# Collectivistic leadership and George C. Marshall: A historiometric analysis of career events ☆

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Many of the prevailing approaches to understanding leadership assume that leadership operates as an individual-level phenomenon, in which one person takes on the role of a leader. However, a number of recently developed leadership models now describe leadership as a shared process. These collectivistic theories present leadership as a dynamic process in which a leader may selectively utilize the skills of followers and distribute elements of the leadership role among these followers as the situation demands. In this study, we conduct an investigation into the viability of core elements of the collectivistic theories through a historiometric analysis of events from the career of a notable leader, George C. Marshall. One hundred and two events from Marshall's career were identified from historical biographies and were then content coded and analyzed with regard to the components of a collectivistic leadership model. The results of this historiometric analysis indicated that there are key antecedents to collectivistic leadership and that the use of this form of leadership can result in positive team outcomes.

## 1. Introduction

"When 9/11 came, 46 year-old Brigadier General McChrystal sees a whole new world. First, the things that are obvious, that you're familiar with: the environment changed — the speed, the scrutiny, the sensitivity of everything now is so fast, sometimes it evolves faster than people have time to really reflect on it. […] It also produced something which I call an inversion of expertise, because we had so many changes at the lower levels in technology and tactics and whatnot, that suddenly the things that we grew up doing wasn't what the force was doing anymore. So how does a leader stay credible and legitimate when they haven't done what the people you are leading are doing? And it's a brand new leadership challenge. And it forced me to become a lot more transparent, a lot more willing to listen, a lot more willing to be reverse-mentored…"

[Retired General Stanley McChrystal]

The concept of leadership has been traditionally defined and studied as a phenomenon centering on a single person in a single role — the leader (Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007). While this idea of an individual in a well-defined role has been popular in the world of research, it may be an oversimplification to view leadership as solely an individual-level phenomenon. Leadership, in reality, occurs as a dynamic multi-level process in which the leadership role may be taken on by multiple individuals and passed between a formal leader and a team working with this leader (Dansereau, Yammarino, & Kohles, 1998; Day, Gronn, & Salas, 2004; Gronn, 2002; Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). In fact, as indicated in the quote above from Retired General Stanley McChrystal's (2011) TED Talk entitled "Listen, learn… then lead," it is becoming imperative in many organizations that leaders shift their perspective on the role they play — from authoritarian commander to a facilitator and integrator of diverse expertise. Just as the post-9/11 problems General McChrystal faced increased in their dynamism and complexity, so do the problems teams and larger collective structures face in other organizations. And, as it did for the General, it may often benefit leader and team performance to empower those within the team to assume a leadership role when their expertise is the most relevant (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2006; Hauschildt & Kirchmann, 2001; Howell & Boies, 2004).

In light of this growing need, a number of leadership scholars have proposed theories conceptualizing leadership in this way (e.g., Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Sims, 2002), and several recent review pieces have examined the current state and potential future directions of the field of "collectivistic" approaches to leadership (Contractor, DeChurch, Carson, Carter, & Keegan, 2012; Yammarino, Salas, Serban, Shirreffs, & Shuffler, 2012). Although many of these theories speak to a similar theme – that the leadership role can and should be shared with followers under certain conditions, they take slightly different approaches and use different labels for it – shared leadership (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Pearce & Conger, 2003), distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002), participative leadership (House, 1996), and empowerment (Mathieu, Gilson, & Ruddy, 2006). Each of these research areas has begun to build in their own niches, with irregular attempts to integrate the findings. A recent effort by Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, and Mumford (2009), however, took an integrative approach to the literature and incorporated concepts and findings from these related areas into their collective leadership model and took a step toward laying out the nomological network of this area of research (Mumford, Friedrich, Vessey, & Ruark, 2012).

In a recent review, Yammarino et al. (2012), collectively refer to theories in which there are "multiple individuals assuming (and perhaps divesting themselves) of leadership roles over time in both formal and informal relationships" as "collectivistic" theories of leadership. Although this article, and others, point to this shared foundation among the many related theories, there has been few attempts to integrate their constructs and test the overall phenomenon. Although there is some evidence from existing research that this aggregate concept of "collectivistic" leadership may have a positive impact within organizations (e.g., Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2006; Hauschildt & Kirchmann, 2001), there is little research that tests the relationships between key components shared by these theories. Our goal in this study was to examine the viability of several core elements – those which were the core antecedents and processes seen most across the collectivistic theories – and also provide added value in testing relationships that have yet to receive much attention in the collectivistic approaches (e.g., communication and collectivistic leadership).

Toward these goals, we conducted a case analysis on 102 leadership events drawn from the career of an eminent leader, General George C. Marshall. General Marshall was chosen for a number of reasons that not only provided a rich source of material to evaluate, but also allowed us to shed light on an individual that played an important role in shaping the modern U.S. Army. Marshall had a long and distinguished career in the United States government, taking on multiple leadership positions, most notably Army Chief of Staff, Secretary of Defense, and Secretary of State. General Marshall was also the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953 for his work to stabilize Europe following WWII, including his significant contribution via the Marshall Plan.

General Marshall has been the focus of several in-depth biographies and his long career and multiple positions resulted in rich source material for our study. Additionally, he is a military leader that has maintained high levels of regard from historians, military personnel, and leadership scholars alike (Clarcq, DeMartino, & Palanski, 2011), and we felt examining his behaviors would be a useful study of effective leadership. Most importantly, his approach to leadership has been recognized as one that promoted delegation and autonomy of subordinates and respect for the opinions and expertise of those within his team (Clarcq et al., 2011). Thus, examining leadership as executed by Marshall in these cases, with regard to collectivistic leadership actions, may provide us with evidence of which components of these models have the greatest influence on leader, team, and organizational outcomes. Before turning to a discussion of the specific model being tested, we will first review the collectivistic theories that informed the core constructs and relationships tested in the proposed model.

## 1.1. Models of collectivistic leadership

The focus of leadership research has traditionally been the individual leader and, sometimes, the direct interactions between leaders and followers. However, a growing number of leadership scholars are now viewing leadership as a collectivistic phenomenon in which the leadership role is taken on, both formally and informally, by multiple individuals over time (Contractor et al., 2012; Yammarino et al., 2012). Beyond the leadership role, relationships between leaders and others can occur both formally and informally across multiple different levels. For example, formal leadership may occur in large and small teams, dyads, departments, networks, and multi-team systems. Informal leadership might involve a leader's personal network, including those both within and outside an organization, as well as the networks of his or her followers. These multi-level leadership relationships and roles are not seen as static, but instead are dynamic systems that change over time based on situational demands.

The collectivistic theories of leadership that have been developed thus far include team and multi-team system leadership, leadership networks, shared leadership, distributed leadership, complexity leadership, and collective leadership (see Yammarino et al., 2012). These approaches to leadership share a number of common features. They are not primarily leader-centric ways of