

TOP OF THE SOUTH MEN'S NETWORK AN EXPLORATION OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Since the beginning of time, we have attempted to create equitable social structures, yet we have inevitably fallen into dominating hierarchies that have marginalised and scapegoated sections of society, causing enormous suffering and pain. All living and social systems at an appreciable level of complexity find that forming hierarchies improves the efficient management of entropy. These hierarchies have all too often fallen into dominating hierarchies that oppress and subjugate people. Distributed leadership structures challenge the more traditional patriarchal way of functioning. Systems theory is ideally suited to explore the complexities of human social dynamics to shine light on this perennial problem and open a pathway to more equitable social structures.

The first part of the paper employs systems theory as a framework to understand why these dominating social dynamics so persistently reproduce themselves despite our fervent desire to avoid them. The second part of the paper is a case study of the development of a network of men's groups in the Top of the South Island of New Zealand. The men's groups have always been fiercely autonomous, so a standard hierarchical structure would not have been accepted; a distributed leadership model was utilised.

Finally, we investigate similar distributed leadership solutions developed on a larger scale in the northern Spanish city of Mondragon and Enspirial in New Zealand.

Keywords

Distributed Leadership, Hierarchy, Patriarchy, Domination, Scapegoat

Introduction

This paper is written in three main parts. The first uses systems theory principles (Beer, 1984; Bertalanffy, 1969) and Holling and Gunderson's adaptive cycle (2002), as applied to large social groups in particular, to shed light on the social dynamics prevalent in human societies, which have led to a predominance of patriarchal-based dominance hierarchies (Walby, 1990). These hierarchies have consistently resulted in oppression and suffering. The second part presents a case study of the establishment of a network of men's groups in the top of the South Island of New Zealand, operating under a distributed leadership model (Spillane, 2006), where there is no position as leader, but individuals in the group step forward to initiate action as needed. The style of leadership might be called unleading because it deconstructs the usual understanding of leadership. This initiative, in its own small way, aims to avoid a return to harmful patriarchal social structures. The final part addresses the issue of scale, demonstrating that there are viable examples of distributed leadership networks at a large scale.

Top of the South Men's Groups: An exploration of distributed networks

The Adaptive Cycle in Societal Contexts

Holling and Gunderson (Gunderson & Holling, 2002) presented the adaptive cycle as a cyclic model that applies to all living and social systems, shedding light on the cyclical processes of societies. Life breathes; in and out. It expands to a point beyond which it can expand no more, and contracts until it is ready to start a new cycle of expansion. The adaptive cycle is further divided into four phases.

The first is the growth, or exploitation phase. In a society, the number of people and the complexity of the interactions increase rapidly at the beginning. Growth typically begins exponentially. As with all living and social systems, counteracting the impacts of entropy within its boundaries becomes increasingly difficult over time as complexity arises. It soon becomes more efficient to select a subset of the whole society to take on the task of managing and controlling the entropy on behalf of the whole group.

The person, or people, may be elected, appointed, or take power. Very often, they begin with the best intentions. Taking power in the exponential growth phase is more manageable than later, so the promises to the people can usually be met. It is therefore easier to gain the compliance of the membership at the start. As the complexity of social structures increases, further levels of hierarchy are added to manage the resulting entropy. While establishing a hierarchy reduces entropy and makes the society more manageable, it also creates inequality. Those at the top become increasingly disconnected from the lower levels.

Exponential growth cannot continue forever (Meadows et al., 1972). There will always be one or more constraining factors that limit growth. This heralds the movement into the conservation phase, where growth slows. The law of diminishing returns, commonly understood as picking the low-hanging fruit (Tainter, 2007), means that because humans tend to use the most easily accessible resources first, extracting them becomes more complex, takes longer, and costs more. More and more resources and effort are required to produce the same output. Picking the fruit hanging within easy grasp is much easier than climbing the tree, which becomes necessary later.

As the society grows, the infrastructure required to manage the entropy must increase and consume an increasingly larger proportion of the resources available to the system (Odum, 2007). The environment will change over time, so what worked earlier might no longer be effective. Actions taken by those in power may create a reaction that must then be managed. If a government has a controversial policy, the people are likely to protest.

Technological advances can significantly improve a society's ability to manage infrastructural complexity. Computers significantly improve the accuracy and speed of bureaucratic functions in any society. A technological advantage over a competing society can impact who maintains dominance over resources.

It becomes harder over time for those in power to maintain control. Often, those in power are increasingly faced with dissatisfied citizens and the level of compliance drops. Those in power often turn to more coercive or even violent means to maintain control (Abraham, 2019; Hauggaard, 2021).

Since those in power constitute a subsystem within a nested hierarchy of systems of systems (Troncale & Friendshuh, 2012). Leaders can choose to focus more on their own needs and desires as a subgroup. They can use their position for their own ends rather than the good of society. They possess resources such as the army, control over education and the news media, as well as the power to exclude or punish, which, if used for personal gain, can be very destructive to the people.

Max Weber (1972) states that the sovereign is the person or people who have a monopoly on the use of violence. They claim the legitimate right to coerce and force people. Since those who rebel can choose violence to disrupt the system, the leaders must be able to match the violence, or risk losing power.

Top of the South Men's Groups: An exploration of distributed networks

The society therefore enters the second phase, where expansion slows as constraints take effect. The people expect the exponential growth phase to continue expanding, and those in power typically promise continued growth. The leadership group finds it increasingly difficult to maintain control. Those in power tend to slip back into controlling through the misuse of power. They might introduce laws that restrict the actions of citizens or scapegoat a particular subset of society. Jim Sidanius's Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001) proposes that societies select arbitrary set discrimination to find an easily observable difference in the members of the society to discriminate against, such as gender, race, or age. Hitler made Jews wear a Star of David to make them identifiable.

The scapegoat (Girard & Freccero, Yvonne, 1986) pays the cost that other members of society are unwilling to pay themselves. They are often blamed for the problems those in power have been unable to resolve. The scapegoat often suffers economically and is excluded from society and denied social influence. The move towards control and dominance, of course, generates a backlash and new conflict that must be resolved.

As we see from Joseph Tainter's law of diminishing returns (Tainter, 2007), there will be a point beyond which the cost of producing new gains exceeds the value of those gains. The system is no longer viable and starts to collapse. Scapegoats or external threats are watching for the opportunities afforded by the breakdown.

The release phase is not always negative. For an alcoholic who has decided to remain sober, the growth and conservation phase has seen a repeat of their old habits, but then a change to living a difficult life. The release is a release from old behaviours, but it is not easy. There will be withdrawal symptoms that are very difficult to overcome, but they offer the possibility of creating a whole new cycle the next time. Most usually, however, the release phase is experienced as a time of pain, suffering and loss. The leaders desperately try to retain control.

Shifting into the reorganisation phase opens opportunities to plan for a better future by learning from the past and preparing bold plans for the future. We rarely take the time to assess our errors. So often through history, we have seen a lack of foresight by those who now hold the power. The errors of the reorganisation phase herald the nature of the crisis that will occur in the next cycle. We only have to look at the way Germany was treated after World War I to create the grievance that allowed Hitler to rise to power some 20 years later. The French Revolution led to Napoleon taking control, and the downfall of Tsarist Russia foreshadowed the horrific suffering under Stalin. After the reorganisation phase, the cycle begins again with a new growth phase (Carneiro et al., 2015).

The new cycle begins with hope for a better future, but this has been really evident throughout history. The reality, all too often, has been a game of musical chairs, where the players change seats but the music remains the same.

Other cyclical models

Two other cyclical models are instructive in helping to explain the social cycles we live through. The Fourth Turning, by Strauss and Howe (S1997), describes a cycle that aligns with the adaptive cycle, proposing that history follows a cycle of approximately 80 to 100 years. A complete cycle is called a saeculum, and they note that after one whole saeculum, there is nobody alive with any power who remembers how catastrophic the previous crisis was. Those in power are more willing to enter a new war.

Each turning lasts around twenty years and is thus a generation. World War II was a crisis that was followed by a High period when peace returned. There was new hope for a better world in the High Generation, but the cracks eventually appeared in the Unravelling, which transitioned into a crisis period, typically marked by war. They propose that we are now moving towards a new crisis period. They claim this cycle has been

Top of the South Men's Groups: An exploration of distributed networks

evident for hundreds of years. All the great empires of the past have followed a similar pattern of growth, reaching a peak, then falling into crisis and decay. The concept is controversial because it is difficult to falsify and has limited rigorous application outside of the US and UK.

Kondratieff (1935) devised a cycle of 40 to 60 years based on economic theory rather than social change, which also has four phases that can be aligned with the adaptive cycle and the Fourth Turning. While the exact predictions of the cycles might be contestable, the general flow of four phases repeated over time appears consistent.

Exhibit 1: The adaptive cycle phases compared to the Fourth Turning.

The adaptive cycle of Holling and Gunderson	The Fourth Turning of Strauss and Howe	Kondratiev Cycle
Growth or Exploitation	High	Expansion
Conservation	Awakening	Stagnation
Release	Unravelling	Recession
Reorganisation	Crisis	Innovation

Colonisation

All life expands where it will increase fitness. As it expands, it will inevitably encounter constraints that limit its growth. If a society exists on a piece of land, the resources available to sustain life limit what can be achieved. Commonly, therefore, a society will look to expand its borders, especially if the population is growing, so that the available resources per person decrease. That is fine where free new land is available, but typically, others have already claimed adjacent land, or there is some other impediment to expanding.

The Roman Empire is a prime example. Rome grew from small beginnings, but soon found that it could not meet its energy needs within its boundaries. It developed its military prowess to the point where it could seize the land of others by force. Some of the conquered people were killed, some enslaved, and others were allowed to become Roman citizens. There were certainly advantages for the conquered nations, but they came under the brutal rule of Rome.

The further the empire grew from its centre, the more effort and resources were required to maintain it. The boundary to be defended expanded exponentially. Sending military orders took longer, and supplies had to be sent further. Some of the neighbouring tribes they encountered were easier to defeat, while others offered more resistance.

Eventually, of course, the impact of the constraints becomes greater than the gains of conquest, and the society is on the edge of collapse. Internal strife, external threats, and the loss of control over resources can all lead to the downfall of a regime. Rome fell. Without a viable alternative society to maintain the infrastructure established by the Romans, Europe fell into the Dark Ages.

This destructive cycle has been evident throughout patriarchal societies. Men have assumed the leadership and used it for their own benefit. Powerful top-down hierarchies have controlled all aspects of people's lives. Scapegoats have been subjugated, and whole peoples oppressed. Lands have been colonised and exploited for profit at the expense of the original owners. What might then be the hallmarks of a new way for men to navigate the modern age? What might challenge the old hegemonic structures of patriarchy and to create a new social narrative and a more wholesome way for humans to come together?

Top of the South Men's Groups: An exploration of distributed networks

The Top of the South Men's Groups

A small-scale attempt to address the harms of patriarchal social structures is growing in the top of the South Island of New Zealand. It is by no means exceptional, and yet the experience of around 100 men to date may help us establish a new narrative and new ways for men to be together that build family and community. The first men's group in the top of the South was established in the mid-1990s, inspired by the activities of the Tui Community in Golden Bay. A group of eight to ten men gather in each other's houses every two weeks to create a safe space for men to explore their lives and build deeper relationships with each other. Each group is highly autonomous, making its own decisions by consensus, which, of course, is simple at that scale. The groups are peer groups without leaders or roles. They avoid *pub talk* and topics like religion and politics that distract people from their personal story. The group works hard to maintain respect, confidentiality, honesty, and accountability. Groups also developed in Motueka. A little over ten years ago, the author's men's group was established in Nelson. From early on, twice-yearly weekend retreats have been held at Lake Rotoiti.

Challenges in a Men's Group

One would expect that individuals trying to dominate the group or claim an informal leadership role would pose a challenge for men's groups; however, this has not been a significant issue for any of the groups. The greater problem has been maintaining the commitment to attending group meetings and events. With a group of eight or nine men, it is common for several to be out of town, sick, or have another reason not to be present. Particularly during winter, the numbers in Group A soon become unsustainable. Some groups are stricter about attendance than others. Sometimes, two groups may combine over a winter break to keep numbers viable.

The groups are peer groups, so the men do not have the skills to cope with a person with significant mental health issues. Experience suggests that acting sooner when a person proves unable to act appropriately in the group is ultimately more effective, given the potential conflict that can arise. Often, the man himself realises there is not a good fit for him in the group, and he chooses to leave.

Conflict between individual men can arise, and experience tells us that most often this is because of mental health or other such reasons are involved. The initial men's groups tended to be composed of a similar demographic: white, middle-class men. As the number of groups expanded, the range of ages, cultures, and lifestyles has broadened. There are few Māori men in groups, perhaps because they feel their needs are already met within a Māori cultural context. Making our groups more inclusive and accepting of differences remains a high priority.

The use of alcohol and drugs has appeared in groups. The initial groups were rigorous on not having alcohol or drugs at evening sessions or weekend retreats. We hear of closed groups choosing to take drugs together. While groups are free to choose what they do, such illegal drug use could harm the network's reputation. An issue of drugs use recently arose, not within a group we established, but a group we network with, which held a public event where we heard of drugs being freely used.

The network has had two transgender men interested in joining a men's group. Neither joined a group, but it was due to personal circumstances rather than issues related to gender. There was a willingness for men to give a transgender man an opportunity to join a group. One man asked whether it made a difference that a transgender man has not been through the socialisation process standard to men, and whether that would make a difference when discussing issues. The network looks forward to the challenge of when a transgender man joins a group.

Top of the South Men's Groups: An exploration of distributed networks

The Establishment of the Network

Three to four years ago, it became evident that the number of men's groups was dropping and commitment was waning. Many of the active young men, who established the first groups, were now of retirement age and had fallen into predictable patterns. At a weekend retreat held at Mangarakau, Hardy Bachert was challenged over his feelings of not having a purpose in his life. He identified men's work as his passion. He and the author began working to rebuild the network because they felt men's groups had something important to offer men, but men in the community were not hearing about us.

This resulted in the first International Men's Day event in Nelson in 2022. Around 100 men attended the event, and twenty-five expressed interest in joining a group. A group started that stabilised at eight members. Three International Men's Day events have been held, the first two generating one new group each and the third generating two new groups. A grant from the Ministry of Social Development enabled a Men's Open Day event to be held in Reefton in October 2023, a small rural town with many unmet social needs, and has led to a men's group that is still active 18 months later. An evening course on *Men Building Better Relationships* in Kaikōura evolved into a men's group that remains active after three years. A third regional network retreat was established around the Waitangi Day holiday.

There were other groups we had not heard of that were pulled into the network in Westport and Greymouth. From the four groups established in earlier days, there are now 15 groups within our region.

A website (mensgroup.n) has been established that is accessible nationally. While the focus has been on the Top of the South region, the website is national, and a growing confederation of men's groups exists. There are links to Auckland's Essentially Men. They work somewhat differently, with a training programme in place for men to progress through, and the work has inspired the formation of a Christchurch network in the Top of the South. Requests for information are received from all over the country.

When a new group is established, it needs guidance. There will be a facilitator to lead the group, model how a men's group operates, and foster a men's culture within the group. *Uncles* are men who have a history of being in men's groups and support the facilitator. After around six months, but sometimes longer, the supportive scaffolding has done its job, and the group can sustain itself as an autonomous group within the network. The first training weekend was recently held to equip men with the skills to be more active in supporting the network. It trains people to be uncles and to establish the unleader style of leadership firmly.

A forum has been developed to spread the workload away from the author and Hardy Bachert. The group is now organising the next International Men's Day and other events.

The Challenges of Establishing a Network

The network is a meta-level system of systems, allowing a new entity to emerge from the individual groups.. While it is easy for a men's group of eight men to manage themselves, a network of 100 or so men in a wide-ranging set of autonomous men's groups is less easy to manage, especially when approached from an unleader perspective.

If each group is autonomous, it is necessary to provide an overarching structure that does not interfere with their autonomy while maintaining sufficient cohesion. A set of principles that were developed that are broad enough to include everyone, yet narrow enough to create clear boundaries. One principle states that groups are not politically or religiously aligned. This needed to be clear enough to exclude a nationally based, strict religious organisation that has a network of men's groups adhering to traditional concepts about the place of women that did not fit our beliefs, and yet still able to embrace a Salvation Army-based group in Nelson City and a group with a high proportion of Christian believers.

Top of the South Men's Groups: An exploration of distributed networks

Some groups are focused more on men with dysfunctional lives, who would not be able to maintain a group without some facilitation to maintain coherence and motivation. Our principles serve more as guidelines than rules. The set of principles is a living document that is open to re-examination and amendment over time. Refer to Appendix A for the current principles. If a men's group breaks the principles, there must be a way to either bring them back within the fold or exclude them if the breach has been too significant.

The network needed to be able to apply for grant money to help hold events and build the network. Without any formal structure, defined roles, or financial accountability mechanisms, seeking funding was not possible. The author works for an organisation named RISE Living Safe (rise.net.nz), which has been operating in Nelson and other parts of the Top of the South for thirty years, providing services to perpetrators and victims of family violence. They agreed to operate as an umbrella organisation to enable the men to apply for funding. This has allowed the network the flexibility to retain its distributed leadership identity. To date, approximately \$50,000 in grant funding has been received.

RISE was able to tender for funding through the Accident Compensation Commission of the New Zealand Government to support five workers locally in a programme called Hikitia (Māori for *raise up*), assisting the community to provide solutions to family violence in our region. We are developing a strong working relationship, including cooperating with Hikitia to expand our International Men's Day activities.

A forum has been established to distribute the workload more evenly and create a more equitable distribution of decision-making within the group. Typically, in any organisation, there is a small group of initiators who step into the space to make a change. If nobody steps into that space, no change occurs, but stepping into that space can easily result in the formation of a hierarchy. Often, the initiator holds too tightly to their dream and stifles further development, which hinders the group's growth. Next is a subgroup of contributors. They do not make as significant a contribution as the initiators, but are vital to the ongoing development of the group. This group includes the uncles and contributors, who are willing to do more than just be part of a group. The bulk are members who attend a men's group, gain from it, but do not contribute further to the organisation. This pattern is evident in the network, indicating that the network is aware of an implicit hierarchy established by the level of commitment each individual is prepared to make towards the project. However, it works to maintain as much equality and autonomy as possible for all group members.

The roles of the author and Hardy Bachert are not positions of power in the structure. They do not represent the groups, but work with the support and encouragement of the groups. The whole network has the power to guide and, if necessary, chastise the author and Hardy Bachert.

Having said that, it is recognised that they hold an implicit power. Especially in the beginning stages, they hold a greater knowledge of the network and how it operates, are present when decisions are made and have influence over other less active members. Keeping this in mind helps maintain more equitable group dynamics, enabling the groups to flourish without falling into the traps inherent in patriarchal structures.

Larger-scale distributed leadership organisations

The case study presented to date has only touched around 100 men. It is small-scale, avoiding issues of scale. If distributed leadership groups are to have an impact on patriarchal dominance structures, they must also be effective at larger scales. There are many examples of larger-scale distributed networks, three of which will be mentioned as examples.

Distributed leadership structures (Bennet et al., 2003; Spillane, 2006) are not the magic bullet to solve all problems that arise through hierarchical structures. An operating theatre in a hospital or the cockpit of a commercial airliner needs immediate, well-informed decisions, which a distributed leadership struggles to

Top of the South Men's Groups: An exploration of distributed networks

maintain. Someone needs to be in charge and have the authority to make decisions in the moment. Many other functions in an airline or a hospital could, however, be undertaken through more cooperative organisational styles.

Cooperatives allow the profits of an organisation to flow back to the workers or members. There are housing cooperatives, cooperative banks, supermarkets, food co-ops and more that have proven effective at scale and over extended periods. A prime example is the city of Mondragon (Mondrag & Experiencie, 2012; Whyte & Whyte K., 1991) in northern Spain . In 1955, a Jesuit priest named Jose Maria Arrizmendiarieta established a small cooperative constructing kerosene heaters. Over time, more and more cooperatives arose and networked, to the point that the city has a cooperative bank, university, hospital and social service centre. The whole town is virtually a network of worker cooperatives. Mondragon has a turnover of around two billion Euros per year and has extended to forming similar centres around the world.

The boards of the various cooperatives have representatives from the workers, middle management and higher management. This means the cleaners have an opportunity to serve on the board of a large-scale cooperative. Terms are fixed so that nobody can become entrenched in a leadership position. When the cooperatives first started, the highest salary could be no more than three times that of the lowest worker. That proved to be unworkable because all the talented leaders could earn so much more outside of Mondragon. The ratio now sits at ten to one.

In Wellington, New Zealand, Joshua Vial founded a successful software company. Rather than just expanding his company, he formed collaborations with other professionals, such as accountants, lawyers, and marketers that was named Enspiral (Pazaitis et al., 2017). They each gave a portion of their profits to a central pool. Someone wishing to start a new venture could present a case and access the necessary funds for the venture, which they would repay over time. The various skilled professionals supported one another with the skills needed to build the entire network. They developed Loomio, a software platform that enables a large number of people to reach a consensus decision without a leader or coordinator. People could vote on a proposal to agree, disagree, or abstain from a decision that did not align with their views, and a veto that could be used, perhaps only three times in a lifetime, to prevent the veto from being used to get one's way. Rounds of votes, where people could change their minds, proved to be an effective means of decision-making without centralised control.

Modern technology has proven to open new possibilities for cooperative development that might otherwise be unavailable. There are cooperative versions of Uber, like Union Taxis (<https://uniontaxidenver.us/>), whereby instead of a top-down hierarchy skimming the profits at the expense of the workers. The taxi drivers are the owners, and all profits are reinvested in the business or paid to the drivers. There is no need for unions, because it is in the owners' interests to look after themselves as drivers.

Summary

Systems principles tend to form hierarchies in social groups because they increase the fitness of the group compared to one that does not cede power to a small group. Unfortunately, our history is filled with examples of male-dominated hierarchies that misused their power and used it against their own people, scapegoating others to pay the cost of the dominating structure.

Despite such tendencies, there are alternative viable choices we can make. The Top of the South Men's Network is a small scale example of a group of men taking their future into their own hands, organising leadership in a distributed fashion to ameliorate some of the negative impacts of dominance-based hierarchies, This network is merely one small example of the power of cooperative development that can be scaled up to organisations like Mondragon with a turnover of billions of Euros per year and Enspiral network. As more and more examples of distributed leadership emerge, we find hope for a more wholesome

Top of the South Men's Groups: An exploration of distributed networks

people-centred future that moves beyond the domination and suffering that have been so prevalent in our past social structures.

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Top of the South Men's Groups: An exploration of distributed networks

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Appendix I

The goal of a men's group is pure self-development and self-empowerment.

- Men's groups are peer support groups where everyone is equal.
- Men's groups are open to any man
- The core of our work is the sharing circle.
- We speak about ourselves, preferably in I-statements,
- Every man remains responsible for himself
- Confidentiality is essential.
- Feedback is integral part of the process.
- Challenges are valuable and essential to progress.
- Experimentation is welcome.
- Dealing with trauma, its imprint, and resulting patterns is part of the work we are doing.
- Commitment is essential,
- A group determines its own culture

(1)