

# Multi-level nature of and multi-level approaches to leadership

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## Abstract

This introduction provides an overview to *The Leadership Quarterly* Special Issue on *Multi-Level Approaches to Leadership*. Building on the last such Special Issue more than a decade ago and a recent *Yearly Review* article [Yammarino, F. J., Dionne, S. D., Chun, J. U., & Dansereau, F. (2005). Leadership and levels of analysis: A state-of-the-science review. *Leadership Quarterly*, 16, 879–919], we focus on the multi-level nature of leadership and highlight the contributions of six articles that offer various multi-level conceptual and methodological approaches to leadership.

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## 1. Introduction

In the leadership literature, multi-level approaches were brought to the forefront of research more than two decades ago in the work of Dansereau, Alutto, & Yammarino (1984). They noted the importance of clearly specifying the level (s) of analysis at which phenomena are expected to exist theoretically. They also stated that it is critical to ensure that the measurement of constructs and data analytic techniques correspond to the asserted level(s) of analysis so that inference drawing is not misleading or artifactual. More than one decade ago, when one of us (F. Yammarino) was Senior Editor of *The Leadership Quarterly*, the other of us (F. Dansereau) was commissioned to develop a two-part Special Issue on 13 multi-level approaches to leadership. Subsequently, we edited and published a two-volume research monograph (Dansereau & Yammarino, 1998a, 1998b) focusing on these multi-level approaches to leadership. The 13 original Special Issue articles were reprinted in the monograph; and (1) key measurement instruments for each leadership approach, (2) two commentaries on each original article, and (3) replies by the original article authors to the commentaries on their work were added to complete the monograph.

More recently, Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau (2005), in a *Yearly Review* article, sought to review the state of the science in regard to leadership and levels of analysis work for 17 leadership approaches. These authors reviewed and coded nearly 350 leadership publications for the degree of appropriate inclusion and use of levels of

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analysis in theory formulation, construct/variable measurement, data analytic techniques, and inference drawing. Yammarino et al. (2005) concluded that the state of the science for leadership and levels of analysis, while representing an encouraging improvement over that seen during the previous two decades, remains far from adequate. Unfortunately, relatively few studies (about 9%) in any of the areas of leadership research that were reviewed had addressed levels of analysis issues appropriately in theory, measurement, data analysis, and inference drawing.

As Guest Editors, we sought to develop this Special Issue of *The Leadership Quarterly* on *Multi-Level Approaches to Leadership* with the goal of fostering the development of multi-level approaches to leadership in both theory generation and theory testing. In our *Call for Papers*, we sought articles that explicitly incorporated levels of analysis issues and approaches in conceptualization, measurement, data analysis, and inference drawing. Moreover, we encouraged the submission of quantitative or qualitative empirical articles; integrative research reviews and meta-analyses; theoretical, conceptual, and methodological articles; and research and conceptual notes. Six articles survived the review and revision process and are published in this Special Issue.

In this introductory article to *Multi-Level Approaches to Leadership*, we first provide a simplified multi-level perspective on the nature of leadership. Next, we briefly preview and highlight the key aspects and contributions of the six articles that appear in this Special Issue. Finally, we present an overview of some key themes and conclusions found within these articles based on the work of Yammarino et al. (2005) and the multi-level perspective on leadership in this introduction.

## 2. Multi-level perspective on the nature of leadership

Despite the fact that leadership seems to be inherently multi-level, to date there has been limited progress in the development of multi-level theories and the use of multi-level methods (see, for example, Yammarino et al., 2005). The reasons for the lack of widespread acceptance of this characteristic of leadership are not clear. Nevertheless, we will attempt to describe, as briefly as possible, why leadership seems to be inherently multi-level.

We begin with a simple and almost trite saying: Without followers, there can be no leader! When a person leads or follows, the leader and the follower inevitably become interdependent with each other in some way. As a consequence, leaders and followers move from the situation in which each party is considered as an individual to a higher level of analysis where they form at least a dyad or where the leader links with the followers as a group. Thus leadership involves a movement from one level (person level) to a higher level (dyad level or leader–follower group level). When the scenario is viewed from this perspective, a key issue becomes those characteristics of the leaders and the followers that might link and move them to a higher level of analysis. One way to think about this linkage is in terms of the leaders and the followers both separately and in combination—that is, as leaders, followers, and linkages.

### 2.1. Leaders

Leaders can be viewed as individuals with various traits and personalities, who exhibit the same or at least similar behaviors toward all individuals; this perspective has been called the average leadership style (ALS) approach (see Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975). Alternatively, leaders can treat subordinates on a relativistic basis such that some members of a group are viewed as in-group members and others are viewed as out-group members (see Dansereau et al., 1975; Schriesheim, Neider, & Scandura, 1998); this perspective is often termed the vertical dyad linkage (VDL) approach. Finally, Dansereau et al. (1995) have shown that leaders may treat followers on a one-to-one, individual basis. In this approach, which is termed individualized leadership (IL), the way a leader treats one follower has no relationship to how the leader treats another follower.

To summarize, there are potentially three views of the leader: ALS, VDL, and IL. All three views may apply to a particular situation.

### 2.2. Followers

In terms of followers, individuals may be viewed in at least three different ways (see Dansereau et al., 1984; Dansereau, Cho, & Yammarino, 2006; Dansereau & Yammarino, 2006; Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994). The independent individual view holds that individuals operate as independent individuals and are not part of a group. Followers can also form either of two types of groups. From a wholes perspective, followers can be viewed as forming

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