007). In recent years, substantial attempts have been made to surface the foundations underpinning multi-level studies in leadership with a focus on the quality and quantity of multi-level studies over time (e.g. Dionne et al., 2014; Tseng, Tung, & Duan, 2010). When looking at these studies' findings, limitations emerge as they focus only on specific themes, (e.g. transformational leadership (Dionne et al., 2012)), concentrate on a set of high impact mainstream journals (DeChurch, Hiller, Murase, Doty, & Salas, 2010) or one focal journal, *The Leadership Quarterly* (Dionne et al., 2014; Markham, 2010) where the predominance of leadership research was published. Questions of how and to what extent multi-level research into the leadership phenomenon and leadership outcomes started to appear, yet how this has evolved over time and which informal research networks or streams, invisible colleges (Vogel, 2012), drove this evolution, remain vastly unexplored despite leadership being, by definition, multi-level in nature.

Therefore, leadership research still lacks some conceptual and methodological clarity regarding the application of the multi-level paradigm. More importantly it further neglects a comprehensive and consistent understanding of the developmental patterns for the multi-level approach to leadership based on an all-encompassing body of leadership literature. This can limit the evaluation of progress in the domain and may hinder the identification of possible areas of future research in multi-level leadership studies. Instead review studies need to include a wide range of publications, such as books, book chapters or less-established journals with a broader thematic range in order to explore the intellectual structure and evolution of the multi-level nature of leadership, and to identify future avenues for research.

The present study aims to cast a dynamic perspective on the underlying structure and invisible colleges of multi-level approaches to leadership research with the main goal of uncovering specific paths and areas of future development that can advance the multi-level aspect in the leadership field, both overall and in distinct sub-domains. As invisible colleges can be defined as communications among scholars (in dyads or groups) who share interest in a particular area (de Solla Price, 1965), exploring such scholarly communication allow us to map the evolution of the intellectual structure of the leadership field over the last 30+ years. It also allows us to examine longitudinal trajectories of leadership field evolution, not only for the levels involved in conceptualizing the leadership phenomenon (e.g. leadership styles, types, approaches etc.), but also, recognizing the extensive interest in the utility of leadership, i.e., at what level leadership outcomes (i.e. results, consequences) were most frequently studied. We base our study on a document co-citation analysis, a bibliometric technique that constructs measures of similarity between documents and is defined as the frequency with which two units are cited together (Small, 1973). Using this technique enables us to identify the most influential topics, the levels of analysis that they focus on predominantly, the extent to which specific colleges embrace a multi-level approach, and how they are connected with each other in communication networks. In this way, we can uncover a college's level of sophistication in theorizing and testing multi-level phenomena, on the nature of leadership and its outcomes, which also serves as a basis for offering prospects for the further development of the field.

In taking this approach, this study aims to contribute to the leadership literature in two ways. First, using a document co-citation approach adds to understanding the underlying structure and evolution of multi-level phenomena in the leadership field by offering a more comprehensive, inclusive and objective review study (Nerur, Rasheed, & Natarajan, 2008; Vogel & Güttel, 2013; Zupic & Čater, 2015). Document co-citation analysis complements and expands other qualitative and meta-analytical reviews, effectively capturing the whole leadership field and building on a much bigger sample size of documents and thus allows us to also explore more marginal topics discovered within the leadership literature. Second, by drawing on college theory (Vogel, 2012) and building on network analysis rooted in a document co-citation approach, this study aims to expand the theorizing about the evolution of multi-level phenomena in leadership (Liden et al., 2008; Schriesheim et al., 2009; Taggar & Ellis, 2007) and to subsequently propose developmental areas for the future evolution of the field. These are informed speculations (Vogel, 2012) about how multi-level approaches could possibly advance the leadership field in the existing dominant domains, in the emerging domains, as well as in the field in general. This has the potential to change our conversation within the field towards improving theorizing and empirical research in the colleges that have not yet fully embraced the multi-level approach, as well as to provide specific directions for potential additional connections with clusters that have.

Leadership and levels approach: towards multi-level research in leadership

Leadership is by nature a phenomenon that involves multiple conceptual levels because it can occur, for instance, between an individual leader and individual followers, groups of followers and/or entire organizations (Dionne et al., 2012) and can also cause organizationally relevant consequences at various levels. Multi-level approaches and challenges that address defining constructs, operationalizing of measures, and empirical tests of theoretical relationships are not new in the leadership field (Yammarino et al., 2005) and still remain current (Dionne et al., 2012). However, addressing an appropriate level of analysis and focusing on separate analytical levels may not be the only way to account for leadership phenomena and their outcomes at different levels. A multi-level approach that accounts for multiple levels of leadership occurrences and its outcomes simultaneously, and examines

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