Sociological analysis of the distributed team leadership*

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Abstract. The importance of leadership in social and scientific spheres has been studied from different perspectives; the paradigms, approaches and methods have been constantly changing. The pattern of the authoritarian leader in the society has receded in favour of distributed leadership, and today researchers consider interpersonal relationships as the main factor of the leader's effectiveness if he is capable of fostering leadership in others. Thus, in the team, the potential of leadership is distributed between those members who are capable and not afraid of taking responsibilities. Leaders who help to create the next generation of leaders are more valuable for the society than those who are concentrated on their personal ambitions. The authors consider the features of distributed leadership within one group in the course of time. The authors applied different methods to analyse distributed leadership — a survey and a participant observation — to study manifestations of distributed leadership in time and space, the relationship between distributed leadership in the group and context, the nature of the interaction of group agents in legitimisation and dominance, and the participation of group members in social interaction. The article examines the features of distributed leadership based on the study conducted at the RUDN University in 2017–2020 within one group. The results show that distributed leadership is effectively regarded in time and space: the leader takes a flagship role and relies on the acquired experience when interacting with other members of the group; it is possible for several leaders to co-exist under certain social conditions and in distributed areas.

Keywords: distributed leadership; leadership paradigm; influence theory; theories of relationships; dominance; legitimation; participant observation

The future of the nation is a strong, competitive and talented youth. The leaders of the new generation act as agents of global transformation, who seek to change the world for the better [14]. The leader is someone who has already developed systemic thinking which helps him to effectively direct the potential to the rest of the group and redistribute it to two or more agents. Leaders support the idea of humanism and prioritise human rights and freedom; they constantly develop new qualities in themselves and try to keep up with progress. A true leader is not only an object of admiration — he also motivates for continuous development. However, the leadership paradigm has changed and is no longer perceived as something integral and flawless: the leader is seen as a person who has strengths and weaknesses, who

is able to 'make up for his missing skills by relying on others' [1]. This change requires moving to the next level: instead of a true leader, a large number of leaders are required to make extraordinary efforts in an effective team [6]. Five important markers prove the team efficiency: it is a real team rather than a nominal one; it has a compelling direction for work; it has an enabling hierarchy that stimulates teamwork rather than hinders it; it functions within a supportive organisational context; it has an available expert supervising teamwork; and the major responsibility of leaders is to ensure all the above in order to increase the work effectiveness of the team [8].

Since the 1920s, scientists have considered the idea of leadership from different perspectives, and the following theories have emerged: theories of personality traits, behavioural theories, situational theories, theories of influence and theories of relationships. Scientists have been studying the theory of relationships since the late 1970s. It includes the relationship, the interaction of the leader with the group, and their influence on each other. Interpersonal relationships are regarded as the main factor of the leader's effectiveness. One of the theories of this group describes distributed leadership in connection with the social context. One form of distributed leadership leads to a simple model with the contribution of each person involved. The second form recognises the social context and collective engagement in the group, creating interactive spaces between its members [11]. The social context is understood as the natural environment, the human factor, and the use of implicit knowledge [15]. The context or situation forms individual cognition which reflects the relationship between a person and the social environment [7].

Later these ideas were extended by researches who confirmed them in practice. Darling-Hammond in the case studies conducted in Delaware, Georgia and North Carolina analyses distributed leadership in middle and high school, and how the social context influences it [2. P. 138]. Donaldson sees strong leadership at schools as the combined effort of many people, and each acts as a leader in their own sphere; administrators, formal and informal teacher leaders contribute to the leadership mix [9]. Nevertheless, distributed leadership is not exclusive of the administrative leaders responsible for the team collaboration [5]. MacBeath also considers distributed leadership in the education system but in terms of its application to students, demonstration of initiatives, and different contexts and hierarchies. His conceptual framework includes six models of distribution: starting from the formal definition of roles and job in the first distribution model to intuitive leadership embedded in culture [12]. Spillane provides an insight into the core of the distributed leadership structure as an aspect of 'leadership practice' which results from the interaction between the leader and followers. The key element of 'leadership practice' is the leadership process generated by the interaction of members within the social system [16. P. 4]. Distributed 'leadership practice' is described by leadership functions and tasks, in particular, social and situational distribution of tasks. With or without a formal leader, the distributed leadership perspective seeks to understand the complexity of human interaction within a single social group [17. P. 8]. Human

interaction is seen as a viable element of distributed leadership which "emphasises leadership as an emerging property of a group or system of interacting individuals" [19. P. 441]. The perspective of distributed leadership is viewed as the ability to yield across different group members, and this flexibility makes a distinction between traditional and distributed leadership.

DeFlaminis compares traditional leadership with distributed leadership and develops a six-level classification structure [3]. The first level is characterised by positioning a leader above and separate from the team: the leader has the sole authority for making decisions and guides members by influencing the core work. A centralised leader is described at the second level where he is put at the centre of the group, but distinction still exists between what the leader does and what the work team does. At the third level, the leader remains central to the team but starts implementing decision-making authority, and encourages independence in selected areas. A more advanced collaboration is observed at the fourth level, where the main scope of responsibility extends to a larger number of team members. The fifth level represents a shift in the position of the leader from a sole doer to a supporter and facilitator in distributed areas: team members acquire the distribution of responsibilities previously held by the leader. The top level which can be achieved is highly distributed leadership, in which the team is self-directed while the leader adopts the role of a counsellor when needed [3].

From 2017 to 2020, we conducted a study at the Departments of Foreign Languages and Sociology of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the RUDN University. Undergraduate students studied Sociology, Political Science, Philosophy, History, Art, and International Relations. In the first year (2017–2018), the study group consisted of 15 students; in the second year (2018–2019), their number increased up to 19; in the third year (2019–2020), the composition of the group decreased to its original number of 15 students. The group consisted of the students representing Russia, Azerbaijan, Greece, and Mongolia. The RUDN University is a special educational platform where a foreign language helps representatives of different nationalities to acquire social-cultural experience, form successful communication with other nationalities, taking into account various behavioural norms [20].

The choice of the group can be accounted for by the long-term interaction; another factor was that the researchers had known the group for a long time. The authors aimed at studying distributed leadership over time within one group, with no control and experimental groups but with participant observation (or 'included observation' as a direct participation of the researcher in the life of the group [18]). The authors conducted an in-depth study of one case of distributed leadership in a limited system by collecting the detailed data from several sources (included observation and survey) — in order to test the hypothesis that distributed leadership is a changeable structure, and changes over time and in space.

In order to identify leadership in the group, quantitative data were collected. However, when analysed, they were insufficient to capture the dynamics of leadership and its subjective nature in the context. The unidirectional research focused only on one leader, while the contextual paradigm offers an alternative view with many socially structured realities. Consequently, the context and atmosphere in the group is the key in describing individual situations. Therefore, the study of the natural atmosphere, the analysis of the human factor, and the use of implicit knowledge complemented the study and created a complete picture of the leadership.

The existing theories consider leadership to be inextricably linked with dominance and legitimation. The term 'dominance' refers to the dominant position of some members of the group in relation to others. The term 'legitimation' means recognition and approval by the members of the group of the existing order [10]. These terms are interrelated.

The included observation was conducted from 2017 to 2020, and the group was analysed according to the following criteria: manifestations of distributed leadership in time and space; relationship between distributed group leadership and the context; nature of interaction of group agents in legitimation and dominance; participation of group members in social interaction. Each criterion reflected different areas of leadership (Table 1).

Table 1

Data collection in the included observation

Evaluation indicators	Questions
How does distributed leadership manifest itself in time and space?	How is the interaction initiated What is the frequency of interaction before taking a decision/taking an action Are decisions/actions taken equally by all members of the group What is the position of the members of the group in relation to each other Does the position change every class?
What is the relationship between distributed group leadership and the context?	What tools are used for maintaining leadership How is information/solutions shared within the group Does the group receive feedback and, if so, how and from whom?
What is the nature of the interaction of the group's agents in legitimisation and domination?	Is the contribution of all participants into generating ideas and decision-making equal Are there any roles assigned? If so, what are these roles How are the roles of group members distributed Are there unofficial command norms How do the members of the group interact with each other — formally or informally Do the group members take turns while speaking?
How do the members of the group participate in social interaction?	Do any members of the group work together, do they form any subgroups Are these relationships stable or do they change with time?

Observation during classes, informal communication during breaks and extracurricular hours were the main types of observation. Group members communicated with each other in the VKontakte social network, where important information was most often exchanged. During the interaction, the dynamics of the relations between students was analysed. The English classes lasted three hours, so the researchers were given a great opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process of choosing a monitor — the leader — and at the same time to be an outside onlooker. The interaction was assessed from different perspectives — how communication took place during classes and breaks, how decisions were made, how goals were achieved — between all members of the group, between the main team of leaders, and the monitor.

The gender ratio in the group in the first year of study was: males — 20 %, females — 80 %; males, unlike females, were inactive and happy not to participate in decision making.

Manifestation of distributed leadership in time and space. In the first year, three students demonstrated leadership qualities during the first month: Sofia B., Arina E., Arina V. Both Arinas showed intellectual abilities, and Sofia — organisational abilities. All three participated actively during lessons and interacted with all members of the group. When making group decisions, for example, topics distributions, three leaders had deep involvement. Most of the group often changed their location in space depending on the subject and type of class (seminar/lecture/assessment), while Sofia B., Arina E., Arina V. were always sitting in the front rows, which indicated their greater interest in the subject. Based on the observations, it was obvious that they wanted to be noticed, singled out and paid attention to.

Relation between distributed group leadership and context. Being the monitor during the first year, Sophia B. administered the distribution of information within the group. She communicated directly with the teaching staff and conveyed all the necessary information to the rest of the group. The team of leaders always openly expressed their opinions, shared their thoughts with other members of the group. The rest of the students often refrained from expressing their position, as they did not react positively to multiple offers to participate in the group life. Their main aim was to get good grades in the subject.

The nature of the group agents' interaction in legitimation and dominance. The main members of the group treated each other informally and gradually established friendly relationships. The team of leaders and the monitor were also treated informally by the rest of the group and interacted on equal terms. Sophia B. took the initiative and volunteered for the role of the monitor. At the same time, important decisions were often made by the leaders due to their authority among the students. The assistance in the group was provided by more active students, which reflected the dominance of leaders over other students. When answering the professors' questions, the following features were observed: group members

sometimes interrupted each other, they could often speak simultaneously, elaborating the thoughts of other students.

Participation of group members in social interaction. In social interaction, the composition of the group was as follows: the monitor as the head of the group, two main leaders, and four subgroups. There was a tendency that students of one direction of training were in regular contact with each other rather than with others. In the second year, due to the organisational changes, Tatiana I. who was a member of a subgroup had the opportunity to change her role of the participant-observer to the leader. She managed to gain trust in the group by establishing mutual understanding between all members and equal relations in the group of leaders. The numerical composition of the group increased as new students joined in. The authors got the opportunity to analyse a different perspective of students' interaction because the share of males had increased (32 %).

Manifestation of distributed leadership in time and space. In the second year, Sofia B. handed over the post of the monitor to Tatiana I., but remained in the main group of leaders. At the same time, Arina V. left the university, and Arina E. retained her position in the main group of leaders, where two people were added. She relocated to the back rows in the classroom, showing less interest in studying. Tatiana I. together with the group of leaders did not change her location. The male students, who had previously shown no interest in leadership, became more active due to the friendly atmosphere after electing the new monitor. They changed their location from the back to the front rows and even tried the role of activists. Most of the important decisions were made by the monitor together with the leadership team.

Relations between distributed group leadership and context. To maintain leadership the new monitor used communication skills with professors. Tatiana I. encouraged all members of the group to openly express their opinions when making decisions.

The nature of the group agents' interaction in legitimation and dominance. The information in the group was distributed by the monitor and Arina E., who was among the leaders. Representatives of different countries interacted similarly to the representatives of the same country. The members of the group communicated informally. During the previous year, the relationship between students of different directions of training became more harmonised.

Participation of group members in social interaction. In 2018, four new students from directions Philosophy and International Relations joined the group. Peter K. commenced to demonstrate leadership qualities. He actively participated in the classroom, often helped his classmates, while always sitting in the back rows. In the third year, the composition of the group changed again. There was a rotation of students in accordance with their academic achievements, and the numerical composition of the group changed. New students came with fresh ideas and a desire to actively participate in the life of the group. The authors had the

opportunity to analyse how this fact influenced the process of forming leadership in the group of leaders.

Manifestation of distributed leadership in time and space. In the third year, Tatiana I. remained in the role of the monitor and retained her leadership position. Arina E. decreased her activity in the classroom, often came unprepared, preferred to sit in the back rows. Four students from Political Science and History directions left the group. Instead, two students from Art direction came to the group — Henrietta V. and Nadezhda B. From the first days, Henrietta V. began to show leadership qualities, actively respond to classes and take part in the life of the group. Teymur M. also showed a robust life position, while his leadership qualities were realised in extracurricular activities. Other newly arrived members were less active, often consulted with the monitor. The location of the students in the space also changed. Now Sofya R. occupied the back rows next to Tatiana I., and Henrietta V. — front rows, closer to the professor. Despite the distant position of the monitor, Tatiana I. used her authority and skilfully relied on the reorganised group of leaders.

Relations between distributed group leadership and context. Teymur M. started showing his intellectual abilities, always expressing his opinion and personal position. Other members of the group of leaders continued to actively participate in the discussions, while the rest of the group refrained from expressing their opinions publicly and spoke out only when motivated by the professor.

The nature of the group agents' interaction in legitimation and dominance. The decision-making process was still dependent on the monitor, since all members relied on her organisational skills to interact with professors. For a two-year term, Tatiana I. not only retained the role of the monitor, but also grew into an intellectual leader. Relationships in the group remained informal, which was manifested by friendship and mutual assistance.

Participation of group members in social interaction. During this period a redistribution of subgroups was observed. The direction-of-training-bound relations were not as strong as they used to be at the beginning. There was a dominant tendency among the newly arrived students to communicate mostly with their peers.

At the beginning of each academic year, students were asked to fill in a questionnaire to identify potential leadership. The survey aimed at identifying several indicators: the desire of students to become group activists, the desire to work individually, and the desire to take a leading position. During the first year, 73 % of respondents indicated that they would like to participate in the group of leaders (Fig. 1), 20 % would like to but were afraid, while 7 % were negative. In the second and third years, 58 % and 60 %, respectively, would like to be active in the group. Consequently, over time, the desire of students to become group activists decreased.
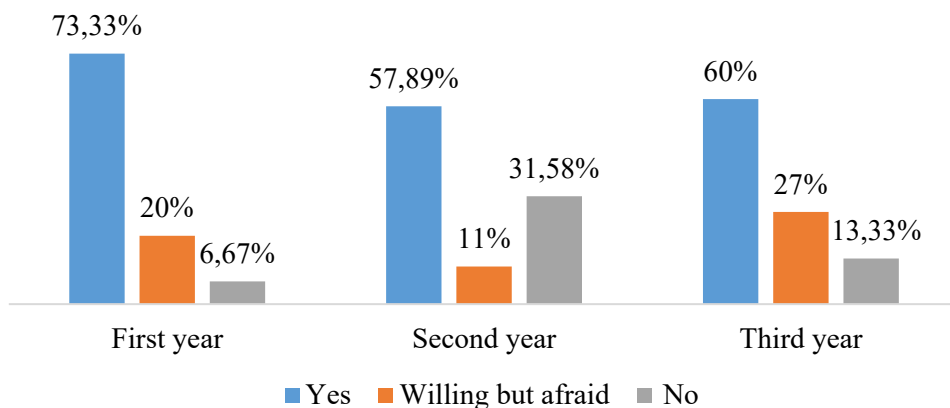
**Fig. 1.** The desire of students to become group activists

The second most striking indicator was the students' answers to the question about the desire to work individually (Fig. 2). In the first year, 93 % of the respondents noted that they liked to work independently, which indicated the difficulty of getting used to each other in a new group. In the second year, this indicator decreased to 79 %, and in the third — to 60 %. The desire to work in the group increased among students every year, which reflected favourable atmosphere in the team.
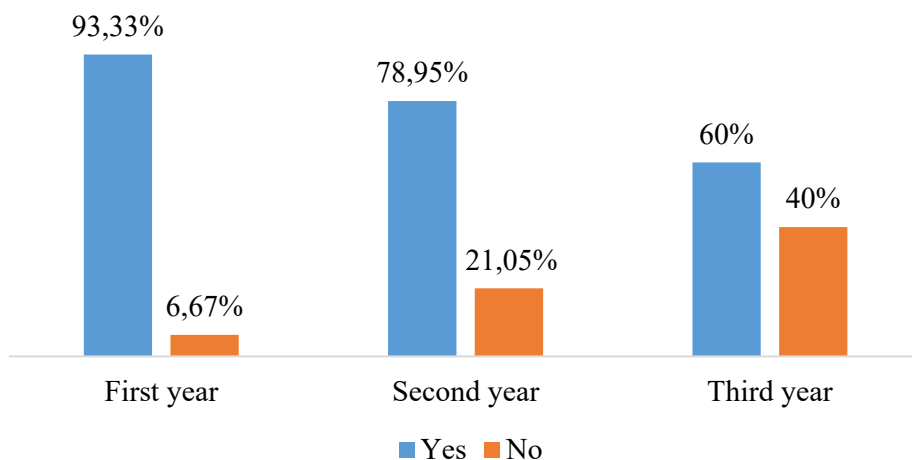
Fig. 2. The desire of students to work individually

In the first year, 60 % of respondents noted that they would like to become leaders (Fig. 3). In the second year, this parameter decreased by only two percent, which indicated a desire to take the role of a leader. In the third year, less than a third would like to take a dominant position. At this stage of the learning process, the students did not need to compete for the leading position of the monitor, since there was a redistribution of roles and it became possible for all members to express themselves depending on their preferences.
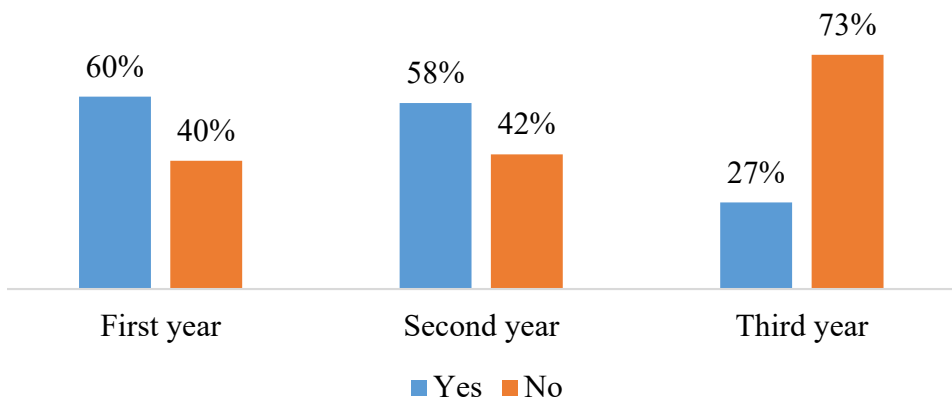
Fig. 3. The desire of students to take a leading position.

Leadership in a group is associated with the regulation of interpersonal relationships which are both official and unofficial. Being the core of the group, the leader contributes to the productive achievement of results and goals in interpersonal relationships by the shortest path. The leader who obtains intellectual abilities, strong character traits, tact and diplomacy can influence group members and take responsibility and risk for decision-making. The emergence of a leader is impossible without an appropriate environment that nurtures new leaders who are ready to conform to the spirit of the times [13]. The concept of 'leader personality' is an important aspect of sociological analysis: the leader of the group who has the flexibility of character, initiative and ability to find contact easily wins the support of the main leadership team. He sees the potential and opportunity of the members of the core leadership team, and helps another individual to take a leading position if the latter has certain leadership qualities. In certain social conditions and with the formation of a psychological portrait of a leader, it becomes possible to transform and differentiate the role of a leader. Thus, in the presence of certain qualities, any person can become a leader based on the behavioural patterns of other leaders. On the example of the group under study, the authors showed a possibility of nurturing a new leader and distributing leading positions without negative consequences of changing the leader within the group.

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Социологический анализ распределенного лидерства в команде*

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Аннотация. Значение лидерства в социальной и научной сферах изучалось с разных точек зрения, парадигмы, подходы и методы постоянно менялись. Модель авторитарного лидера в обществе уступила место распределенному лидерству, и сегодня исследователи рассматривают межличностные отношения как основной фактор эффективности лидера, способного

взращивать лидерство в других: в команде потенциал лидерства распределяется между теми членами, кто не боится брать на себя ответственность. Лидеры, которые помогают создавать новое поколение лидеров, более ценны для общества, чем те, кто сосредоточен только на личных амбициях. Цель статьи — рассмотреть особенности распределенного лидерства в рамках одной группы с течением времени. Авторы применили анкетирование и метод включенного наблюдения за участниками группового взаимодействия для изучения проявлений распределенного лидерства во времени и пространстве, взаимосвязей распределенного лидерства в группе и контекста, характера взаимодействия групповых агентов в легитимации и доминировании, а также участия членов группы в социальном взаимодействии. В статье рассматриваются особенности распределенного лидерства по результатам исследования, проведенного в Российском университете дружбы народов в 2017–2020 годы в рамках одной группы. Его результаты и выводы продемонстрировали, что распределенное лидерство меняется во времени и пространстве с точки зрения своих проявлений и эффективности. Лидер занимает роль флагмана и опирается на приобретенный опыт взаимодействия с другими членами группы. В ней могут сосуществовать нескольких лидеров — при определенных социальных условиях и в распределенных областях,