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What *is* colleagueship, actually? – A look at 25 years of research

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Summary

Leadership is traditionally predominantly defined as a leader-centered and individual activity. Role of colleagueship, the phenomenon of leadership among colleagues, who might hold relatively equal positions in an organizational hierarchy, remains underexplored in organization research. This paper diverges from prevailing leader-driven approaches and emphasizes the role of each colleague at the workplace. The research question guiding our inquiry is: What is known in previous literature on colleagueship at the workplace? Our paper offers the preliminary findings from a systematic review of extant literature in management and organization research. Our findings indicate that whilst colleagueship itself is not researched, it is researched under the terms 'coworker' or 'colleague'. In addition, colleagueship appears to be indirectly researched as part of other organizational themes and as an implication in organizational life. The contribution of our paper is in recognizing an opportunity to introduce the concept of colleagueship into management and organization research.

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Introduction

In prevailing research, leadership is predominantly defined as a leader-centered and individual activity. Despite the recent emergence of alternatives as regards shared, distributed or plural leadership (Bolden, 2011; Denis et al., 2012), the discussion still seems to revolve around the question of how appointed individuals lead their subordinates and organizations toward high performance (Abreu Pederzini, 2018). In other words, leaders, thus considered as exceptional individuals and top performers, even heroes, are placed on the pedestal. One might say that the concept of leadership is considered synonymous to an individual leader (Wood, 2005). What is more, by promoting individual performers' roles toward their organization's outcome, leadership research can be argued to encourage a competitive work atmosphere. This perspective views organizations as competitive arenas between colleagues, and performance as a sum of individual efforts rather than as a synergetic outcome.

Alongside this individual-centrism, interest in leadership as a relational activity and as a socially constructed and bottom-up phenomenon has raised awareness of the role of followers. Notwithstanding, the notion of followership has received increasing research attention (Collinson, 2006). Despite these developments that have led to acknowledging leadership as enacted via a multiplicity of individuals, the hierarchical roles of leaders and followers still tend to be taken as the starting point. In turn, the phenomenon of leadership among colleagues, who might hold relatively equal positions in an organizational hierarchy, remains relatively underexplored. This might partially be due to the critique that this stream of leadership research has received. According to critics, while researching everyday leadership, where the focus is on subtle, everyday actions and collegial relations, the phenomenon in question is not considered as leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003).

All the while, colleagueship is arguably important. Contemporary organizations are increasingly dependent on competent and committed human resources (Becker et al., 1997; Hatch & Dyer, 2004). In turbulent organizational environments (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997), daily cooperation and peer support between colleagues matters. However, extant research appears not to explicitly focus on the role of colleagues. Prior leadership research has mainly concentrated on the role of leaders and followers, while the question of colleagueship has taken a back seat. This paper diverges from the traditional leader-focused or top-down approaches and, instead, focuses on colleagues at work.

Acknowledging the lack of explicit research on the topic, in this paper we focus on the phenomenon of colleagueship. The main research question guiding our paper is: *What is known in previous literature on colleagueship at the workplace?* Our paper is based on a systematic review of extant literature; in total, our sample encompasses 148 papers published in leading management journals in the period 1992-2017. Our paper is submitted to track 47 - Collegiality as an Alternative Mode of Governance in Organizations - as we propose that colleagueship is critical in collegial professions and organizations. In this developmental paper, we present an early version of our findings for discussion.

Methodology

A three-stage iterative process was conducted in order to systematically review the research published in leading management and organization journals. The structure of the review process was adopted from Theurer et al. (2018, 157), who label the phases as follows *1) identification of the relevant literature, 2) in-depth structural and content-based analysis of*

the literature and 3) integration of articles and clustering into categories to synthesize the research". This short paper offers the preliminary findings from our literature review regarding phases 1-2. Phase 3 is in progress and will be reported at the conference.

Phase 1: identification of relevant literature

The identification of relevant literature was undertaken in three steps. First, we noticed that colleagueship is a relatively new term, which has (via this term) not been systematically examined in management and organization research. Our open search (journal and time span were not limited) yielded only 32 publications using the term "colleagueship" in Scopus. Of those publications, only one result was published in core management and organization journals (see Schneider et al., 1994). Subsequently, we redirected our literature search toward what has been published on parallel concepts.

Since colleagueship is not an established concept in academic research, we then sought to obtain a preliminary understanding of the themes describing or relating to notions paralleling colleagueship. The search was focused on fourteen leading management journals (ABS 3-4* ranked, see Table 1), using the main research databases available.

We scanned the volumes 2013-2017 of these 15 leading management and organization journals, issue by issue, reading and categorizing article titles and abstracts. This preliminary search yielded the following search terms: colleague, coworker OR co-worker, collaborativ* and interpersonal(*). These terms were used in the subsequent search. The scarcity of prior research that directly refers to colleagueship led us to refine our research question to: *What are the conceptual components that describe or may be associated with colleagueship?*

Thirdly, we moved toward a systematic search for papers using the keywords identified in the second phase. The search was limited to the 25-year period from January 1992 to December 2017. The focus was on the fourteen management journals in our sample. The main database used in the first phase searches was Scopus. Because the coverage in Scopus of full texts was not perfect, EBSCO was used for certain journals or time spans. Searches were conducted per search term per journal (per database). The terms were searched in the article title, abstract and keywords. This search resulted in a total of 1116 articles. The results contain articles, reviews, conference papers, book chapters, editorials interviews etc. Because of the vast amount of articles thus identified, we restricted the sample to the search words – co-worker/coworker and colleague – that most directly relates to the colleagueship. The reader is encouraged to refer to Table 1 for an overview of the search results.

Phase 2: thematic analysis

The analysis of the search results proceeded as follows. In a first round of analysis, the identified papers (N=426) were divided between the three researchers (authors), who reviewed the titles and abstracts of the papers. Based on the individual reviews and subsequent joint discussion the papers were classified as relevant or irrelevant; papers not related to colleagueship were discarded from the final sample. Only published research articles were included in the sample, and duplicates were removed from the sample. This resulted in a final sample of 148 papers.

Journal title	Search words used					
	colleagueship	colleague	coworker OR co-worker	collaborativ*	interpersonal	N
Human Relations	0	24	25	18	57	124
Organization	0	5	0	6	4	15
Organization studies	0	19	5	25	7	56
Organization science	0	13	17	41	41	112
Administrative Science Quarterly	0	5	4	8	17	34
Leadership Quarterly	0	5	11	10	32	58
Human Resource Management	0	10	16	7	13	46
Journal of Applied Psychology[1]	1	12	82	5	175	275
Journal of Organizational Behaviour	0	15	57	7	67	146
British Journal of Management	0	8	4	13	7	32
Academy of Management Journal	0	10	24	17	46	97
Journal of Management	0	7	22	7	44	80
Academy of Management Annals (2007-2017)	0	0	1	4	4	9
Academy of Management Executive (1993-2005)	0	3	5	8	11	27
Academy of Management Perspectives (2006-2013)	0	2	1	0	2	5
Total	1	138	274	176	527	1116
Open Search in Scopus	32	54,894	19,635	180,866	194,392	

[1] In the Journal of Applied Psychology for the search term "interpersonal" the search was narrowed down to the years 2012-2017 due to the huge amount of results (n=496) the search yielded in the years 1992-2017.

Table 1. Results of the initial search on conceptual components of colleagueship.

Each paper was then carefully read based on its title and abstract. A thematic analysis strategy was adopted. This resulted in a first categorization of the findings in the form of eight themes, which are social and interpersonal dynamics, affective components, pro- and anti-social behaviors and attitudes, information flow, belongingness, values, similarities and differences, and power and status. It became apparent that many of the preliminary themes bore similarity. Based on the first thematizing exercise, a second round of categorization was conducted in which the preliminary themes were refined and grouped into three wider, more generic meta-themes.

Findings

We start presenting a descriptive overview of our findings. Our results reveal that most articles related to coworkers or colleagues are published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* (25 %) (see Table 2). Altogether, the journals representing the field of psychology (JAP and JOB) contain the highest number of articles on the topics of coworkers or colleagues (47 %). Within the field of organization studies, the journals *Human Relations* (9 %) and *Organization Science* (9 %) are the most relevant journals. *Journal of Management* contains

11 % of the relevant articles. It deserves mention that 81 % of the colleagueship articles are found by using the search word 'coworker' (see Table 3), and only 19% with the search word 'colleague'. It thus appears that the term co-worker is the best proxy for colleagueship in extant research.

Journal title	Field	AJG 2018 ranking	N of articles	%	N/field	%/field
Human Relations	ORG STUD	4	13	9		
Organization	ORG STUD	3	0	0		
Organization studies	ORG STUD	4	7	5		
Organization science	ORG STUD	4*	13	9		
Leadership Quarterly	ORG STUD	4	6	4	39	26
Journal of Applied Psychology	PSYCH (WOP-OB)	4*	37	25		
Journal of Organizational Behaviour	PSYCH (WOP-OB)	4	32	22	69	47
Human Resource Management	HRM&EMP	4	7	5	7	5
Administrative Science Quarterly	ETHICS-CSR-MAN	4*	3	2		
British Journal of Management	ETHICS-CSR-MAN	4	3	2		
Academy of Management Journal	ETHICS-CSR-MAN	4*	8	5		
Journal of Management	ETHICS-CSR-MAN	4*	16	11		
Academy of Management Annals (2007-2017)	ETHICS-CSR-MAN	4	1	1		
Academy of Management Executive (1993-2005)	ETHICS-CSR-MAN	-	2	1		
Academy of Management Perspectives (2006-2013)	ETHICS-CSR-MAN	3	0	0	33	22
TOTAL			148	100	148	100

Table 2. Results of the restricted search per journal.

About two thirds of relevant articles deal with the phenomenon of colleagueship as a part of another established organizational phenomenon, be it social exchange (Bordia et al., 2017) or organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) directed at individuals within the organization (Turnley et al., 2003). The rest approach colleagueship by using more mundane concepts, such as 'daily positive collegial interactions' (McGrath et al. 2017) or compassion at work (Lilius et al, 2018). Nearly half of the articles explored colleagueship using a quantitative research design as an outcome variable, a third as an antecedent, while a minority of the papers apply a qualitative research design or are review-based or conceptual articles.

The interpersonal and social aspects of organizational life were widely represented in the sample. Two of the meta-themes relate to these aspects, i.e. how colleagues 1) interact and 2) build relationships with each other. Coworker interaction is an integral part of everyday organizational life and manifests itself as coworkers' construction of colleagueship (Mik-Meyer, 2016), for example. Colleagueship in workplace relationships are studied through theories such as team-member exchange (TMX) (Farmer et al., 2015) and social networks (Korte & Lin, 2013).

The third meta-theme concentrates on workplace behaviors and attitudes that can have beneficial or harmful consequences. Such effects may be realized at the organizational or the

interpersonal level. The widely researched and well-known areas of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and interpersonal citizenship behavior in particular (e.g. Trougakos et al., 2015) were attached to this theme. The interpersonal perspective within OCB research emphasizes the behavior that is targeted towards colleagues, such as spontaneously and altruistically helping a colleague, who is under exceptionally high work load or alternatively guiding a newcomer (Trougakos et al., 2015).

Journal	Coworker	Colleague	N
Human Relations	11	2	13
Organization	0	0	0
Organization studies	3	5	8
Organization science	10	3	13
Leadership Quarterly	6	0	6
Journal of Applied Psychology	35	2	37
Journal of Organizational Behaviour	27	5	32
Human Resource Management	5	3	8
Administrative Science Quarterly	1	2	3
British Journal of Management	1	2	3
Academy of Management Journal	5	3	8
Journal of Management	14	2	16
Academy of Management Annals (2007-2017)	1	0	1
Academy of Management Executive (1993-2005)	2	0	2
Academy of Management Perspectives (2006-2013)	0	0	0
TOTAL N	**121**	**29**	**150**
%	**81**	**19**	

Table 3. Results of the restricted search per search word.

Conclusions

In this paper, we offer a glimpse into the preliminary findings of our systematic literature review on the role of colleagues at the workplace. Our review shows that whilst colleagueship itself is not researched, it is researched under the terms 'coworker' or 'colleague', with an emphasis on the former. What is more, colleagueship appears to be indirectly researched as part of other organizational themes and as an implication in organizational life. In many cases, articles deal with aspects of colleagueship as implications or as a secondary themes in management or organization related research settings that are not directly linked to colleagueship. In other words, there is little explicit focus on colleagueship as a concept, or its related interpersonal dynamics. Our analysis leads us to observe that colleagueship is perceived as both an inward state, as well as a behavioral attribute in that behavior that can affect the self but also other colleagues.

The main contribution of the paper is in recognizing an opportunity to re-introduce the concept of colleagueship into management and organization research. In this paper, we start taking stock of extant research on the phenomenon of colleagueship via a systematic literature review. Our paper thus extends research by highlighting and tentatively conceptualizing the

notion of colleagueship. In so doing, we bring attention to and emphasize the significance of each organizational member. While we use the concept of colleagueship, we refer to a continuous co-construction process in which acts of colleagueship in everyday actions have a locally supported influence on the collegial social order (see Hosking, 1988). In fact, our notion of colleagueship is comparable with certain aspects of shared leadership. Paralleling developments in leadership research, our focus is not directed at individual leaders and their excellence. Instead, we acknowledge that power is distributed throughout an organization among all of its members.

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