Unraveling the Definitions of Distributed Leadership: An Insight from the Industrial Sector through a Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. The shift in perspective that leadership cannot be performed by a single leader alone, but involves the active role of organizational members, makes Distributed Leadership (DL) an interesting leadership concept to understand more deeply today. However, research on distributed leadership is dominated by studies in the educational context, and there is no consensus on the definition of DL used. This study aims to understand the characteristics of studies and explore the definitions used in Distributed Leadership research using a Systematic Literature Review. The scientific articles in this SLR are 35 articles included in the Scopus database from 2018 to 2024. The review results revealed that the definition of DL is used based on the level of unit analysis. At the organizational level, the definition and concept used is Distributed Leadership, while at the individual level, the concept and definition used is Distributed Leadership Agency. Based on the analysis, the majority of DL studies included were published in 2020 and 2021 using quantitative methods. Conducted mostly in China, the research context is mostly in the Healthcare industry, and analysis was done at the organizational level. This research contributes by providing a definition of Distributed Leadership based on a summary of various definitions and characteristics of DL according to previous researchers. In addition, from the analysis of study characteristics in this research, it can be identified that there are research gaps that still need to be explored in future research in the context of non-education industries.

Keywords: Distributed Leadership, HRM, Leadership, Organizational, Systematic Literature Review

1   Introduction

Distributed Leadership (DL) is a framework or practice in which decision-making within an organization is collectively carried out by members at various levels [1]. One of the earliest researchers to discuss DL was [2], who argued that the best leadership is exercised by groups rather than individuals. Currently, James P. Spillane is a prominent theorist in DL, often cited in contemporary research. According to [3], DL is rooted in distributed cognition and activation theory, which posits that cognitive processes and Distributed Leadership (DL) is a framework or practice in which decision-making within an organization is collectively carried out by members at various levels

(Tashi, 2015). One of the earliest researchers to discuss DL was [2], who argued leadership activities such as problem-solving and decision-making do not occur solely within an individual's mind but are distributed among others in a social context.

One reason why the concept of DL is gaining traction today is the increasing criticism of centrist or heroic leadership models. [4] criticized "centrism-leader," which concentrates power and influence in the hands of a single leader. This critique gave rise to collectivist leadership models like DL, where all employees can participate in leadership [5], [6]. Distributed leadership is often associated with other leadership types, such as collective, coordinated, dispersed, relational, shared, and dispersed leadership [7], and is frequently used interchangeably with shared leadership [8]. These leadership concepts share the view that leadership should not be the sole responsibility of one individual but should be a collaborative effort to achieve a common goal. Due to the overlap with other leadership concepts, there is a need for a consensus on a robust definition and the characteristics of DL.

Most studies on DL have been conducted in the field of education [9], leading to calls from other researchers to explore DL in contexts outside of education [10], such as within corporate settings, where the environment is promising for DL to take place [11]. Therefore, this study aims to identify the characteristics and definition of distributed leadership in the industrial context through a systematic literature review of DL research in the industry over the past seven years. The research questions this study seeks to answer are:

1. What are the characteristics of studies on DL in the industrial context?
2. How is DL defined in research within the industrial context?

2   Methods

A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted in this study following the guidelines from The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement 2020 [12]. An SLR can provide a synthesis of a topic or discipline, thereby generating future research priorities. Additionally, an SLR can address questions that cannot be answered by individual studies or offer insights into how a theory is applied or how a phenomenon occurs [12].

Each literature source had to meet six inclusion criteria: (1) publication period from 2018 to 2024, (2) written in English, (3) peer-reviewed articles, (4) indexed in Scopus, (5) research context involving industry, companies, or public organizations outside educational institutions, and (6) accessible and downloadable articles. Scientific articles were identified and collected from the Scopus database and the digital library website of the University of Indonesia. The search was performed by entering the title or topic "Distributed Leadership" in the database for documents from January 1, 2018, to March 29, 2024, and applying Boolean operators AND NOT Teacher AND NOT School AND NOT Education AND NOT Teaching. Finally, filters were applied using checklist boxes for Document type: article, Language: English, Source type: Journal.

All stages were performed with the assistance of the web-based application SLR, Covidence. The identification stage ensured no duplication between the Scopus

database and the digital library, resulting in 107 articles for screening. The initial title screening was performed on titles, abstracts, and journals relevant to the study, yielding 61 articles. Further screening of article content that included empirical methods and definitions of Distributed Leadership (DL) used in the research resulted in 35 articles included in this study.

3   Results and Discussions

3.1   Characteristics of Distributed Leadership Studies

Based on descriptive analysis performed within included articles, studies on Distributed Leadership (DL) in the industrial context within the included journals were most frequently published in 2020 and 2021, with eight articles each. Quantitative methods are the most commonly used among other methods, with a percentage of 65.7%, followed by qualitative methods at 28.6%. Based on the countries where the research was conducted, China being the most frequent research site, accounting for six articles, followed by cross-country research with five studies.

Based on the types of industries studied, healthcare is the most frequently used sector as the context for DL research. DL studies in the healthcare sector are generally conducted in hospitals. Hospitals are suitable locations for DL research because they involve an intersection of business management within the hospital and service management for patients performed by experts such as doctors or nurses. This intersection of tasks is prone to conflicts, necessitating the active role of both formal and informal leaders in making on-the-ground decisions. Another industry where DL research is conducted is the Information and Technology sector. The IT sector is also suitable for DL research due to the flexible work patterns that facilitate frequent interactions between supervisors and subordinates.

The final characteristic of the studies that can be identified is the level of analysis. DL research in the included journals is predominantly conducted at the organizational level with 18 articles and at the individual level with 13 articles. DL research at the organizational level seeks to identify the antecedents and outcomes of DL in organizations, such as Organizational Ambidexterity and Firm Performance. At the individual level, researchers also explore factors influencing DL and its impact, but on a smaller scale, such as individual commitment and turnover intention.

3.2   Definition of Distributed Leadership in the Industrial Context

The definition of Distributed Leadership (DL) used in this study varies significantly. This variation is generally distinguished based on the unit of analysis. At the organizational level, [3] is one of the most referenced researchers in studies conducted on DL in the industrial context. DL is defined as a pattern of interaction among leaders, followers, and situations. This definition was used by [13] and [14] in their DL studies. This definition of DL is fundamental and can be applied in any context and can also be

combined with dimensions referenced by other researchers. Additionally, [3] is known as one of the contemporary experts in DL.

Based on the review results, the authors summarize several characteristics that often appear in DL definitions according to experts:

1. Interaction between leader and follower, where in DL, leaders and followers interact to exchange ideas and also perform tasks. This interaction results in followers becoming more expert by receiving new information from leaders, while for leaders, the interaction serves as a means of communication to align perceptions to achieve goals [3], [15], [16], [17].
2. Shared Decision Making, where all members contribute to decision-making within the team or at a larger level related to the organization [1], [18], [19].
3. Conjoint action, where members actively and voluntarily participate in activities related to leadership (Gronn, 2002; Jønsson et al., 2016; Thorpe et al., 2011).
4. Common goals, where leaders and followers must have shared goals to avoid losing direction in carrying out tasks and leadership roles (Carson et al., 2007; Gronn, 2000; Günzel-Jensen et al., 2018; Jønsson et al., 2016; Thorpe et al., 2011; Tian et al., 2016).
5. Formal and informal leaders. Often in DL, informal leaders emerge due to their expertise or influence on other members. Although formal leaders still exist in practice, the role of informal leaders in decision-making has a significant impact on the team and organization [4].

From these five characteristics, DL can be redefined as "leadership that emerges due to the interaction between leaders and their followers who may also act as informal leaders where they share the same vision regarding joint decision-making and proactive leadership implementation by each individual."

DL research at the individual level has led to a concept known as Distributed Leadership Agency (DLA). The definition and dimensions of DLA, often referenced by individual-level DL research, come from a study conducted by [21]. DLA is defined as "to engage actively and with influence in how to establish and achieve common goals". Studies that refer to the DLA definition proposed by [21] include [24] , [25], and [26]. DLA is a deliberately created concept to examine whether an individual actively engages in leadership activities within the organization.

4   Conclusion

This SLR study answers two research questions. First, out of the 35 included literatures, DL studies were mostly published in 2020 and 2021 using quantitative methods that were predominantly conducted in China with the majority focusing on the healthcare industry and analyzed at the organizational level. From these initial findings, there are still numerous opportunities to explore DL in different contexts, such as countries in Africa or Southeast Asia. DL studies can also be conducted in industries that have not been previously studied, such as logistics or retail companies. Furthermore, future

research can also perform multilevel analyses, including individual, team, and organizational levels.

Second, the concept of DL and its definition are based on the level of unit analysis. DL research at the organizational level often refers to the definition by [3], defining DL as a pattern of interaction among leaders, followers, and situations. Similarities among experts in explaining DL characteristics were also identified, as seen from their definitions: interaction between leader and follower, shared decision-making, conjoint action, common goals, formal and informal leaders. Thus, DL is redefined as leadership formed due to interaction between leaders and their followers, who may also act as informal leaders where decision-making is done collectively, and leadership implementation is done proactively by each individual. Meanwhile, DL research at the individual level often refers to [21] with the concept known as Distributed Leadership Agency, which is to engage actively and with influence in how to establish and achieve common goals.

This DL research with SLR contributes in two ways: redefining the DL definition and providing a comprehensive understanding of DL research in a more specific scope, namely the industrial context. DL was redefined based on the synthesis of several commonly used DL definitions by experts. Additionally, an understanding of current DL research trends was also presented. This study has several limitations: subjectivity of the reviewer in literature selection, limited to Scopus and the digital library of the University of Indonesia, restriction to English-language literature only, and an inclusion of conceptual studies that do not depict empirical conditions regarding DL in the real world.

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