



## A 25-year perspective on levels of analysis in leadership research

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to present a comprehensive 25-year review of the incorporation of levels of analysis into conceptual and empirical leadership research published within *Leadership Quarterly* throughout its history. We assessed the population of *Leadership Quarterly's* research (790 research articles) on four key levels of analysis-based issues: (1) explicit statement of the focal level(s) of analysis; (2) appropriate measurement given level of constructs; (3) use of a multi-level data analysis technique; and, (4) alignment of theory and data. Prior reviews regarding levels of analysis incorporation into leadership research have been limited to major research domains. Results revealed that while both conceptual and empirical articles only explicitly state the focal level of analysis in approximately one-third of the articles, appropriate levels-based measurement and alignment between theory and data are relatively strong areas of achievement for the articles within *Leadership Quarterly*. Multi-level data analysis techniques are used in less than one-fifth of all articles. Although there is room for improvement, there is evidence that *Leadership Quarterly* is a premier outlet for levels-based leadership research. Given the increasing complexity of organizational science with regard to groups, teams and collectives, *Leadership Quarterly* has an opportunity to model for organizational research on how to build and test complicated multi-level theories and models.

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## 1. Introduction

With more than 800 leadership manuscripts published within the annals of the *Leadership Quarterly* (*LQ*) over the past 25 years, arguably the largest repository of scholarly leadership research lies within the pages of *LQ*. As a fledgling journal, the first issue contained the mission of *LQ*, stated by Bernard Bass (1990), the founding editor:

“In the years to come, we see the *Leadership Quarterly* playing a signal role in bringing together diverse scholarship and practice to help better understand and improve the leader's performance and the effectiveness of the individuals, groups, organizations, and societies for which the leader officer, manager, or administrator is responsible” (Bass, 1990, p. v).

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While not explicitly using the term “levels of analysis,” Bass (1990) tacitly acknowledged the importance and centrality of a variety of levels of analysis in leadership research by including these levels in the mission of the journal. Coincidentally, just a few years prior to that first issue of *LQ*, organizational scholars Dansereau, Alutto, and Yammarino (1984) addressed growing concerns regarding levels of analysis issues in organizational research (Boulding, 1980; Cummings, 1981; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Miller, 1978; Roberts, Hulin, & Rousseau, 1978; Staw, 1980; Staw & Oldham, 1978; Van de Ven & Astley, 1981). Their book introduced a new paradigm for multi-level research, and was a response to concerns that a) theoretical formulations were lacking a clear conceptualization of levels of analysis, therefore limiting the logical basis for theory testing (Roberts et al., 1978) and b) statistical level of analysis issues in data analysis were seemingly viewed as distinct from theory development. The paradigm introduced by Dansereau colleagues (1984) offered a comprehensive, integrated framework for theorizing, measuring, testing and drawing inferences regarding organizational variables and the relevant entities upon which they are based. Thus, their approach addressed both aforementioned concerns regarding poor levels specification in theory, as well as the flawed view of independence between theory and data analysis.

While the Dansereau et al. (1984) framework represented the most comprehensive view of levels of analysis to date in organizational research, more importantly for leadership research was their use of leadership theory to present and discuss their new “varient approach.” Moreover, Dansereau colleagues (1984) fledgling approach to organizational research would intersect dramatically with the leadership field's fledgling journal, *Leadership Quarterly*, and set both on a 25-year odyssey that would see continued and sustained intersection through the years.

Most notably, of the hundreds of leadership scholars that have served on *LQ*'s editorial board over the years, there are a handful of scholars that have served uninterrupted – their service to the journal has spanned the entire 25 years. Besides being a remarkable achievement and an exemplar of service to the field of leadership, within this esteemed group of “lifers” are three board members who have significantly contributed to another field related to, but separate from leadership: levels of analysis in organizational research. Along with being notable leadership scholars, *LQ* editorial board “lifers” Fred Dansereau, Chester Schriesheim and Francis Yammarino also are notable levels of analysis scholars, with all three playing a critical role in introducing and/or further developing levels of analysis within organizational science (Dansereau & Yammarino, 1998a,b, 2000, 2003, 2005; Dansereau, Yammarino, & Kohles, 1999; Dansereau et al., 1984; Schriesheim, Castro, & Cogliser, 1999; Schriesheim, Castro, & Yammarino, 2000; Schriesheim, Castro, Zhou, & Yammarino, 2001; Schriesheim, Cogliser, & Neider, 1995; Yammarino, 1996; Yammarino & Bass, 1991; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2002, 2004, 2011).

Thus, the 25-year history of *LQ* is closely aligned with the history of levels of analysis development within the field of organizational behavior. However, the intersection of key *LQ* editorial board members with key levels of analysis scholars during the time period both the journal and levels of analysis were fledgling entities begets some interesting questions. What role did *LQ* play in advancing general leadership scholarship, while at the same time advancing levels of analysis issues within the field of organizational behavior?

While Bass's (1990) early vision for *LQ* included leadership research across a variety of levels, *LQ* began moving to the forefront of levels-based organizational research soon after its inception. *Leadership Quarterly*'s role as an early leader within multi-level research may be related to Fran Yammarino's tenure at the editorial helm, where he served as editor (1991–1992) and senior editor (1992–1998) of the journal. During this time, editorial vision and direction for the journal tended to consider the importance of levels of analysis in research. One of the authors (F.J. Yammarino) during his time as editor and senior editor of *LQ* said that while “not requiring a levels-based focus outright, authors and reviewers were encouraged to consider research within a levels-based lens.”

Moreover, besides the aforementioned core *LQ*/levels of analysis scholars, over the next 25 years several other scholars of levels of analysis would pass through the *LQ* editorial board, ensuring *LQ* a healthy understanding of the importance of levels of analysis within the scope of leadership research. Given the intersection between key levels of analysis scholars and *LQ*'s editorial board, what was the trajectory of levels of analyses research during *LQ*'s development? The unique interplay between *LQ* and the burgeoning levels of analysis field allows for the notion that even as a new journal, *LQ* was one of the academic outlets at the forefront of developing and advancing levels-based research.

With the exception of editorials, commentaries and theoretical letters, we undertook the current review of every published research (full) article in *LQ* over the past 25 years as means of examining the evolution of levels of analysis-based leadership research within the pages of *LQ*. This comprehensive examination evaluated how research published in *LQ* met a standard of levels-based rigor, now requested at several major journals. While Yammarino and colleagues (Dionne et al., 2012; Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005) have produced levels of analysis reviews of leadership research in the past, those reviews were not limited to publications within *LQ*, and those reviews were focused on specific and particular leadership paradigms (i.e., transformational and charisma leadership only in 2012; and 17 classic leadership models in 2005).

The current review differs in that every research article ever published in *LQ* is assessed, regardless of the model or paradigm represented in the research. As *LQ* is regarded as the top journal in leadership research (Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney, & Cogliser, 2010), a comprehensive review of all articles published within *LQ* can provide a proxy for the current state-of-the-science view regarding levels of analysis issues within the leadership literature. The current review assessed the “health” of levels of analysis within *LQ*'s portion of leadership research and therefore differs from prior reviews in its singular focus on *LQ* as the publication outlet. However, prior reviews that examined publication sources other than *LQ* enable a comparison regarding the state of levels of analysis in the leadership field within *LQ* and outside of *LQ*.

Levels of analysis assessment here proceeded based on criteria applied in prior levels of analysis reviews (Dionne, Chun, et al., 2012; Yammarino et al., 2005). Specifically, the assessment addressed four key questions related to levels of analysis

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