



## Pluralized leadership in complex organizations: Exploring the cross network effects between formal and informal leadership relations



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### ABSTRACT

Understanding the connection between leadership and informal social network structures is important in advancing understanding of the enactment of pluralized leadership. In this article we explore how the enactment of pluralized leadership is shaped by leadership influence and informal (advice and support) networks and the interactions between the two. Building on recent developments in Exponential Random Graph Modeling, we empirically model the cross network effects across three leadership networks and explore different forms of cross network effects and under what conditions they occur. Our findings suggest that patterns of pluralized leadership have important endogenous qualities, as shaped through actors' leadership and informal networks, and are important for understanding the required capability for facing increasingly complex organizational situations.

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Rather than the individualized heroic view of leadership, we consider leadership as an emergent network of relations, which is a shared and distributed phenomenon, encompassing several leaders who may be both formally appointed and emerge more informally (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006; Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson, 2006). Scholars' attempts to theorize the notion that leadership extends beyond the individual have spawned a range of different concepts such as: distributed leadership (Currie, Lockett, & White, 2011; Fitzgerald, Ferlie, McGivern, & Buchanan, 2013; Gronn, 2002; Mehra et al., 2006), collective leadership (Carter & DeChurch, 2012; Contractor, DeChurch, Carson, Carter, & Keegan, 2012; Cullen, Palus, Chrobot-Mason, & Appaneal, 2012; Denis, Lamothe, & Langley, 2001; Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, & Mumford, 2009; Mumford, Friedrich, Vessey, & Ruark, 2012; Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, & Shuffler, 2012), shared leadership (Carson et al., 2007; Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006), and relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). In the face of a good deal of inconsistency surrounding conceptual and definitional issues, a number of these scholars have provided prescriptions for a better understanding of these labels (see: Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012; Yammarino et al., 2012). In particular, Denis et al. (2012) present the idea of pluralized leadership, within which these other concepts of leadership, extending beyond the individual, are encompassed. In doing so, they present an opportunity to better our understanding of how pluralized leadership arises.

Specifically, Denis et al. (2012) describe pluralized leadership as being characterized by the existence of multiple leaders in organizations, whom exert influence through both formal and informal means, and is "naturally occurring" in complex organizations. As such, leadership is continuously collectively enacted and becomes a consequence of actors' relations; an effect which is a product of their local interactions (Denis et al., 2012, p. 254). In fact, this is a view, shared by many scholars of pluralized leadership (broadly defined) who see leadership as a collective product of actors' interactions that emerges in social relations

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(Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006; Carson et al., 2007; Kilduff & Tsai, 2003; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Yammarino et al., 2012). Here, scholars are persistently pointing to a gap in our knowledge of pluralized leadership surrounding the influence of leadership on the network relations that connect people, and vice versa (Friedrich et al., 2009; Mumford et al., 2012; Yammarino et al., 2012).

In this study we address the research gap above drawing on social network analysis theory and method, and so heed the calls for more scholarly attention to be paid to the micro-dynamics through which pluralized leadership is enacted (Brass, 2001; Carson et al., 2007; Carter & DeChurch, 2012; Contractor et al., 2012; Mehra et al., 2006). In doing so, our research addresses the call for research that “may require new types of leadership operationalizations, methods, interventions, and assessments for understanding and enhancing leadership science and practice” (Yammarino et al., 2012, p. 384).

Consistent with prior research (Carson et al., 2007), we focus on leadership influence networks as constituted in the influence relationships that emerge among actors (Contractor et al., 2012). Unlike most leadership network studies, which rely on a single network, we investigate patterns of pluralized leadership from a multi-network view (i.e. “multiplexity”), focusing on the presence of multiple, and interdependent, types of relationships between the same set of actors (Shipilov, Gulati, Kilduff, Li, & Tsai, 2014).

From a theoretical perspective we explore the multiplexity surrounding pluralized leadership by employing concepts of mutual exchange and entrainment to explain two different forms of interdependency between networks of leadership influence and informal social network relations. Mutual exchange involves a directed tie of one type being reciprocated with a tie of another type between two actors (Hiller, Day, & Vance, 2006; Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997), and is driven by the principle of direct reciprocity (Bearman, 1997; Yamagishi & Cook, 1993). Entrainment is a process through which behavioral cycles related to different informal relations become co-occurring with one another (McGrath, Kelly, & Machatka, 1984; Standifer & Bluedorn, 2006). To theoretically model the conditions under which the informal relations underpinning leadership influence are characterized by mutual exchange or entrainment we focus on nature of the informal ties involved, drawing a distinction between instrumental (i.e. goal oriented) and expressive ties (the tie is an end in itself) (Fombrun, 1982; Ibarra, 1993). In doing so, we are able to offer a unique micro-level perspective of the enactment of pluralized leadership.

From a methods perspective, we draw on recent developments in social network analysis (SNA) methods, specifically Exponential Random Graph Models (ERGMs) (see: Lusher, Koskinen, & Robins, 2012; Pattison & Wasserman, 1999; Robins, Pattison, Kalish, & Lusher, 2007) to examine how multiple relations are interrelated. ERGMs are superior to models that assume independent observations as they take dependencies inherent in network relations into account (Robins et al., 2007). To date there are few studies that have examined leadership using an ERGM approach (Box-Steffensmeier & Christenson, 2014; Mehra, Marineau, Lopes, & Dass, 2009; White, Currie, & Lockett, 2014), and even less that takes a multiplexity view (see: Contractor et al., 2012 for a discussion). ERGM is state of the art, and holds the potential to generate new insights into the structure of leadership relations, as it enables us to specify and test the specific conditions under which informal relations and leadership influence relations may be mutually exchanged and/or entrained.

We contribute to the literature on pluralized leadership by examining the type of complex and contentious organizational situation that Denis et al. (2012) suggest is likely to prove illuminating in considering leadership influence and informal relations within pluralized leadership. Our data is drawn from a complex organization of an inter-professional, inter-organizational network delivering health and social care, specifically the safeguarding of children, an organizational context prone to publicly visible failures of leadership, which may result in child deaths (Laming, 2009).

## Pluralized leadership

Beyond Denis et al. (2012), various commentators have examined pluralized leadership within complex settings (Currie & Lockett, 2011; Gronn, 2002; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; White et al., 2014; Yammarino et al., 2012). They agree pluralized leadership is always present in professionalized, complex organizations, but do not provide an adequate theorization of the spread of leadership, which takes account of the interaction of informal relations and leadership influence that underpin pluralized leadership to explain the extent to which it is more or less widespread. Many studies seeking to explain the spread of pluralized leadership tend to highlight the effect of external context (cf. Currie & Lockett, 2011; Currie, Lockett, & Suhomlinova, 2009; White et al., 2014) and argue that some sources of influence carry more weight than others, and are anchored in different sets of resources; i.e. leadership influence derived from managerial accountability or professional status. These studies tend to emphasize that pluralization of leadership is likely to be concentrated in an elite group of actors, rather than widespread. Yet other studies empirically report that pluralized leadership is widespread in a way that cannot be explained by exogenous factors, such as managerial accountability or professional status (Buchanan, Addicott, Fitzgerald, Ferlie, & Baeza, 2007; Huxham & Vangen, 2000). Buchanan et al. (2007) focus upon the fluid, ambiguous, migratory dynamics around social relations in making their claim that ‘nobody’s in charge’, but tend to ignore, or even eschew perceived leadership influence. Meanwhile Huxham and Vangen (2000) take a ‘holistic’ view of leadership through which they consider how collaboration is shaped and enacted. They take a more balanced view of the interaction of perceived leadership influence and social relations, in considering the behavior of participants identified as leaders, but also what happens on the ground because of structures and processes of collaboration. However, Huxham and Vangen (2000) focus upon a wide range of issues, as well as the interaction of perceived leadership influence and social relations within their empirical study, as a consequence of which we still lack sufficient in-depth understanding of the spread of leadership influence at a more micro-level of analysis, involving local level interactions derived from social relations (Denis et al., 2012; Yammarino et al., 2012).

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