Informal Leadership: An Integrative View and Future Research

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This article presents an integrative view of informal leadership (IL), leadership action and influence without a designated power position, through a systematic literature review. IL contributes to the new ways of organizing work, and it has received increasing interdisciplinary research attention in the last two decades along with the rise of a multi-level approach to leadership research. The integrative view displays IL being entwined around knowledge, change-orientation, action, communication, group, and influence. Findings suggest that IL is beneficial, for example, to group efficacy, productivity, and social relations. Cross-cutting meta-themes are proposed, i.e. shared meaning, volunteering, granted by others, and organizational (in)visibility. Issues related to formal leadership and power seem to have a significant and understudied impact on informal leadership. Considering the interplay between formal, informal, and collectivistic leadership, the power shift is an elemental feature to be explored. Several suggestions for future research are made, for example on the processuality, temporality, and impact of IL. Informal leadership is demonstrated to be a key element in resolving the knots of leadership in the transformation of work. Informal leadership and collectivistic forms of leadership can contribute significantly to seeking solutions in renewing leadership in organizations and guiding them towards responsibility.

Keywords: collectivistic leadership, informal leadership, leadership emergence, literature review

1 Introduction

The fundamental nature of work and organizations is transforming (Contractor et al. 2012). The flattening hierarchies (Yammarino et al. 2012), changing values (Kuzior et al. 2022), and increasing education (OECD 2021) create conditions in which work needs to be reorganized. Expert employees, in particular, are becoming more independent, leader-like, and strategic in their responsibility areas (Dondi et al. 2021). These changing roles and responsibilities are challenging organizations' prevalent hierarchies, leadership structures, and practices. Thus, the current leadership ontology with leaders, followers, and shared goals is no longer sufficient in understanding leadership in organizations in conditions that are increasingly peer-like, changing, and collaborative (Drath et al. 2008). These changes put the roles of managers and employees in parallel change. This change requires new approaches to leadership that go beyond the hierarchical leader-focused view (Friedrich et al. 2016). The collectivistic forms of leadership (Yammarino et al. 2012) utilize both formal and informal leadership in the collective work performed in organizational and inter-organizational contexts.

In general, leadership as a formal position of power has attracted vast research interest (Yammarino 2013). However, organizations are becoming increasingly dependent on leadership skills throughout the organization (Ciuk & Schedlitzki 2021). Thus, it is high time to take a look at the informal side of organizational leadership. The phenomenon of informal leadership occurs and prevails in organizations, networks, and encounters between people, and thus deserves to be studied as a form of leadership in its own right, separated from formal leadership (Wilson 2022). However, so far the topics of informal leadership research seem to have followed the patterns of formal leadership research (see e.g. Yammarino 2013). Informal leadership can be utilized in advancing the new networked reality of work and leadership, and in renewing these perspectives.

This article presents an integrative view of informal leadership through a systematic literature review. In other words, IL is explored from diverse perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The integrative view (see e.g. Wright, Patrick & Snell 1991; Vignoles et al. 2011; Weiser et al. 2020) is produced through a research process in which the literature is evaluated, merged, and reframed "to capture the full richness and complexity" (Vignoles et al. 2011: 10) of the phenomenon. In an era of accelerating knowledge production, there is an increasing need to consolidate and organize the existing knowledge (Kunisch et al. 2018). In general, a systematic literature review is a method to synthesize fragmented, complex and interdisciplinary findings to provide collective evidence in a particular research area (Snyder 2019), also in the bourgeoning areas of research (Petticrew & Roberts 2006). Literature reviews play an important role in developing theory (Hoon & Baluch 2020), possibly providing alternative theoretical approaches to given fields or phenomena (Post et al. 2020) and, by integrating findings of previous research, they may provide evidence on a meta-level (Snyder 2019).

There are several reasons for conducting this research. First, informal leadership is a bourgeoning and interdisciplinary research topic (Van De Mieroop et al. 2020) lacking a systematic literature review. Thus, this review aims to provide an integrative description of informal leadership in a systematic, transparent, and reproducible way (Snyder 2019), contributing to collectivistic (Yammarino et al. 2012) and plural (Denis et al. 2012) forms of leadership. Second, the topic needs further research (Cullen-Lester & Yammarino 2016) since it has the potential to renew the perspectives on work and leadership. By providing a comprehensive overview of the concept, it will allow further developments and reflections on the meaning of informal leadership in organizational and inter-organizational contexts. Third, research on informal leadership has been fairly limited (Adams-Robinson 2021: 37), even though it was acknowledged almost a century ago as a form

of leadership (Carter et al. 1951). This article integrates the literature on informal leadership within the scope of this research, gives visibility to the phenomenon, and adds new perspectives to leadership in organizations (Post et al. 2020). A holistic approach – looking at the entity and the interrelatedness of the constructs – is used to understand the complex phenomenon (Daher et al. 2017) in order to "maximize what we see" (Hoon & Baluch 2020). A holistic approach is often applied to leadership reviews to establish the underlying structures, to assess multi-level thinking (Batistič et al. 2017), and to reveal the potential of future research on multidimensional constructs (Hoon & Baluch 2020).

With this approach to the review, the analysis was conducted with three overarching questions:
(1) What is known about informal leadership through existing literature?
(2) How is informal leadership defined within the literature?
(3) What is the future of informal leadership research?

This article is structured in five main sections. First, after the introduction, the theoretical framework is presented, followed by data and methods. Next, the findings are divided into seven sections: Descriptive Overview, Defining Informal Leadership, Theme Topics of Informal Leadership Literature, Nomological Network of Informal Leadership, Integrative View of Informal Leadership, Informal and Formal Leadership, and Framework of Informal Leadership. Finally, a discussion of the findings is presented, along with suggestions for future research.

2 Informal Leadership and Contemporary Work

Informal leadership (IL), leadership action and influence without a designated power position emerges through a dynamic social process in various encounters between people. The IL status arises in an emergent network of relations (White et al. 2016) in a complex process among people acting and perceiving those actions (Neubert & Taggar 2004), creating centrality, popularity, and power (Balkundi & Kilduff 2005). IL roles are adaptable and subject to change based on shifts in situations; the changes may be based on group dynamics such as changing or adding members, their expertise, or the task (Yammarino et al. 2012). The phenomenon also applies to individuals with formal power in situations where their formal power does not apply. Thus, informal leadership can be prevalent in all groups.

The informal aspect of organizations was recognized in classical organizational theories (Barnard 1938, according to Chiu et al. 2021). Prior to this, the Hawthorne studies (1927–1932) had provided the first evidence that informal work groups impacted the workplace and group productivity (Adams-Robinson 2021: 9). An informal leader was recognized "to adapt his or her style of performance to the group's needs" (Levine 1949), and informal leadership to reside along with formal leadership as one type of leadership (Carter et al. 1951). Informal organizations were researched by Roy (1952), Blau (1955), Dalton (1959), and Marglin (1974), among others. However, most leadership research has focused on formal leadership (Banks et al. 2022), and the concept of informal leadership is a relatively new area of organizational development (Adams-Robinson 2021: 5). This rise occurred simultaneously (Figure 2) with the multi-level approach to leadership becoming more prevalent in the 2000s (Batistič et al. 2017).

Informal leadership is part of collectivistic and plural forms of leadership, contributing to the new ways of organizing work and diminishing hierarchical structures (Yammarino et al. 2012; Denis et al. 2012). Collectivistic leadership approaches (Yammarino et al. 2012) – team leadership, network leadership, shared leadership, complexity leadership,

and collective leadership – and leadership in the plural (Denis et al. 2012) see leadership as being constructed in action, among different people, and thus not being the property of individuals. Collective leadership as a multi-level leadership approach uses several levels of analysis – individual, dyadic, group, and organizational levels (Batistič et al. 2017) – to understand how leadership spreads within different levels of organizations (Kozlowski & Klein 2000). These relational, multi-level approaches extend leadership beyond individuals' knowledge, skills, and abilities, including networked social relationships (Cullen-Lester et al. 2017).

As a whole, collective engagement in leadership is needed in increasingly complex situations, and many of the collective and network-based approaches to leadership emphasize informal leadership (Cullen-Lester & Yammarino 2016). When seeking to enhance the holistic leadership capacity of organizations, both individual and collective-based networks should be employed (Cullen-Lester et al. 2017). The knowledge and skills of everyone are essential to the entity, and thus leadership skills throughout the organization are also needed (Ciuk & Schedlitzki 2021). Informal leadership can be deployed in this endeavor to contribute to the organizational benefits. Collective leadership is, by definition, "a function of selectively utilizing the information or specialized expertise that individuals within the network possess" (Friedrich et al. 2009). Therefore, informal leadership and utilizing employees' expertise on all levels are essential in applying collectivistic forms of leadership. All in all, the existence of multiple kinds of leaders, both formal and informal, naturally occurs in complex organizations (Denis et al. 2012; White et al. 2016).

While work is organized around teams and knowledge is distributed up and down organizational hierarchies, employees become even more specialized (Contractor et al. 2012). Formal management is responsible for the organization-level matters, and the employees are expected to independently lead in their respective, expertise-based responsibility areas. In these situations, knowledge and actions are created, shared, and developed with peers, groups, networks, and organizations. This superior knowledge (Stincelli & Baghurst 2014) functions as a catalyst for informal leadership actions. When a collective approach to leadership is incorporated, expertise knowledge must be acknowledged (Friedrich et al. 2009). Altogether, informal leadership is an option to renew working and leadership. It can contribute to new ways of organizing work and add to the value created in and by the organizations.

3 Data and Methods

The systematic review of informal leadership literature was conducted in October 2020 through searches in six databases: ScienceDirect, Web of Science, Scopus, Business Source Premier (EBSCO), ABI/INFORM Collection ProQuest, and APA PsycArticles. The vast number of databases searched was justified due to the interdisciplinary nature of informal leadership research. The fields included in the search were management, leadership, organizations, business, psychology, behavioral sciences, and social sciences interdisciplinary. The fields excluded from the search were sports, education, nursing, and medicine. The keyword used was 'informal lead*'. For an article to be included in the review, it had to contribute to informal leadership in an organizational context, for example in the context of individuals, teams, groups, or networks. Relevant conceptual papers were included due to their importance in addressing leadership development and theory building. Eligible research papers were added to the dataset during the review process. While conducting this literature review, no other systematic literature review on informal leadership emerged. During the review process, single-sided aspects of leadership were excluded, such as influencing your supervisor (upwards leadership), working with a co-worker (peer-leadership), and motivating yourself (self-leadership)

(Alvesson & Spicer 2012). In addition, three concepts, which by definition do not contribute to IL, were also excluded: expertise leadership (Wang 2016), expert leadership (Goodall & Pogrebna 2015), and academic leadership (Saroyan et al. 2011).

The original search resulted in 274 research articles, and eventually 85 articles were included in the data. The literature search and evaluation process are presented in Figure 1.
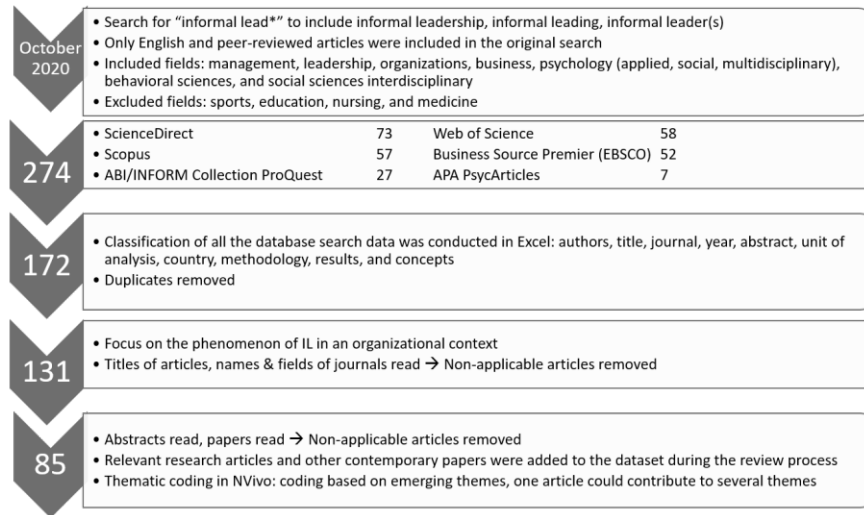

Figure 1. Informal Leadership Literature Search and Evaluation Process

4 Findings

Informal leadership research has mainly focused on two aspects: the emergence of informal leadership in groups and teams, and the profile of informal leaders. The picture of informal leadership is entwined around knowledge, change-orientation, action, communication, group, and influence. Knowledge forms the basis of informal leadership emergence, and communication is the essential means of utilizing this knowledge. Findings suggest that IL is beneficial, for example, to group efficacy, productivity, and social relations. A significant cross-cutting feature of IL research is the connection to formal leadership and management. The following subsections provide a descriptive overview of the IL research, followed by an analysis of the definitions of informal leadership. Next, the theme topics of IL literature are presented, as well as the nomological network of IL. Then an integrative view of IL is formed, followed by a description of the interplay between informal and formal leadership. Lastly, a framework of IL is presented.

4.1 Descriptive Overview

In the last two decades, informal leadership has attracted increasing interdisciplinary research interest (Figure 2).
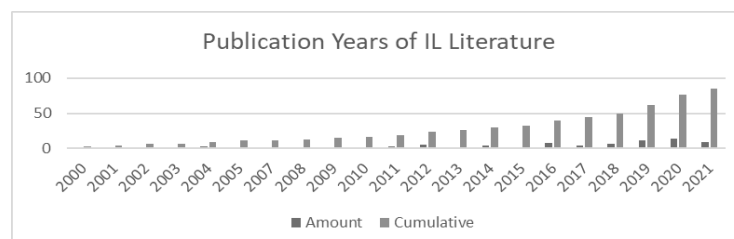

Figure 2. Publication Years of Informal Leadership Literature (Number per Year and Cumulative)

Two-thirds (57) of the studies are empirical, and one-third (28) conceptual. Most empirical studies are quantitative (34), while qualitative (16) and mixed methods (7) studies make up the minority (Figure 3). Regarding the level of analysis (Figure 4), the individual level has attracted a significant amount of research interest, mainly in the context of IL emergence in teams. On the other hand, the managerial and organizational levels have been neglected with only some contributing studies.
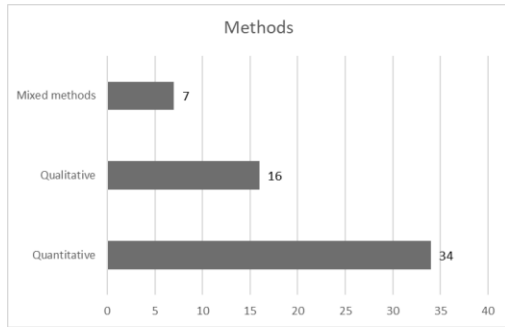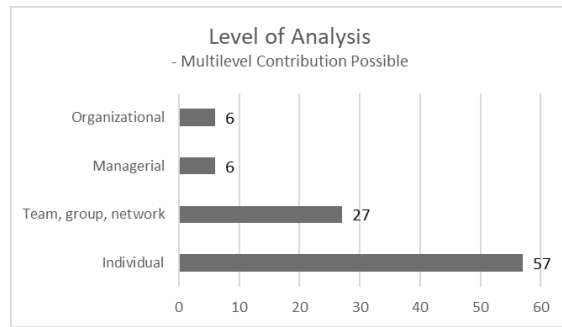
Figure 3. Research Methods

Figure 4. Level of Analysis

The most influential journal contributing to IL research is The Leadership Quarterly, having published over one third (31) of the reviewed articles (Table 1).

Table 1. Journals Contributing to Informal Leadership Literature

Journal	Publications
The Leadership Quarterly	31
Human Relations, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Small Group Research	4 each
Human Resource Management Review, Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies	3 each
Academy Of Management Journal, Leadership, Organization Science, Personnel Psychology, Scandinavian Journal of Management	2 each
	59 of 85

4.2 Defining Informal Leadership

There are two main perspectives in defining informal leadership: leadership as a dynamic social process, and leadership without formal authority (Table 2). The definitions highlighting dynamic social process emphasize emergence (5), interaction (4), action (3), influence (2), process (2), and temporality (2), and various other aspects (11). On the other hand, the definitions highlighting leadership without formal authority emphasize influence (5), lateral (2), and various other aspects (18). In total, influence (7) is given the most emphasis in the IL definitions, followed by emergence (6), action (4), and interaction (4). All this can be seen pointing to the views of Graen et al. (2010): "Recognizable leadership becomes apparent to outsiders after it has emerged as people acting beyond their pay grade toward a common goal." In general, informal leadership occurs within a collective, including both vertical and horizontal aspects, and affects both organizational and inter-organizational relations.

Table 2. Definitions of Informal Leadership

Perspective	Dynamic social process	
Emphasis	Author	Definition
action, communication, culture	Pielstick 2000	"Leaders conduct themselves and even communicate through their actions to build relationships and shape culture. Combined with communication, this is the act of leading."
action, emergence, perception, process	Neubert & Taggar 2004	"Informal leaders emerge through a complex process of role taking and peer perceptual processes that determine who becomes leader."
action, collaboration, emergence, influence, problem solving	Graen et al. 2010	"Leadership is defined as informal emergent influence that can be activated by problem situations demanding leader–member cooperative, extra-role action much beyond the ordinary action feasible from formal supervisor and subordinate or coworker and coworker problem situations."
interaction, influence	Denis et al. 2012	"Forms of leadership that in one way or other imply plurality: that is, the combined influence of multiple leaders in specific organizational situations." "Leadership not as a property of individuals and their behaviors, but as a collective phenomenon that is distributed or shared among different people, potentially fluid, and constructed in interaction."
interaction, over time, structures	Yammarino et al. 2012	"Leadership is viewed as a collectivistic phenomenon that involves putting the ''we'' in leadership where multiple individuals interact, through a variety of formal and informal structures, broadly defined, and take on a variety of leadership roles, both formally and informally, over time."
behavior, emergence, interaction, interdependent, over time, self-organization	Cullen-Lester & Yammarino 2016	"Leadership is collective behavior resulting from a number of interdependent entities interacting with one another, typically in a nonlinear way, and have the characteristics of emergence (i.e. macro-level properties arise that are not reducible to micro-level properties) and self-organization over time (i.e. dynamical processes that explain the emergence of these properties)."
emergence, network of relations	White et al. 2016	"Leadership as an emergent network of relations, which is a shared and distributed phenomenon, encompassing several leaders who may be both formally appointed and emerge more informally."
process	Kwok et al. 2018	"[Informal] leadership is a dynamic social process between group members."
emergence, interaction, responsibility	Gerpott et al. 2019	"Emergent leadership — the ascription of informal leadership responsibilities among team members — is a dynamic phenomenon that comes into place through social interactions."
Perspective	Leadership without formal authority	
Emphasis	Author	Definition
advocate, expertise, influence, knowledge, lifting effect, relationship-building	Smart 2005	"Informal leaders are individuals without formal title or authority, who serve as advocates for the business and heighten the contributions of others as well as their own self primarily through influence, relationship-building, and knowledge and expertise."
action, collaboration, encouragement, process	Bartol & Zhang 2007	"Leadership roles may involve positions with formal authority or informal roles without authority. Related leadership processes address the strategies and steps associated with encouraging individuals to work effectively together."
credibility, influence, guide, respect	Stincelli & Baghurst 2014	"[Informal leadership is] carried out by individuals who do not possess formal authority or power within an organization but can influence and guide others based on the respect and credibility they possess."

engagement, recognition, tasks	Veenis 2018	"Informal leader is a leader that is not formally appointed in the position of a leader, but nevertheless gets recognized as a leader by other people in the organization and engaged in leadership tasks."
influence, lateral, social status	Pan et al. 2018	"[Informal leadership is] a type of social status defined as an employee's influence over his or her peers without formal authority."
influence	C. Zhang et al. 2020	"Informal leadership is the extent to which an individual exerts influence over other people and the collective work when the individual does not have a formally appointed leader role."
emergence, influence, lateral	Hanna et al. 2021	"Emergent leadership is the degree to which an individual with no formal status or authority is perceived by one or more team members as exhibiting leaderlike influence. Our definition clearly highlights that emergent leadership is an informal, lateral form of leadership within a collective."

4.3 Theme Topics of Informal Leadership Literature

The review revealed theme topics of informal leadership literature (Figure 5). The focal points of research have been the emergence of informal leadership in groups and teams, and the profile of informal leaders. This gives the theme Connection to Peers the top position, followed by the themes Leadership Actions, Competence, and Traits. These themes constitute the majority of the research contributing to the picture of IL. Several theoretical papers contribute to IL development and position it within leadership research. However, what seems to be an essential aspect of informal leadership – Connection to Management – has not yet been the focus of many studies. In this theme, the interfaces are addressed mainly indirectly. The latter part of the 13 theme topics represents the underlying features of IL, which have not yet attracted much research interest. Few studies have directly addressed Communication, even though it seems to be a fundamental part of IL. In general, informal leadership research seems to have followed the main lines of research conducted within leadership (Gardner et al. 2010). Each theme also deserves continued research attention in the future.
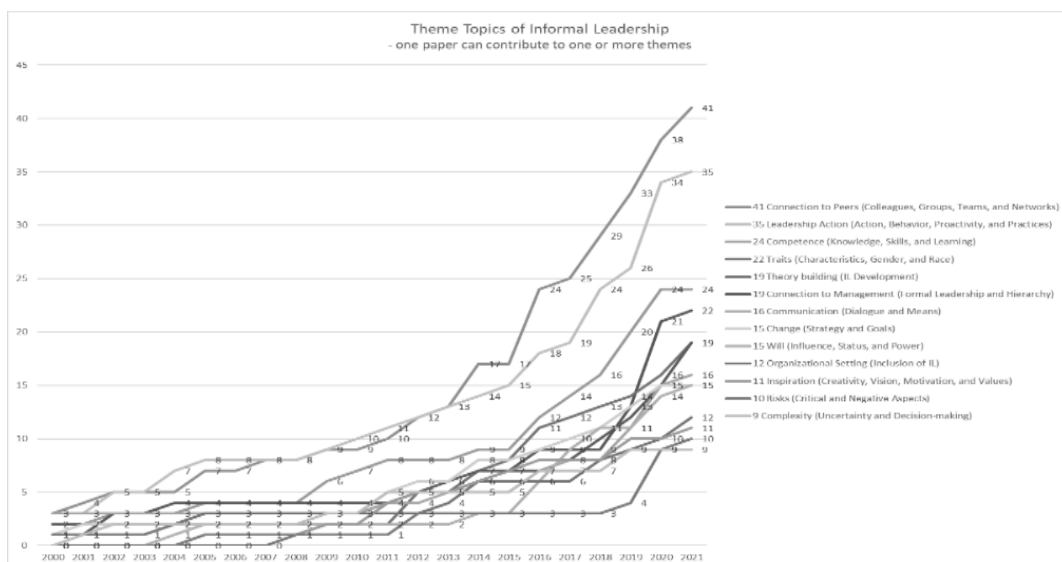

Figure 5. Theme Topics of Informal Leadership Literature (Cumulative)

4.4 Nomological Network of Informal Leadership

A nomological network is a conceptual network and a broadly integrative theoretical framework (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.) that identifies the key concepts and constructs focal to the phenomenon being researched, while also revealing their interrelationships, and providing opportunities to signify patterns and mechanisms (Verma & Khatri 2021). The nomological network (Figure 6) visualizes the concepts used in the informal leadership literature of this review. In developing the presented nomological network, the key concepts and keywords of the literature were listed, combined, and further categorized into concept entities to provide a broad framework. In the figure, informal leadership is set as the focal point connecting all the research in the framework. The circle size and distance indicate the prevalence of the concept entity in informal leadership research. For clarification, the circle 'Teams, Groups, Networks, Peers, Social Aspects' includes, for example, social networks, networks, teams, self-managing teams, leadership networks, and group composition, whereas the circle 'Emotions' includes, for example, emotional intelligence, and emotion recognition.

An analysis of concepts reveals the phenomenon to be studied mainly within collectivistic forms of leadership. It is also wrapped around leadership emergence and network approaches, such as collective leadership (e.g. Chrobot-Mason et al. 2016), emergent leadership (e.g. Carter et al. 2020), network centrality (e.g. Neubert & Taggar 2004), and social network theory (e.g. Balkundi & Kilduff 2005). Individual-level aspects, such as identity, motivation, personality, work satisfaction (e.g. Chiu et al. 2021), knowledge creation (e.g. He et al. 2021), extraversion (e.g. Spark et al. 2022), and motivation to lead (e.g. Wellman et al. 2019), are also significant aspects in the nomological network.
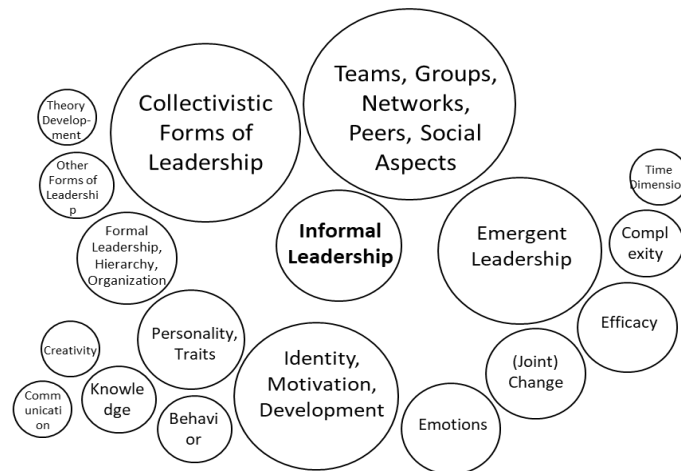

Figure 6. The Nomological Network of Informal Leadership

4.5 Integrative View of Informal Leadership

Having established that informal leadership is a dynamic social process and leadership without formal authority, an integrative approach is taken. As elaborated earlier, most informal leadership research is conducted in the collectivistic forms of leadership within a group or team context focusing on the emergence of IL. This review can validate the notion by Chiu et al. (2021) that previous research mainly focuses on the process of becoming an informal leader (i.e. antecedents), while few discuss the outcomes associated with IL. First, three cross-cutting meta-themes emerged, giving perspective to the whole IL phenomenon as simultaneous, relational, abstract entities (Tesch 1987): shared meaning, volunteering, and granted by others. Also, as a fourth meta-theme,

organizational (in)visibility could be considered. Shared meaning is required for the phenomenon to be able to emerge; through shared meaning, an understandable justification is presented. For that to emerge, volunteering in IL is needed. Eventually, the actions taken in the process of IL are granted by others – otherwise they would not exist. Regarding organizational (in)visibility, it is clear that IL occurs in organizations (Denis et al. 2012) and, depending on whether the phenomenon is acknowledged or not, light is shed on informal leadership or it is kept in the shadows.

The picture of informal leadership is entwined around knowledge, change-orientation, action, communication, group, and influence. Generally, IL is self-initiated, proactive, and constructive behavior that unfolds in social and interpersonal processes (Veenis 2018; Flocco et al. 2021), evolving over time (Kalish & Luria 2020). Informal leadership is a driving force for change and innovation. It is based on the knowledge of individuals who foresee improved futures, which may become achievable through joint actions. These visions are conveyed to others based on a shared meaning. Eventually, this complex process may lead to IL influence.

Superior knowledge of a subject matter is a crucial element of IL (Stincelli & Baghurst 2014), and a foundation from which the development ideas and actions stem, and which is recognizable to others. Because IL emergence is relational and situational, if the knowledge levels or needs change, it may change the group's IL perceptions (Cook et al. 2019). In general, taking charge (M. J. Zhang et al. 2021), motivation to lead (Luria & Berson 2013), leader role identity (Kwok et al. 2018), and identity in the organization (Chrobot-Mason et al. 2016) predict informal leadership emergence. In the early stages of teams, easily noticeable traits like gender (Schlamp et al. 2021) or extraversion (Spark & O'Connor 2021) can benefit IL emergence. However, qualities that are more covert can become defining factors in the long run. These include, for example, consciousness (Kalish & Luria 2020), analytic and group task coordination skills (Wolff et al. 2002), the ability to prioritize and achieve goals (Stincelli & Baghurst 2014), political skills (Russell et al. 2016), cognitive abilities (Luria & Berson 2013), emotional abilities (Paik et al. 2019; Walter et al. 2012), verbal skills, fairness, and the ability to build social networks (Gavrilets et al. 2016).

In general, IL can be seen as transformation work leading to change (Roşca & Stănescu 2014), and it can be instrumental in generating ideas and promoting them through informal networks (Adobor 2004). This change-orientation can be enhanced by formal leaders' visionary behaviour (Pan et al. 2018). Superior knowledge and change-orientation are made visible to others through action. Basically, informal leadership exists with credible actions (Marion et al. 2016), and initiating change is possible by altering these actions (Börjeson & Löwstedt 2017). The actions are initiated by the common good (Pielstick 2000) to benefit the group. Considering the emergence process of IL influence, and the notion of 'others perceiving' (Neubert & Taggar 2004), selfish endeavors "vanish if ego is simply one more person in a highly connected group" (Balkundi & Kilduff 2005). In other words, selfish motives are eventually exposed to the group. Failures in work processes or in achieving goals hinder IL actions (Schaubroeck et al. 2020).

Communication is essential in transferring the knowledge into shared meanings, visions, and actions. Task-oriented communication predicts IL emergence; change-oriented communication is emphasized at the start, and relations-oriented communication at the end (Gerpott et al. 2019). In this vein, information brokering – compiling, distributing, and channeling information of organizational and technical aspects – is essential, and dialogue is used to mediate strategic values (Larsson et al. 2011). It is fair to say that communication is the key in building IL coalitions and teams (Pielstick 2000). Collaboration and joint action are constructed through communicative acts. Social networks are the structures that define leadership action (Balkundi & Kilduff 2005), and it is in these

networks that the IL influence and becoming a focal person in a group may be gained. This networking is expressed through, for example, helping, encouraging, mentoring, remaining open to being influenced (Pielstick 2000), brokering (Balkundi & Kilduff 2005), being asked for opinions and knowledge (Fazio 2020), or bridging organizational and network boundaries (Yammarino et al. 2012). In this dynamic social process, informal leadership influence may be achieved. In general, informal leaders understand the influence they have and find it rewarding (Fazio 2020). It is noteworthy though that actual follower identities are rare in the organizational context (Kempster et al. 2021). The IL influence can be used to add or diminish organizational or hierarchical functioning through different networks (Balkundi & Kilduff 2005; Roşca & Stănescu 2014). Thus, it would be beneficial for organizations to recognize informal leadership and its effects.

Informal leadership provides several advantages to individuals, teams, networks, and organizations. In general, IL behavior generates, for example, innovation, learning, and adaptability for the organization (Uhl-Bien & Marion 2009). Informal leaders influence group efficacy perceptions (Pescosolido 2001; Shaughnessy et al. 2017), and engage in groups' emotional management, resolve ambiguity, and catalyze groups to act (Pescosolido 2002; Wolff et al. 2002; Walter et al. 2012). Collective information-processing in cliques positively affects the organization's productive capacity (Marion et al. 2016). In all this informal, collective work, knowledge is assimilated, ideas are developed, and issues are solved, allowing people to do their own work. However, there are also disadvantages to engaging in informal leadership. IL actions and influence can lead to situations where a person leads a team but feels dissatisfied (Zhang et al. 2020; Chiu et al. 2021) for several reasons. For example, the role can harm relationships with other people due to a lack of organizational role and power; it may bring unwanted work, which consumes time and effort; it may cause image risks or friction with others due to the change-oriented approach. Thus, to avoid these risks, stepping back is done in severe relationship problems to give space to the group to resolve the issues (Zhang et al. 2020). The presence of formal leaders cause the highest risk perceptions to informal leaders themselves; there may be status conflicts, direct or indirect punishments by formal leaders, fear of retaliation, isolation, or lack of support (Zhang et al. 2020; Fazio 2020). Still, informal leadership is considered "worth the risk because their goals extend beyond material gain or personal advancement" (Smart 2005).

4.6 Informal and Formal Leadership

Connection to formal management and leadership displays an elemental feature of informal leadership. Understanding the connection between formal leadership and informal leadership structures is critical in advancing our understanding of how collectives engage in leadership processes (Cullen & Yammarino 2014). It has not been the focus of many studies so far, but formal leadership is an influential element affecting informal leadership action (Chiu et al. 2021; Flocco et al. 2021). This connection forms a deep undertone for the IL phenomenon. All in all, formal and informal leadership co-exist in organizations (Denis et al. 2012; Van De Mieroop et al. 2020), and their interaction can be positive (Börjeson & Löwstedt 2017; Briker et al. 2021) or negative (Zhang et al. 2020). Formal and informal leaders 'do leadership' together; it may be through talk, facial expressions, and space, formal leadership allowing or prohibiting informal leadership from emerging (Van De Mieroop et al. 2020). In this sense, informal leadership is detected but not necessarily acknowledged. It is noteworthy that informal leaders generally seek to collaborate with management to fulfill the change-oriented aspirations, and generally do not aspire to be formal leaders themselves (Fazio 2020). Although informal leadership cannot be used as a tool due to its voluntary nature, it can be allowed to emerge and influence in organizations. In this process, informal leaders may face interpersonal, image-related, and instrumental risks for stepping up and taking the lead (Zhang et al. 2020) despite the knowledge-based justification. Giving space to informal

leadership may happen if the formal leader acknowledges the relevant expertise (Friedrich et al. 2009; Johannessen et al. 2015). Openness to dialogue and different opinions support this. If IL is prohibited, the long-term consequences may lower performance, job satisfaction, and the quality of decisions (Russell et al. 2016), among other things.

As stated, informal leadership exists alongside formal leadership. IL contributions to the organisation may be dependent on formal management's support, since formal authority may be needed to modify formal structures or practices or give public support to IL action. The knowledge-oriented and change-oriented initiatives stemming from IL, aiming to support joint work, may thus be either included in or excluded from the organizational venue. High-performing and empowering cultures encourage IL (Stincelli & Baghurst 2014), whereas authoritative cultures do not (Adams-Robinson 2021: 82). If formal leadership is absent, for example due to incompetence or a laissez-faire attitude, informal leadership and hierarchy are created, especially when facing complex tasks – if work is not organized, it can be self-organized (Zendeh & Oskuie 2017; Oedzes et al. 2019). The interaction between formal and informal leadership can benefit organizations in a substantial manner. All organizational leadership should be engaged in the collective work.

4.7 Framework of Informal Leadership

The framework of informal leadership (Figure 7) displays the elements of informal leadership as presented in this review. The arrow shape represents the processuality, change-orientation, and action-orientation of informal leadership. The base of the phenomenon is in the collectivistic forms of leadership. Stemming from there, informal leadership is entwined around knowledge, change-orientation, action, communication, group, and influence, which become reality in interaction with peers, groups, networks, and formal leadership and management. Also, informal leadership is affected by simultaneous, cross-cutting, and relational meta-themes: shared meaning, voluntary, granted by others, and organizational (in)visibility. This dynamic social process is the route to informal leadership, leadership without formal authority.
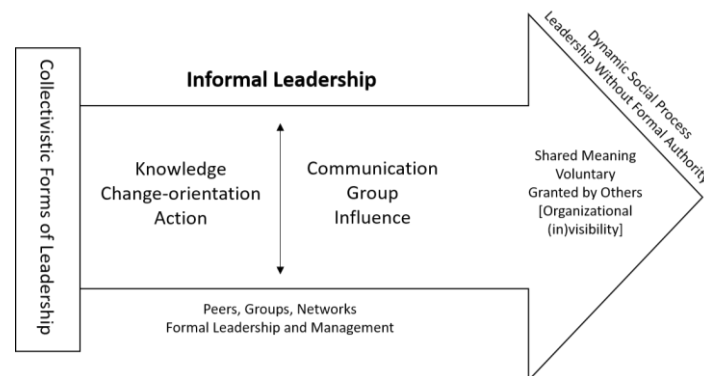
Figure 7. Framework of Informal Leadership

5 Discussion and Future Research

The purpose of this article was to paint an integrative picture of informal leadership through a systematic literature review and answer three research questions:

(1) What is known about informal leadership through existing literature?
(2) How is informal leadership defined within the literature?
(3) What is the future of informal leadership research?

The main contribution of this paper is to summarize the issues addressed in the included literature and to detect the research gaps. The review shows informal leadership to be an interdisciplinary research topic, which has gained increasing research interest in the last two decades. It has been studied mostly within multi-level, collectivistic forms of leadership through the emergence of leadership in group and team contexts. In general, the topics of informal leadership research have followed the patterns of formal leadership research (see e.g. Yammarino 2013). This review gathers the views of research conducted in the fields of management, leadership, organizations, psychology, and behavioral sciences. However, informal leadership research has also been conducted, for example, in the fields of sports, education, nursing, and medicine, which have been excluded from the scope of this study (see section 3 Data and Methods). A comparative study is suggested as it could provide additional insights into informal leadership. In the same vein, the proposed nomological network of informal leadership should be developed further to provide a comprehensive view of antecedents, outcomes, moderators, and mediators of the construct (Verma & Khatri 2021).

Informal leadership is demonstrated to be a key element in resolving the knots of leadership in the transformation of work. The experts immerse themselves in the trajectories of their own fields, possessing the highest subject-specific knowledge in the organisation. In this work, they lead or participate in the related organizational and inter-organisational networks. Through their lead, new joint targets and innovations are created. However, this informal leading work can be missing from the organizational agenda and be overlooked. This expert knowledge should be incorporated in organizational decision-making and future-planning. In general, the IL phenomenon should be acknowledged and understood in organizations. As informal leadership positions hold no formal power, recognition and support from formal management is required occasionally. Through this, formal practices, structures, and directions can be aligned to meet transformative informal leadership goals. This empowers and enables organizational renewal through knowledge utilization, supporting group work, and innovation. In this context, the collectivistic ways of organizing leadership require redistribution of possibilities, permissions, and power related to individually assigned responsibilities. This power shift is an elemental feature considering the interplay between formal, informal, and collectivistic leadership.

In defining informal leadership, two main perspectives are present: leadership as a dynamic social process, and leadership without formal authority. Primarily the definitions emphasize influence, emergence, action, and interaction, which is congruent with the content of the literature. The essence of the definition conforms Levine's (1949) description of an informal leader as being someone who tends "to adapt his or her style of performance to the group's needs". However, there is also plenty of room for further research in defining IL. Interesting aspects would be, for example, the processuality, temporality, and impact of IL. In general, the concept is not well known, and this review aims to give visibility to the phenomenon. In summary, informal leadership occurs within a collective, including both vertical and horizontal aspects, and affects both organizational and inter-organizational relations.

It has been demonstrated that informal leadership is a natural and inevitable phenomenon in groups and organizations. Research interest in informal leadership is increasing in conjunction with multi-level, collectivistic forms of leadership. In this regard, there are several interesting aspects that should be considered to advance informal leadership research. First, the research needs to be expanded from the group and individual levels to organizational and inter-organizational levels. Second, the distinctive perquisites, processes, and outcomes of informal leadership need to be addressed. Third, the long-term outcomes and impacts have so far been under-researched. Fourth, the role of for-

mal leadership and management in informal leadership processes requires further attention. Fifth, power-related aspects need to be addressed, as they are essential to this phenomenon. Finally, the interplay between informal, emergent, and collectivistic forms of leadership deserves attention to clarify and link the concepts.

Multi-level views of leadership involving informal leadership are important when hierarchies are becoming lower and technological advancements are constant (Yammarino 2013). Transformation is ongoing in several levels for example in work, values, knowledge bases, and leadership. To respond to these challenges in organizations, the skills on all levels of the organization should be incorporated into the collective leadership work. Acknowledging and supporting informal leadership can lead to better futures. Informal leadership as a knowledge-oriented and change-oriented phenomenon can help individuals, groups, and organizations to be more innovative and visionary. Individuals engaging in informal leadership should be supported, and their efforts aligned with the organizational aspirations. Informal leadership should be understood, acknowledged, supported, and utilized in organizations. Informal leadership and collectivistic forms of leadership can contribute significantly to seeking solutions in renewing organizations towards responsibility.

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