



Predicting leadership relationships: The importance of collective identity



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ABSTRACT

In many organizations, leadership increasingly looks less like a hierarchy of authority. Instead, it is better understood as a network of influence relationships in which multiple people participate, blurring the distinction between leader and follower and raising the question, how do we predict the existence of these leadership relationships? In this study, we examine identification with one's organization and work team to predict the presence or absence of a leadership relationship. Using Exponential Random Graph Models (ERGMs) we find that employees who strongly identify with their company and team are more likely to view others as a source of leadership. We also find that employees who strongly identify with the organization are more likely to be viewed by others as a source of leadership. Implications for enhancing the understanding of plural forms of leadership and leadership development are discussed.

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Leadership is changing. The traditional image of leader as hero, savior, or white knight is slowly being replaced with a new image; that of a collective group of people exerting influence and taking action (Yukl, 1999). Various labels have been applied to these emerging leadership practices, including plural, relational, collective, shared, and interdependent. In these forms of leadership, tasks are largely achieved through networks of influence relationships as opposed to solely or largely through a hierarchy of authority (Fletcher, 2004). Recent reviews conclude that plural forms of leadership, which bring people with different resources, capabilities, and sources of legitimacy to the table, are needed to address the challenges of a complex world (Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012; Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, & Shuffler, 2012). Despite gaining attention in the literature, a better understanding of leadership as a collaborative, relational process is needed. In contemporary organizations, as the role of leader and follower becomes more blurred and dynamic, a primary question of interest becomes: How do we better understand and predict the existence of leadership relationships?

Taking this view of leadership requires a shift in mindset regarding how to conceptualize and measure leadership. No longer is it sufficient to identify a select few individuals, who hold formal positions, as leaders. Instead, plural forms of leadership can be thought of as a network of influence relationships (Carter, DeChurch, Braun, & Contractor, 2015; Contractor, DeChurch, Carson, Carter, & Keegan, 2012) in which leadership is both claimed and granted (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Network approaches have recently been applied to the study of leadership and represent a useful way to measure leadership relationships that are dispersed throughout a team, department, organization, or other collective (e.g. Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007, Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson, 2006). The network methods employed in the current study provide insight into the self-organizing principles that

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underlie the structure of leadership networks by predicting the existence of dyadic leadership relationships, which are the basic building blocks of leadership networks (e.g. Kalish, 2013, White, Currie, & Lockett, 2014). Specifically, we use this approach to begin to answer the question: What predicts who will grant and be granted leadership in today's flatter more interdependent organizations? In addition to accounting for a number of broader structural network features that may explain the existence of leadership relationships, this approach is used to understand if the identity of the person granting and being granted leadership influences whether a leadership relationship exists.

Historically, organizations have used formal leadership roles to ensure certain individuals provide leadership for others; however, we argue that in the absence of or in addition to these prescribed roles, leadership occurs through informal relationships that develop between individuals who are part of a collective team or organization. Furthermore, we argue that identification with the collective is important for predicting whether and how members of a collective participate in leadership relationships.

Identity has been defined as the meaning attached to oneself by self and others (Gecas, 1982). Identity is an important aspect of one's self concept answering key questions for an individual such as "who am I?" and "who do other people know me to be?" (Ibarra, Wittman, Petriglieri, & Day, 2014). Existing research on identity and leadership has largely focused on how individuals come to see themselves as leaders, including a recent emphasis on the socially constructed process through which individuals internalize a leader identity as part of their self-concept (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). However, identity and sense of self is in part derived from the organizations or workgroups to which people belong (Hogg & Terry, 2000). How this collective identity influences individuals' participation in leadership is not well understood. We propose that individuals who identify with the collective engage in behaviors to help ensure its success and embody the values and goals of the collective, such that others are likely to view them as a source of leadership. Further, because these individuals are invested in the collective's success they will look to others for leadership to ensure that their actions will help achieve the collectives' goals.

In the current study, we examine the connection between collective identity and the existence of leadership relationships to better understand whether and how individuals participate in the social process of leadership. Examining the relationship between collective identity and the existence of leadership relationships is important given the central role of identity in leadership (Munusamy, Ruderman, & Eckert, 2010). Leadership research and theory is expanding through alternative models and paradigms of leadership that include both formal and informal leaders and acknowledge the shift in the distribution of influence from a select few to many organizational members. Thus, this research advances the identity and leadership literature by exploring different forms of collective identity as a possible explanation for why certain individuals may be more likely to grant and be granted leadership influence. In addition to building on social identity theory to explain why individuals who have strong organizational and team identities are likely to be seen as sources of leadership, we also offer new theoretical explanations as to why individuals who identify with their organization and team are more likely to see others as sources of leadership.

Leadership and identity

Although theories and definitions of leadership abound, we rely on a view of leadership in which its defining elements are three collective outcomes: direction, alignment, and commitment (Drath et al., 2008; McCauley, Van Velsor, & Ruderman, 2010). In this view, leadership is not defined in terms of individual characteristics or behaviors, but as a social process for generating the direction, alignment, and commitment needed by a group to accomplish collective goals (Drath et al., 2008; McCauley et al., 2010). As such, leadership can happen anywhere and anytime and is not limited to a particular setting or person. This reflects a shift in the literature toward viewing leadership as a relational property rather than an individual entity (Chrobot-Mason, Ruderman, & Nishii, 2014). Further, this view of leadership lends itself to applying a network approach to examine how a collective engages in the social process of leadership by examining whether relationships that produce direction, alignment, and commitment exist among employees and to examine predictors of the presence or absence of these relationships.

Identity plays a critical role in organizations (He & Brown, 2013) and in understanding the process of leadership (Van Knippenberg, Van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). To date, most research has focused on the role of individual identity (e.g. Day & Harrison, 2007, Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011). That is, to what extent do organizational members view themselves as leaders. Role-based identity theory suggests that leader is one possible role that an individual may identify with or be defined as by others (Gecas, 1982) and identification of oneself as a leader enhances motivation to lead, engagement in the leadership process, and seeking opportunities to develop leadership skills (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009; Kark & van Dijk, 2007). In short, individuals are motivated to enact role identities to fill the need for self-verification and role-consistent behavior (Markus & Wurf, 1987; McCall & Simmons, 1978). Thus, a significant literature supports a focus in leadership development on helping individuals come to see themselves as a leader and identify strongly with that role.

Much less is known about the role of identity in relational aspects of leadership. DeRue and Ashford (2010) proposed a theory to explain how leadership identity construction occurs through a social process. They argue that leader identity should not be viewed as static nor one-directional, but rather as a process of mutual influence in which social interaction among individuals as well as contextual factors cause leader and follower identities to shift over time and across situations. Leader identities are constructed through individuals projecting an image as a leader and others mirroring back and reinforcing that image as legitimate. This social process of individual leader identity construction described by DeRue and Ashford is rooted in interactions between people attempting to create the direction, alignment, and commitment needed to achieve organizational goals. We seek to understand the existence of these leadership relationships. DeRue and Ashford propose that individuals' expectations of leaders, the risks and rewards individuals associate with engaging in leadership behaviors, and the institutional structure that places some individuals in formal leadership roles as reasons why certain individuals are more likely to see others or be seen by others as

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