



## Leadership theory and research in the new millennium: Current theoretical trends and changing perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

Scholarly research on the topic of leadership has witnessed a dramatic increase over the last decade, resulting in the development of diverse leadership theories. To take stock of established and developing theories since the beginning of the new millennium, we conducted an extensive qualitative review of leadership theory across 10 top-tier academic publishing outlets that included *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *American Psychologist*, *Journal of Management*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Organizational Science*, and *Personnel Psychology*. We then combined two existing frameworks (Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney, & Cogliser, 2010; Lord & Dinh, 2012) to provide a process-oriented framework that emphasizes both forms of emergence and levels of analysis as a means to integrate diverse leadership theories. We then describe the implications of the findings for future leadership research and theory.

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### 1. Introduction

Since its inception in 1988 (first issue in 1990), the mission of *The Leadership Quarterly* (*LQ*) has been to sustain and catalyze the development of innovative, multi-disciplinary research that advances the leadership field. Nearly 25 years later, this goal, along with many of the journal's other primary objectives, has been reached (Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney, & Cogliser, 2010). As Gardner and colleagues noted in their 20-year review of *LQ*, leadership research has grown exponentially in the last decade, attracting the interest of talented scholars and practitioners from around the globe who have revolutionized the way we understand leadership phenomena. As their review demonstrates, the number of new leadership theories has grown and the field has advanced from theory that focuses on understanding general leadership processes as they occur over indeterminate amounts of time to a phenomenon that evolves over different time spans depending on the hierarchical level at which leaders are investigated (Kaiser, Hogan, & Craig, 2008). Theories have also developed to understand how micro processes, such as perceptions, emotions, and cognitions (e.g., Bono & Ilies, 2006; Dinh & Lord, 2012; Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000; Trichas & Schyns, 2012), and macro processes, such as the social-relational context (Chang & Johnson, 2010; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Erdogan, Kraimer, & Liden, 2007; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997), dynamically affect follower and leader outcomes. Over the last two decades, leadership scholars have also developed theories to explain a leader's role within complex

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systems for instigating organizational change and managing dynamic social networks (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006; Balkundi, Kilduff, & Harrison, 2011; Hannah, Lord, & Pearce, 2011; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2002; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009).

Although the growing diversity of leadership theory has helped create an academic agenda for leadership research in the new millennium, we maintain that there are several challenges that accompany the rapid proliferation of new theoretical perspectives. In this article, we provide a critical review of leadership theory that has emerged since 2000, and we describe the challenges that scholars and practitioners must address to further advance the leadership field. Our search included theories from nine other top-tier journals in addition to *LQ*, allowing us to offer a broader and more comprehensive review of the topics that have captured the attention of leadership scholars. Rather than provide a detailed summary of the theories that have been identified, this article focuses on addressing one fundamental process-centered issue that is germane to all theories: *how has leadership theory and research contributed to our understanding of the processes by which antecedent elements affect outcomes pertaining to leaders, followers, or organizational phenomena?*

We believe that attention to processes is important for the following reasons. First, understanding leadership processes can help illustrate the limitations of current theory, and it can assist in the development of a more comprehensive agenda for leadership research in the new millennium with direct relevance to organizational practice (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013). This is important because leadership is a complex phenomenon that operates across multiple levels of analysis (Cho & Dansereau, 2010; Wang & Howell, 2010), involves multiple mediating and moderating factors (e.g., DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011), and takes place over substantial periods of time (Day & Sin, 2011; Lord & Brown, 2004). However, leadership scholars have more often focused on the isolated effects of leaders or followers at one or another level of analysis and within short time intervals. Such a static approach is reflected in scholarly work on leadership, which has predominantly relied on cross-sectional retrospective survey methodologies (Gardner et al., 2010; Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007; Lowe & Gardner, 2000). This approach ignores the cumulated effects of transitory processes, such as emotions, thoughts, reactions, and embodied cognitions, which can fundamentally alter leader development and behavioral outcomes (Day & Sin, 2011; Lord, Hannah, & Jennings, 2011).

Second, leadership dynamics involve multiple levels and can produce both top-down and bottom-up emergent outcomes at higher and lower levels of analysis (Yammarino & Dansereau, 2011; Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005). For example, by shaping organizational climates and cultures, leaders can create ethical norms that guide the moral (or immoral) behavior of groups or collectives in a top-down direction (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes, & Salvador, 2009; Schaubroeck, Hannah, Avolio, Kozlowski, Lord, et al., 2012). Simultaneously, leaders may also appeal directly to individuals by aligning followers' values and identities to those of the organization (Brown & Treviño, 2009), enforcing codes of conduct (Tyler & Blader, 2005), or by modeling ethical (or unethical) behavior (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Although these processes reflect top-down leadership influences, bottom-up processes, such as the influence of followers and intrapersonal dynamics, are also important in understanding how leaders influence organizations and how leadership outcomes are achieved (Dinh & Lord, 2012; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2002; Shamir, 2007). For example, research on meta-cognitive processes and self-complexity describes how dynamic intra-personal constructs can interact over time to increase intrapersonal complexity, which allows individuals to have greater behavioral adaptability in response to varying situations (Hannah, Woolfolk, & Lord, 2009; Lord et al., 2011). At higher levels of analysis, individual complexity allows a variety of social networks to develop into valuable organizational resources (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006; Balkundi et al., 2011), and it can produce group complexity when team members interact, thereby creating more complex knowledge structures that guide group behavior (Hannah et al., 2011). At this level, group processes can also aggregate to create intangible organizational resources like social capital (Polyhart & Moliterno, 2011). As these examples show, leadership involves the contribution of multiple actors and bidirectional influence (top-down and bottom-up) that unfolds along different time scales (from minutes to years). Therefore, leadership theory that is narrowly confined to one level of analysis presents an overly restricted static understanding of leadership phenomena.

Third, prior research indicates that we know much less about how leaders make organizations effective than how leaders are perceived (Kaiser et al., 2008). We believe this dearth of knowledge on how leaders create effective organizations stems from a focus on leaders and their qualities rather than on how they change processes in other individuals, groups, or organizations. To address these issues in leadership research and theory, this article expands upon an existing classification scheme that was developed by Gardner et al. (2010) and the framework developed by Lord and Dinh (2012, described in Section 3), which maintains that a key aspect of leadership is to structure the way that the inputs of others are combined to produce organizational outputs. The advantage of these classification schemes is that they offer unique insight for organizing theory based on underlying leadership processes (Lord & Dinh, 2012) and have been successful in organizing leadership research (Gardner et al., 2010; Lowe & Gardner, 2000). By integrating these two classification schemes, we provide several additional contributions to the leadership literature.

Though abstract, addressing the nature of emergence provides a set of conceptual tools that can be used at any level of analysis, and it offers the potential for discovering leadership principles that apply at multiple levels. For example, focusing on each theory's underlying process enables us to organize the extant literature by identifying commonalities among theories. These commonalities may then suggest deeper principles that unite disparate leadership theories. In addition, a framework that can organize theory by levels of analysis is critical because leadership occurs within a social context created by individuals, groups, and larger organizational systems, and the nature of leadership processes may vary with each level. Hence, attention to both levels and process can promote a richer understanding of how simultaneously occurring phenomenon at different levels of analysis interact to influence leadership. Finally, such issues have practical as well as scholarly implications. Currently, practitioners wanting to use scientific research to improve organizational leadership processes must select from a bewildering array of theories that focus on

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