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## Leveraging a team-centric approach to diagnosing multiteam system functioning: The role of intrateam state profiles<sup>☆</sup>

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### A B S T R A C T

The increased reliance on team-based structures within 21st century organizations has sparked a stream of research investigating the drivers of collaboration within and across multiteam systems (MTS), comprised of distinct, interdependent component teams. To date, MTS research tends to rely on the simplified—and potentially inaccurate—assumption that component teams within a MTS are homogenous with regard to their emergent intrateam properties (e.g., team attitudes, behaviors, cognitions). We suggest that team-centric approaches may better characterize the ways in which emergent intrateam properties might vary across different MTS component teams—operationalized with what we term ‘intrateam state profiles.’ Leveraging cancer care MTSs as an illustrative example, we detail the need for team-centric approaches as complementary to traditional, variable-centric approaches to studying collective phenomena. Specifically, we explore intrateam state profiles as a mechanism for understanding complex interactions of emergent properties within teams that may profoundly affect system functioning and associated HRM practices.

### 1. Introduction

Across a variety of contexts (e.g., healthcare, emergency response, business, military, scientific collaboration, space exploration) organizations are increasingly relying on interdependent collective entities comprised of two or more teams, known as multiteam systems (i.e., MTSs; Mathieu, Marks, & Zaccaro, 2001), to accomplish important, complex, and interdisciplinary challenges (Shuffler, Jimenez-Rodriguez, & Kramer, 2015; Zaccaro, Marks, & DeChurch, 2012). MTSs are assembled or emerge with the assumption that synergistic efforts across multiple component teams are needed to achieve one or more shared superordinate goal(s). However, as is often the case within single teams (Steiner, 1972), the MTS ‘whole’ is not always greater than the sum of its constituent team ‘parts.’ MTSs often struggle to align efforts across component teams and may experience between-team process losses that detract from

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system performance (e.g., communication breakdowns, misunderstandings, conflict, and/or distrust between teams; [Lacerenza, Rico, Salas, & Shuffler, 2014](#); [Luciano, DeChurch, & Mathieu, 2015](#); [Shuffler et al., 2015](#)). Thus, a primary goal of MTS research has been to identify drivers of collaboration and coordination processes—within, but especially across, multiple component teams—related to MTS effectiveness.

Conducting MTS research presents numerous challenges in terms of theory (e.g., specifying appropriate levels of analysis for key phenomena; [Aiken & Hanges, 2012](#)), data collection (e.g., collecting sufficient samples of comparable systems; [Resick, Burke, & Doty, 2012](#); capturing sufficiently high-resolution interactions; [Aiken & Hanges, 2012](#)), and analyses (e.g., [Coen & Schnackenberg, 2012](#)), requiring researchers to make certain simplifying assumptions as they investigate specific aspects of multiteam functioning. For example, most prior empirical studies of MTS effectiveness have focused on how top-down and system-wide strategies or interventions uniformly produce desired effects across a system as a whole (e.g., interteam-coordination; [Davison, Hollenbeck, Barnes, Slesman, & Ilgen, 2012](#); [DeChurch & Marks, 2006](#); system-wide shared mental models; [Murase, Carter, DeChurch, & Marks, 2014](#)). These prior studies relied on the simplifying assumption that the teamwork processes (e.g., information sharing norms, conflict management styles, backup behaviors) and psychological states (e.g., team trust, team cohesion, collective efficacy, shared mental models, [Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006](#)) that emerge and evolve within component teams (i.e., emergent intrateam properties) are—or should be—fairly homogenous across different teams in the same system.

However, MTS theory affirms that each component team in a MTS is actually characterized by its own set of unique features, including, but not limited to, the team's composition, expertise, contributions, norms, goals, and organizational constraints ([Luciano et al., 2015](#); [Zaccaro et al., 2012](#)). As a result of unique team features, the emergent properties characterizing one component team in a MTS can be very different from those of another team in the same system. Importantly, there may be certain emergent properties within teams, or combinations of intrateam properties (e.g., high levels of team cohesion and low levels of team conflict) within and across teams that pose problems for interteam collaboration and MTS performance.

Herein lies a major challenge for moving the human resource management (HRM) of MTSs forward: by primarily focusing on top-down practices (e.g., selection, training, organizational design) targeting system dynamics as a whole and assuming homogeneity of emergent properties across teams, the existing MTS empirical evidence base does not clarify how intrateam properties might differentially manifest in component teams, nor how these differences might result in more complex or challenging interteam interactions across systems. In the long run, discounting the ways in which emergent processes and states manifest differentially across teams, and in turn, ignoring the effects of intrateam properties on interteam dynamics, could reduce the practical effectiveness of our HRM practices by leaving important boundary-conditions under-investigated.

In this review, we advance the use of team-centric approaches ([O'Neill, McLarnon, Hoffart, Woodley, & Allen, 2015](#); [O'Neill & McLarnon, 2017](#)) in MTS contexts as one way of capturing the complexities of emergent properties within MTS component teams—operationalized with what we term their 'intrateam state profiles'—while also mitigating some of the complexity involved in studying these properties. Traditionally, organizational research has relied on variable-centric approaches to conceptualize and study individual and collective phenomena. Such approaches focus on the independent effects of different predictor variables on outcomes. For example, variable-centric research on teams has examined the effects of mean levels of task conflict, relationship conflict, and process conflict on team performance, treating these variables as if they exist independently from one another. In contrast, person- or team-centric approaches holistically examine multiple properties of individuals or groups simultaneously and assume that there are qualitatively distinct patterns in mean levels across these properties that tend to appear naturally. For instance, [O'Neill et al. \(2015\)](#) applied a team-centric lens to identify commonly occurring latent patterns, or 'profiles,' of team conflict. Their findings indicate that certain levels of task, relationship, and process conflict tend to coexist in teams and suggest a meaningful way for managers or consultants to diagnose teams with regard to multiple interrelated constructs.

We extend foundational work on these approaches to suggest that MTS researchers can leverage team-centric approaches and profiles to better diagnose the variations of internal properties of MTS component teams (i.e., their intrateam state profiles). In turn, intrateam state profiles can be used to investigate how emergent properties of component teams might facilitate (or hinder) interteam collaboration and MTS success. In the following, we first review the limitations of current theoretical and methodological paradigms for diagnosing emergent properties of MTS component teams. Then, we advance the use of team-centric approaches within MTS research. In closing, we offer propositions and directions for future research and practice.

## 2. Theoretical & empirical foundations: emergent properties in multiteam systems

In this section, we set the context for our review and advancement of a team-centric approach to incorporating emergent properties of component teams into research on MTS functioning. First, to ground the concepts presented in this review, as well as highlight their practical implications, we leverage an exemplar MTS context, comprised of multiple teams who are each involved in ensuring the effective treatment of a patient diagnosed with cancer. Then, we evaluate extant approaches used to examine emergent intrateam properties in MTSs, highlighting the limitations of predominant variable-centric approaches for understanding multiple, co-existing, collective constructs. For our purposes, the examples of cancer care MTSs presented are meant to be illustrative in nature and are not descriptive of all types of cancer care MTSs. Importantly, we utilize published sources describing cancer care MTSs (e.g., [Gerber et al., 2016](#); [Weaver, 2016](#)) and constructs identified as important to general MTS functioning (e.g., [Luciano et al., 2015](#); [Shuffler et al., 2015](#)) to ground our example.

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