



The enactment of plural leadership in a health and social care network: The influence of institutional context

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ABSTRACT

In this article we employ developments in social network analysis (SNA), specifically the p^* model, to examine the enactment of plural leadership within, and across, hierarchical levels and organizational boundaries (Denis et al., 2012). Drawing on an empirical study of an inter-professional, inter-organizational network (number of nodes = 23) that delivers health and social care, we address two research gaps: (i) the effect of power relations, derived from professional hierarchy, upon spread of plural leadership; and (ii) the effect of formal leadership, derived from managerial accountability, in channeling the spread of plural leadership for coherent strategic effect. We show that, in a routine situation, the network is characterized by generalized leadership exchanges. In this situation, professional hierarchy and managerial accountability are not visible, nor is channeling of plural leadership by the formal leader. In a non-routine situation, when a disruptive event occurs, the network is characterized by restricted exchange. In this situation, professional hierarchy and managerial accountability are evident, and a formal leader channels plural leadership.

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Scholars' increasing interest in "leadership in the plural" is a response to the critique of more individualistic, heroic notions of leadership associated with transformational organizational change (Fletcher, 2004; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Plural leadership (henceforth PL) focuses, "on the need to distribute tasks and responsibilities of leadership up, down, and across the hierarchy ... [articulates] leadership as a social process that occurs in and through human interactions ... [and focuses upon] the more mutual, less hierarchical leadership practices and skills needed to engage collaborative, collective learning" (Fletcher, 2004: 650).

In studying PL, Denis, Langley, and Sergi (2012: 211–12) suggest that "future research might pay more attention to social network perspectives ... [and] to the role of power", and identify four distinct streams of scholarship examining PL. Our study is located within the third stream, which refers to work that has examined how leadership may be handed over between people from one hierarchical level over time as well as across intra-organizational and inter-organizational boundaries (Buchanan et al., 2007; Chreim, Williams, Janz, & Dastmalchian, 2010; Currie, Lockett, & Suhomlinova, 2009; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Martin, Currie, & Finn, 2009). This is the stream most closely associated with inter-organizational collaboration in professionalized, public services contexts. Within this stream of research, Denis et al. (2012: 253) call for "greater attention [to] the role of power in understanding how leadership works and what this means when it is spread over organizations and across their boundaries." Alongside this, within their review of empirical studies within this stream of PL research, Denis et al. (2012) highlight that it is not clear how professional hierarchy and formal managerial accountability shape patterns of power to channel (or not) the spread of PL for strategic effect. Our empirical study of inter-organizational collaboration through a network in a professionalized, public service context addresses this research gap. Aligned with Provan and Kenis (2008), we take a broader focus upon

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inter-organizational networks as a group or collective dynamic, rather than individualistic or agency perspective, what Powell, White, Koput, and Owen-Smith (2005, 1133) referred to as, “illuminating the structure of collective action”.

Drawing on a case of a health and social care network children's safeguarding board, we studied two episodes of PL at time points 2007 and 2010, which exemplify a routine situation and non-routine situation (following a disruptive event as detailed below), and employed social network analysis (SNA) to examine PL (see: Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006; Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Contractor, DeChurch, Carson, Carter, & Keegan, 2012; Mehra, Dixon, Brass, & Roberston, 2006; Mehra, Smith, Dixon, & Robertson, 2006; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997; Uzzi, 1996, 1997). Employing SNA enables us to focus on specifically how leadership is enacted by each actor in a network, and with whom. In doing so we are able to examine the patterns of leadership interactions in a formalized manner, and account for the institutional context in which actors are located (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006; Brass, 2001; Carson et al., 2007; Contractor et al., 2012; Mehra, Dixon, et al., 2006; Mehra, Smith, et al., 2006) using p^* models (Pattison & Wasserman, 1999; Robins, Snijders, Wang, Hancock, & Pattison, 2007; Wasserman & Pattison, 1996).

In between the two time points in which we studied PL, the health and social care network (children's safeguarding board) was struck by an unanticipated “disruptive event”. Specifically, three teenage girls died from anorexia within a short period of time (Fall 2008), which dramatically shifted the network from a routine to a non-routine situation. The disruptive event rendered visible the spread of PL across two very different network contexts, and created a unique window through which we were able to examine episodes of PL across routine and non-routine situations.

Plural leadership

Our interest lies in understanding the spread of leadership, or, “how leadership may be handed over between people from one hierarchical level to another over time, as well as across intra-organizational and inter-organizational boundaries” (Denis et al., 2012: 213). In considering this, Huxham and Vangen (2000) suggest that inter-professional and inter-organizational collaboration in pluralistic settings may be characterized by strategic inertia, because leadership is fragmented. Although leadership activities clearly affect the outcomes of the collaboration, those leading are frequently thwarted by structural dilemmas and difficulties, so the outcomes are not what they intended. While rich in empirical detail, Huxham and Vangen (2000) did not provide a theorization of the spread of leadership, which takes account of power relations (Denis et al., 2012).

Buchanan et al. (2007) also appear to ignore power, reflected in the assertion that the spread of leadership for strategic change in pluralistic settings is characterized by “nobody in charge”. They argue that formal channeling of PL is not necessary, and might even be harmful. In contrast, Chreim et al. (2010) argue for formal channeling of leadership in pluralized settings, to have a coherent effect upon strategic change. Crosby and Bryson (2010) are supportive of the stance taken by Chreim et al. (2010) towards co-ordination of pluralized leadership. In the face of these competing views, studies need to consider how important formalization of leadership roles and structures might be to the whole concept of PL (Denis et al., 2012).

Meanwhile, Gronn (2002) outlines an idealistic model of distributed leadership, a concept that represents the historical forerunner to interest in spread of leadership within pluralistic settings (Denis et al., 2012). While derived from the single organizational unit of the school, the model exhibits little concern for structures of professional organization or managerial accountability. In later work, cognizant of structures of professional organization and managerial accountability, Gronn (2009, 2011) calls, first, for clarification of the role and influence of any formal leader, as leadership is spread. Second, he calls for more attention to the interplay of both macro and micro-level factors, with some concern for temporary and enduring leadership features. Yet, even in later work, Gronn remains wedded to the idea that distributed leadership has a concerted effect, and downplays power and contestation as leadership is spread (Denis et al., 2012). In contrast, Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2004), argue that leadership does not have to be concerted, but can be contested among stakeholders, so its' effect fragments, rather than channels pluralization. It is not that PL “disappears”, indeed Denis et al. (2012) suggest that PL is always present in inter-organizational, professionalized, public service settings. Rather, the spread of PL might be more widespread or less widespread and more channeled. Drawing the extant literature together, examining the spread of PL, Denis et al. (2012) highlight that power is rarely mentioned, and suggest that scholars need to attend to how power channels PL.

Addressing Denis et al.'s (2012) call, we examine how leadership spreads in a pluralistic setting. We analyze how more formal leadership channels PL for a coherent strategic effect. We now outline the application of SNA to the study of PL, which enables us to examine the spread of leadership taking account of power relations.

Applying social network theory to plural leadership

Denis et al. (2012) suggest that future research on PL should draw upon insights provided by SNA. PL should be viewed as a specific type of social network, in much the same vein as advice and friendship networks (Contractor et al., 2012), and therefore, open to the same network analytic methods. Indeed, a precedent for the use of SNA in studying PL can be seen in a small, yet growing, number of empirical studies (Carson et al., 2007; Dansereau, 1995; Davis & Greve, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Mayo, Meindl, & Pastor, 2003).

SNA is particularly well suited to studying PL, as it renders visible patterns of leadership interactions within a network, and allows for the possibility that there can be multiple leaders (Brass & Krackhardt, 1999; Contractor et al., 2012). In addition, SNA has the potential to describe, in fine-grained detail, the structure of PL (Mayo et al., 2003; Mehra, Dixon, et al., 2006). Finally, it is also possible to examine the patterns of PL among individuals at several levels including, the dyadic, extra-dyadic and whole

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