



## Introduction to the special issue: Longitudinal studies of leadership development

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### ABSTRACT

This introduction provides an overview of *The Leadership Quarterly* special issue on *Longitudinal Studies of Leadership Development*. The purposes of the special issue were to highlight research on the precursors of adult leadership, and to emphasize the importance of longitudinal designs and *long-lens* approaches to the study of leadership. In addition to shedding light on variables that impact the development of leadership, many of the studies in this special issue make use of important longitudinal databases that can be tapped for future research on leadership development across the lifespan.

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Anyone interested in leaders and leadership has likely asked the question of how leadership develops. How do individual characteristics and qualities, such as intelligence, temperament and personality, influence the development of leaders? What roles do early life experiences, parenting, and the larger environment play in the creation of leaders in later life? Do leader development efforts in educational settings, ranging from elementary and high school, through university (and beyond), help in developing leaders in organizations and communities? These questions, and others, are the focus of this special issue.

The purpose of this special issue was twofold:

First, we wanted to highlight research on the early precursors to adult leadership. We sought longitudinal investigations of young people followed over time with some assessments of their attainment of leadership positions in adolescence or early adulthood, or of their leadership potential as adults. We also hoped to bring developmental theories and perspectives to the study of early leader development. This special issue has several articles that are focused on long-term, longitudinal datasets following participants from childhood through early adulthood.

Second, we tried to emphasize the importance of longitudinal designs in leadership research, generally, and research on leadership development, in particular. The vast majority of studies of early leader development are retrospective, cross-sectional comparisons of individuals of different age groups, or very short-term longitudinal designs (e.g., across a few weeks, a single semester, or a few months). The studies in this special issue for the most part look at leadership development over a longer time period—sometimes, across decades.

### 1. Developmental perspectives on leadership

Popper and Mayseless (2007) suggest that to develop as a leader, an individual needs to have the *potential* to lead, the *motivation* to lead, and that certain developmental processes and experiences need to happen. Looking historically at leadership research, nearly all of the early focus was on the *potential to lead*—searching for predictors of leadership. In particular, there has been great interest in the traits that predict leadership. For instance, intelligence as a predictor of leadership has been studied for nearly 80 years (Bass & Bass 2008). Moreover, nearly every possible trait, from height and physical attractiveness, to intelligence

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and a myriad of personality variables, has been investigated as a possible predictor of leadership. More recently, meta-analyses of numerous studies on trait predictors of leadership (e.g., Bono & Judge 2004; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt 2002) have centered on the Big Five and these results suggest that certain traits (most notably Extraversion, Openness to Experience, and Neuroticism/Emotional Stability) do indeed predict leadership (both in terms of attainment of positions of leadership and leader effectiveness). Some of the studies in this special issue also investigate the role that traits play in later leader emergence. However, these new investigations are longitudinal in nature, stretching back from youth into early adulthood. These studies extend our understanding of the role that traits play in predicting leadership in later life.

Motivation is a foundational construct in developmental psychology. In the leadership literature, the study of motivation has primarily focused on using motivation-like traits, as predictors of leadership. For example, achievement motivation and power motivation have both been linked to managerial/leadership success (e.g., McClelland & Boyatzis 1982; Winter 2002). A newer topic in the leadership literature is *motivation to lead* (e.g., Avolio & Gibbons 1988; Chan & Drasgow 2001). Clearly, this motivation to lead has its roots in childhood, and this special issue presents a study that focuses specifically on how early motivation relates to leadership in later life. In addition, several papers consider adult motivation to lead as a critical element in the emergence and effectiveness of leaders.

From a developmental psychology perspective, family structure and parenting have an enormous influence on later life development. It is widely believed, as suggested by Popper and Mayseless (2007), that an emotionally stable home environment and supportive parenting are important for later leadership development. Indeed, retrospective studies of adults have suggested that there is a connection between quality parenting and leadership (Avolio, Rotundo, & Walumbwa 2009). Studies in this special issue begin to explore family environment's effects on later leadership development using a longitudinal methodology.

Early (and later) life experiences play a critical role in the development of leadership. Exposing children and adolescents to experiences that promote self-management and emotional control, social skill development, team skills, and early leadership experiences (e.g., class monitor, teacher's helper) may foster later leader development. The role of early experiences in leadership development is considered in depth in a conceptual paper in this special issue and is touched on in several papers, but this area clearly needs to be further explored in future research.

## 2. Longitudinal research designs and databases

From the first course taken in research methods onward, we are taught the value of longitudinal research, particularly for understanding complex behavioral processes and for understanding human relationships. Leadership involves both complex behavior and complex, interconnected interpersonal relationships. Yet, very little research on leadership utilizes longitudinal data. In fact, a difficulty with this special issue was the paucity of longitudinal databases and unpublished longitudinal designs. Many scholars who are interested in leadership development were contacted, but few had access to longitudinal data. So a critical criterion for inclusion in this special issue was that the studies had to focus on leadership development and had to be longitudinal, or long-term, in design, occurring over a significant time span.

Several of the papers in this special issue make use of three important longitudinal databases. The first is the U.S. Department of Labor's National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79), that followed young people who were born between 1957 and 1964, and were first interviewed in 1979. Although this database has been used to examine career trajectories and work-related outcomes (Fuller 2008; Judge & Hurst 2008). The article by Li, Arvey, and Song, represents one of the first studies looking at leadership variables (i.e., leader role occupancy) in this valuable database.

The second important database is the West Point longitudinal database of cadets. Since 2001, there has been a concerted effort on the part of the United States Military Academy to collect longitudinal data on the development of cadets. The obvious advantage of this database is the "captive" nature of the participants, both while they are at the Academy, and in the potential to follow these participants over time beyond their graduation from the USMA. Additionally, a large number and variety of high-quality assessments can be obtained from the cadets, as they enter and progress through the program. The paper by Harms, Spain, and Hannah demonstrates the potential of using this longitudinal database to address very interesting leadership questions and, in particular, to study the impact of specific leadership interventions over a multi-year timeframe.

The third important database derives from the Fullerton Longitudinal Study (FLS). This is a particularly rich dataset consisting of a research program begun in 1979 with 130 one-year-olds and their families. These children were assessed semi-annually for the first four years, and then annually until they were 17 years of age. An additional brief survey was completed at 24 years of age and the final survey, focusing on employment and leadership, was conducted at 29 years of age. During these 20 assessments, an enormous number of variables were collected from the participants, their parents, as well as observational data and records of academic performance. The great strength of this database from a leadership perspective is its depth and scope of measurement, and the participants represent a general population, as opposed to one that was chosen for leadership potential and/or development.

## 3. The special issue

In organizing this collection, we begin with a conceptual paper by Murphy and Johnson that discusses many of the early "seeds" of leader development. These include the aforementioned traits, the role of parenting, but also consider the role that sports, early education, and even birth order may play in developing leaders and leadership potential. Murphy and Johnson also present a conceptual model of the process of early leader development.

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