



## Informal leadership, interaction, cliques and productive capacity in organizations: A collectivist analysis



Russ Marion <sup>a,\*,1,2</sup>, Jon Christiansen <sup>b</sup>, Hans W. Klar <sup>a</sup>, Craig Schreiber <sup>c</sup>, Mehmet Akif Erdener <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Clemson University, United States*

<sup>b</sup> *Sparks Research and Clemson University, United States*

<sup>c</sup> *Lenoir-Rhyne University, United States*

<sup>d</sup> *Balikesir University, Turkey*

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### ABSTRACT

This study proposes that dynamically changing organizations can achieve stable productive capacity (or environmentally stable states) by adaptively processing internal and external volatility. It tests this proposal with agent network measures rather than with more traditional variables. We examine three such network dynamics that, according to the collective perspectives of complexity theory, influence a network's capacity to perform: informal leadership, interaction among agents, and clique engagement. Data were collected at an elementary school in the southeastern United States; the methodologies include qualitative interviews, network analysis, and response surface methods. Results revealed that informal leadership and engagement in cliques positively affect the productive capacity of organizations, and that cliques can absorb large amounts of information flow (volatility) thus promoting stable productivity levels. That is, collective, information-processing adaptability fosters stable productivity plateaus that absorb unpredictable demands. Suggestions for practitioners are provided.

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### Introduction

Leadership, as a construct, is an engaging notion, perhaps because of its teleological premise, its promise of controlled productivity, perhaps simply because it enables one to feel in control. Such attributions, however, are leader-centric in that they presume leadership to be vested in the independent actions of skilled individuals who motivate people and who change organizations for the better (Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009; Hunt & Dodge, 2001). Leaders enact these leader-centric premises by (among other things) working to foster commitment, establish positive relationships, strategically coordinate activities, and create common purpose.

Yet leader-centrism may define only part of the leadership construct. There are evolving challenges to that model and to its premises (Friedrich et al., 2009; Hunt & Dodge, 2001; Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003; Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Some scholars suggest that perceptions of leadership as the actions of skilled, independent individuals fail to anticipate or explain leadership influence by informal and emergent groups of workers. Informal groups, for example, can influence managerial policy, or emergent team dynamics can generate creative ideas without substantive aid from formal leaders.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [marion2@clemson.edu](mailto:marion2@clemson.edu) (R. Marion).

<sup>1</sup> Direct inquiries to Russ Marion.

<sup>2</sup> Tel.: +1 864 367 3890.

These scholars challenge leader-centric notions that leadership's role is to enable top-down coordination and common mindsets, that successful leadership is largely about building positive relationships with workers, or even that a major role of leaders is to promote goal-oriented change. We concur with these critics, and join their effort to understand leadership beyond, or even without, presuming leader-centrism.

Leader-centric assumptions of traditional models can be avoided by describing leadership activities and organizational outcomes that are embedded in collectives. This enables one to expand conceptualizations of leadership and to reconceptualize it relative to the dynamics of groups, the functions of informal leaders, and dynamic, emergent change. What we ask in this study, then, is how do collective interdependencies and collective leadership, rather than the independent leaders of tradition, influence outcomes in an organization.

Collectivism is defined for this article as the interaction of people, information, and structures in ways that process internal and external information (external informational pressures, shifting demands, information generated internally by the production of ideas and needs, etc.) and that influence organizational outcomes. Collectivism is a rather recent idea. Over the past twenty years, it has been explored by theorists who have labeled it relational theory, distributed leadership, collaborative leadership, shared leadership, and complexity theory (Gronn, 2002; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; Pearce & Sims, 2000; Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, & Shuffler, 2012). We suggest that all these theories are properly collected under the umbrella of collectivism.

This article draws particularly from complexity theory (Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001; McKelvey, 2008; Osborn & Hunt, 2007; Schreiber & Carley, 2006). Consequently, we define the processes and outcomes of our collectivist definition from a complexity perspective: Complex collectives *dynamically*, or nimbly, process perturbations, such as excessive or unpredictably shifting information, by enabling both organizational change and organizational stability. Such systems sometime exhibit phase transitions to dramatic new states, or emergent, often unexpected, outcomes; however, this outcome is well (perhaps overly) represented in the literature, so we focus on the less discussed emergence of dynamic stability.

Leadership in collectivist systems is distributed across numerous informal leaders and serves to enhance and process information flow. Leadership in this context is influence of and within the collective dynamic, thus leadership is not isolated from the collective. Stability is a state of optimal information processing rather than a state of equilibrium; it is not singularly homeostatic but rather it is stability that is enabled because distributed forms of leadership dynamically process internal and environmental information. That is, somewhat paradoxically, dynamic changes in a system absorb perturbations thus fostering a state of changing network stability.

In this analysis, network analysis and response surface methodology are used to probe these seemingly contradictory or non-traditional claims that change or nimbleness can generate dynamic stability, that leadership is (in addition to its formal or positional modality) an informal, collectivist behavior that enhances information flow; and that organizational outcomes are products of the ability to process information in collectives. We propose, specifically, that systems in which networked dynamics are tuned to respond effectively to internal and environmental volatility (Ashby, 1960; Benbya & McKelvey, 2006; Kauffman, 1993) will absorb perturbations and exhibit stability across a rather broad functional landscape.

## Background

Hunt and Dodge's (2001) article in *The Leadership Quarterly* titled, appropriately, "Deja Vu All Over Again," signaled discomfort about traditional leadership models, discomfort that by then had been brewing for several years (e.g. Lichtenstein, 2000, Pearce & Sims, 2000, Taylor, 1999, Tsoukas, 1996). Hunt and Dodge asked, simply, whether leadership scholars can "ignor[e]... the web of relationships through which all work is accomplished" (2001, p. 436). On the heels of this, Marion and Uhl-Bien (2001) argued that leadership is a complex interactive dynamic, Lichtenstein and McKelvey (2002) introduced the notion of emergent rather than planned outcomes, Osborn and Hunt (2002) proposed multiple organizational realities other than traditional predictable order (including complex realities), and Drath (2001) argued that leadership was a relational dynamic (see, also, Uhl-Bien, 2006). Simultaneously, distributed and shared leadership theorists (formal and informal leadership shared across various stakeholders; Heck & Hallinger, 2009), writing in a similar mode, were arguing that leadership cannot be understood outside of its interactive and interdependent contexts (Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Spillane, 2005). In 2009, Friedrich et al. popularized the term, collective leadership, to summarize these perspectives.

### *Collectivism and information flow*

Several issues are somewhat underdeveloped, or even unaddressed, by collectivist theories, however. Collectivist scholars agree that leadership is the interactive exchange of influence in networks (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Friedrich et al., 2009; Hunt & Dodge, 2001; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007), and they typically describe leadership relative to change and improvement (Carson et al., 2007; Lichtenstein & Plowman, 2009; McKelvey, 2008; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Focusing for the moment on leadership as influence: The mechanisms by which collective leaders exert influence are not clear. How does interacting influence translate into follower behavior? The answer seems intuitive, one person influences another, but the underlying medium by which influence occurs is not explicated and, we argue, that mechanism is important (the term, mechanism, is defined by Merton, 1968, and by Swedberg and Hedstrom, 1998, as an event or chain of events that link cause to outcome). We propose that collective influence is enacted by the exchange of information and by information flow within a system. Further, information is amplified and empowered when it is embedded in networked, interactive dynamics. The mechanism of influence, then, is information flow.

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