



Research article

Fishing for leadership: The role diversification plays in facilitating change agents



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ABSTRACT

Leadership is often viewed as being critical to successful natural resource management. This research focuses on a set of leaders identified through a social network analysis of fishers in a rural coastal region. Leaders' connections to different fisheries are evaluated, and these actors are found to be significantly more diversified than other fishers in the area. Drawing on theory related to institutional entrepreneurship and a series of in-depth interviews with these actors, this paper puts forward several hypotheses to explain how diverse social-ecological connections facilitate leadership. Three mechanisms are identified. Being diversified facilitates: (1) production of alternative visions; (2) framing of tractable strategies to sustain local marine resource; and (3) participation in the management process. While more research is needed to understand the relationship between diversification and leadership, these exploratory results suggest that leadership is, in part, a manifestation of ecological circumstance, supporting recent assertions that scholarship on leadership in natural resource management settings could benefit from being more attentive to the processes that shape leadership rather than fixating on individuals and their personal attributes. Given that fisheries policies increasingly constrain diversification, policymakers and managers should consider how specialization of fishers might change the form and function of leaders in the future.

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1. Introduction

Leadership has been identified as an important component of successful natural resource management (Acheson, 2003; Bodin and Crona, 2008; Gilmour et al., 2013; Gutiérrez et al., 2011; Pinkerton, 1989; Sutton and Rudd, 2016). Leaders act to forward visions, facilitate collaboration, ameliorate conflict, and leverage resources, occupying both formal and informal positions of authority and power (Battilana et al., 2009). This research focuses on a set of leaders identified through a social network analysis of fishers in a rural coastal region. In this paper, leaders' connections to different fisheries are evaluated, showing that these actors are significantly more diversified than other fishers in the area. This finding raises the basic question: what is the relationship between leadership and actors' ties to the natural environment? Drawing on the theory of institutional entrepreneurship and a series of in-depth interviews with these leaders, I investigate this question

and outline several potential mechanisms that help to explain the relationship. By bringing explicit attention to the interplay between social-ecological connections and leadership, this research provides empirical evidence to suggest that fisher's diverse connections to fisheries are not decoupled from, but rather integral to the facilitation and maintenance of leadership in coastal communities. This finding lends support to the assertion that scholarship on leadership in natural resource management settings could benefit from being more attentive to the processes that shape and sustain leadership rather than continuing to fixate on individuals and their attributes (Evans et al., 2015; Sutton and Rudd, 2014; Westley et al., 2013).

In this paper leaders are defined as actors who purposefully forward solutions that are intended to improve the social-ecological conditions of their communities. Although leadership can take multiple forms and serve diverse purposes, this definition is consistent with common conceptualizations of leadership in natural resource management contexts that focus on social-ecological sustainability and transformation (Evans et al., 2015;

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Sutton and Rudd, 2014; Westley et al., 2013) (although see Khan et al., 2007; Crona and Bodin, 2010; and Steenbergen, 2016 for cases where leaders act to undermine systems). Those who occupy this role as “change agent” are often referred to as institutional entrepreneurs (IEs). Maguire et al. (2004) define IEs as “actors who have an interest in particular institutional arrangements and who leverage resources to create new institutions or transform existing ones.” IEs are theorized to facilitate transformation by: (1) articulating alternative visions; (2) framing these visions in ways that resonate with others; and (3) guiding the implementation of these new visions through calculated engagement with other actors. Importantly, these strategies are relational, which means that institutional entrepreneurship is not an individualistic endeavor, but rather one that is determined in part by connections to other actors (Garud et al., 2007; Lawrence, 2004; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007; Welter and Smallbone, 2011).

1.1. Alternative visions, framing, and implementation

Being able to imagine different outcomes is a necessary prerequisite to being able to forward alternative visions (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Yet this represents a significant challenge for IEs who are embedded in the systems that they are trying to change and whose cognitive framing is inevitably influenced by their surroundings (Garud et al., 2007; Hannan and Freeman, 1984; Lawrence, 2004; Levy and Scully, 2007; Pretty, 2003; Schusler et al., 2003; Seo and Creed, 2002). This challenge can be explained by the tendency for close associates that regularly interact to have similar perspectives because they share information, while those that interact less frequently tend to have more divergent views (McPherson et al., 2001). IEs are often able to side step this cognitive trap (at least in part) by engaging with actors outside their immediate communities and occupying bridging positions in social networks (Biggs et al., 2010; Maguire et al., 2004; Olsson et al., 2006, 2013; Rosen and Olsson, 2013). Granovetter (1973) asserts that such “weak ties” facilitate learning by creating critical pathways through which new knowledge can be acquired and subsequently repurposed.

IEs must also be able to persuade others that their visions are credible and should be supported (Biggs et al., 2010; Zilber, 2007). Battilana et al. (2009) convincingly argue that this is fundamentally a matter of problem framing. Specifically, they assert that IEs are effective at compelling actors to support alternative visions by way of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing. Diagnostic framing illustrates the problem with the existing system; prognostic framing shows how the alternative vision addresses the issue; and motivational framing lays out a reason for actors to support the new vision. Just as social network position is key to being able to develop alternative visions, framing – which Olsson et al. (2006) refer to as “sense-making” – is also facilitated by the position that actors occupy in their social networks. IEs frequently occupy central nodes in their networks (Powell and DiMaggio, 2012). Such centrality means that IEs have a high “domain of influence” because the flow of goods and services (as well as knowledge and resources) often pass through them (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). This role as arbiter gives IEs a rich understanding of the actors in their networks, whereby making it possible to effectively frame their visions in ways that are coherent and tractable to other actors in the system (Powell and DiMaggio, 2012).

In addition to these two strategies, IEs are also nimble and engage in different parts of the transformation process (Westley et al., 2011). Greenwood et al. (2002) identify six stages through which institutional entrepreneurship transpires: (1) precipitating jolts; (2) de-institutionalization; (3) pre-institutionalization; (4) theorization; (5) diffusion; and (6) re-institutionalization. In the

initial phase, the system experiences some type of social or ecological impact that destabilizes the system. These events create space for IEs to introduce new visions (Biggs et al., 2010; Greenwood et al., 2002; McCarthy et al., 2014; Olsson et al., 2004). During phases 2 to 4, IEs work to disassemble existing norms and institutions by way of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing (Biggs et al., 2010; Olsson et al., 2004). In the final phases, IEs actively work to transform the existing system by mobilizing resources and strategically engaging with different actors in the network at key moments in time (Biggs et al., 2010; Levy and Scully, 2007; Olsson et al., 2006; Perkmann and Spicer, 2007). This is not a unilateral process, but rather one that invariably requires give-and-take between actors.

1.2. Broadening the theorization of leadership

The central theme that weaves these three strategies (alternative visioning, framing, and implementation) together is the critical importance of IEs' relationships to the actors within their social networks. Acknowledging this theme helps to deemphasize both the heroic and individualistic nature of leadership, replacing it with a more context-based perspective (Lawrence, 2004; Levy and Scully, 2007; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007). However, the emphasis that has been placed on broadening the theorization of institutional entrepreneurship to account for the contextual embeddedness of IEs has in itself been rather narrow – focusing primarily on actors' positions in their social network (McLaughlin and Dietz, 2008). This narrow focus is potentially problematic because actors' relationships to the natural environment (i.e., their social-ecological relationships) are also known to have a bearing on their knowledge, actions, and agency (Crona and Bodin, 2010; Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2006). For example, research on a coastal fishing community in East Africa found that opinion leaders' unwillingness to acknowledge fisheries declines and institutional changes in the governance structure was a function of their relationship to the marine environment (Crona and Bodin, 2010, 2006). This interplay between knowledge and the environment is also evident at the community-level, where recent scholarship on social-ecological networks has found that the success of natural resource management can be predicted based on the social and ecological linkages that exist in a system (Bodin et al., 2014; Bodin and Tengo, 2012). It is therefore reasonable to assume that without understanding leaders' ties to the natural environment, we cannot expect to fully understand their motivations, rationale, and strategies used to mobilize change. This invariably requires research on leadership that focuses more explicitly on the “contextual differences” that shape change (Sutton and Rudd, 2014).

Towards this objective, this research specifically focuses on the interplay between leaders and the natural environment in a coastal region of Maine, United States, exploring how fishers' particular connections to fisheries facilitate leadership. I begin by describing the social-ecological context within which my research is situated. Next I explain how leaders and their ties to different fisheries were identified and analyzed. Following this description, I present data showing that there is a significant difference between the diversification of leaders and other fishers in the region and across the state. I then draw on data from in-depth interviews with a subset of the identified leaders to put forward three potential mechanisms that help to explain the link between diversification and leadership within the context of the aforementioned theorization of institutional entrepreneurship. I conclude by discussing the relevance of these findings to those engaged in fisheries management and consider how trends in contemporary fisheries policy may alter leadership through time.

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