Follower Behavior and Followership Identity: A Follower's Perspective

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What compels an employee to act beyond the scope of their role to ensure organizational success? Why do some people always seem to give their best effort no matter who they are working with or the situation in which they find themselves? Where does a worker's drive for excellence come from when it is not directly linked to an extrinsic incentive? These questions, and many more, are driving the growing body of research into what motivates followers to act and what contributes to the formation of followership attitudes (Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson, & Morris, 2006; Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Collinson, 2006; Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Kellerman, 2008; Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Tabak & Lebron, 2017; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014).

How we consider followers, the role they play in different contexts, and the attitude formation that drives them to act, has significant impact on our understanding of followership (Kellerman, 2008; Riggio et al., 2008; Sy, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Over time, a remarkably disproportionate amount of research has been directed at our understanding of leaders and leadership to the detriment of followers and followership (Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). And, even when research is conducted on follower behaviors and identities, it is usually expressed from the leader's perspective and not grounded in follower experience. Which ignores the most fundamental consideration in any project, that "Followers and leaders both orbit around the purpose; followers do not orbit around the leader" (Chaleff, 2009, p. 34). Operational success does not center on leaders or leadership in isolation. And, although it is commonly understood that no person is in a leadership position all of the time, that without followers there are no leaders, and that no two followers are exactly the same, there is very little research into the construct of follower identities or the development of followership attitudes.

The purpose of this study is to increase understanding of the role that follower identity construction plays in the willingness of an individual to subscribe to the authority of another and commit their best effort to a specified outcome. Examination of available literature related to leader-follower roles and identities consistently fails to examine how followership identities are created and exhibited from the follower's perspective in isolation from leadership development ((Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Van Vugt, 2008).

Literature Review

Research oriented on organizational productivity often focuses on refining leadership to drive production, with little consideration given to follower motivation or the leadership-followership dynamic. Although there has been significant research to define a leader and how leadership is operationalized, there is comparatively little research that relates follower behavior to the development of followership, or how the follower experience shapes these expressions. This literature review will explore three research areas to provide a foundation for future research into follower identity and followership attitude construction. The first consideration is follower identity development, followed by existing research on followership, and finally on how followership is considered from the follower's perspective.

Follower Identity

The foundation of followership is constructed through the adoption of follower behaviors that inform the follower's attitude, as represented by follower trait categorization (Carsten et al., 2010; Chaleff, 2009; Kelley, 1988; Thody, 2003). Kelley (1988) suggests that one's followership attitude is determined by two factors, their self-reliance and their motivation to act. Kelley further describes four followership styles that are created through the combination of these two traits: alienated followers, conformist followers, passive followers, and exemplary

followers. Although Kelley does not go into details individual traits that inform his model, he did provide a foundation for continuing scholarship into follower identities and followership attitudes as is represented in the following sections. Kellerman (2008) takes an even simpler approach to describing followers, limiting consideration to rank and behavior. They are followers because they are subordinate to a leader, or they are a follower because they obey commands. This simplified view of followers does not directly support research into followership styles, but it did set the foundation for future research.

Chaleff (2009), took a different route when he introduced a comprehensive list of follower traits that he categorized into followership styles by *support* and *challenge*. The followership styles were organized according to the amount of *support* required by leadership and the degree of *challenge* subordinates would create in the leader/follower relationship. The follower traits were arranged into quadrants I-IV with the most self-oriented in Q1, and the most leader intensive in Q4 (see Table 1).

Thody (2003) applied a more follower-oriented approach when she categorized "Holistic Personality Types" (p.4-5) as either positive or negative, and then correlated the personality types to specific roles the individual would be most suited for. Thody provides support for the idea that follower-oriented research lags behind leader-oriented research, when she provides that she was able to find only 241 references with follower in their title, and of those, only 41 were primary sources. Distribution of Holistic Personality Types is provided in Table 1.

Perhaps the most comprehensive list of follower traits is provided by Carsten et al. (2010). In their study, the authors used "inductive analysis" (p. 548) in their evaluation of 24 followership approaches appropriate to grounded theory approach that allowed major themes to be identified through interaction with the data. Their analysis of terms produced a list of the

coding categories and their definitions for both "prototypical personal qualities and behaviors," and "contextual themes" (p. 549). This is the only study reviewed that provided supporting context for the use of personal traits and their thematic application (see Table 1 for a list of terms and definitions).

Kellerman (2008, xix)	Defined by their rank	Defined by their behavior:
Chaleff's Follower Styles (2009, p. 42) * H= High L= Low S = Support C= Challenge	Q2 – Implementers (*HS, LC): Dependable Supportive Considerate Advocate Defender Team oriented Compliant Respectful of authority Reinforces leader's perspectives	Q1 – Partner (*LS, LC): Purpose driven Mission oriented Risk taker Cultivates relationships Holds self and others accountable Confronts sensitive issues Focuses on strengths and growth Peer relations with authority Complements leader's perspectives
	Q4 – Resources (*LS, LC): Present Available Extra pair of hands Brings specific skills Uncommitted Primary interests lie elsewhere Executes minimum requirements Makes complaints to third parties Avoids the attention of authority	Q3 – Individualists (*LS, HC): Confrontational Forthright Self-assured Independent thinker Reality checker Irreverent Rebellious Self-marginalizing Unintimidated by authority
Thody's typology of followers (2003, pp. 4-5)	Negative followers Alienated Isolated Passive Dependents Observers Reluctant-resistant Sheep Machiavellian Plateaued Survivor Yes-people, sycophants	Positive followers Independent Active-passive Entrepreneurial Loyalist Exemplary/exceptional Interdependent Transactional

Table 1 Follower traits, qualities, attributes

Coding categories for prototypical personal qualities and behaviors (Carsten et al., 2010, p. 549)	Team player	Willingness to work in cooperation with others. Emphasizing collective effort and cooperation.
	Positive attitude	Individual is inclined to approve, help, or support. Emphasizing what is laudable, hopeful, or good
	Initiative/proactive behavior	Willingness to identify, confront, and solve problems or issues; recognize and act on initiatives without deferring to the leader.
	Expressing opinions	Individual makes known his/her opinions and feelings to the leader and the group. Constructively challenges leader's ideas, decisions, initiatives, etc
	Flexibility/openness	Willingness to adapt to and be malleable. Open to new ideas or experiences
	Obedience/deference	Not participating readily or actively. Not involving visible reaction or active participation. Going along with others; Submitting without resistance.
	Communication skills	Able to exchange ideas and thoughts. Understanding audience and framing arguments accordingly.
	Loyalty/support	Faithful adherence to the leader and support for his/her ideas.
	Responsible/dependable	Capable of being depended on; worthy of trust; reliable
	Taking ownership	Emphasis on taking full responsibility for, and having power and influence over, any part of an individual's job.
	Mission conscience	Being mindful of the overarching company goals and direction. Focusing on the bigger picture and greater purpose of the work.
	Integrity	Adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty

Table 1 Follower traits, qualities, attributes (continued)

Coding categories for contextual themes (Carsten et al., 2010, p. 549)	Hierarchical/bureaucratic work context	Emphasize a command and control working relationships. Operate in a top-down fashion.
	Empowering work climate	Shared perception that the organization encourages individuals to be proactive and get involved in decision making.
	Authoritarian leadership	Leadership characterized by an insistence on obedience and authority.
	Empowering/supportive leadership	Provide autonomy and encouragement to followers. Share information to build efficacy and strengthen follower performance.

Table 1 Follower traits, qualities, attributes (continued)

How is Followership Defined?

When considering the expression of follower identities (behaviors) and the idea of followership, it is essential to consider how followership definitions are constructed. That is, do follower behaviors combine to construct followership attitudes, or do followership attitudes drive follower behavior? How followership attitudes are constructed has significant impact on how we weigh followership development relative to leadership development when working to improve efficiency and productivity within an operation. Do followers, through followership, influence leaders to adopt a leadership style, or do leaders drive the adoption of followership attitudes?

The research relating follower behaviors to followership development has been largely expressed from a leader's perspective with only about 15% of studies considering the follower's perspective (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). An additional omission in this body of research is the portability of followership. With the exception of implicit leader theory, there are no other complete theories that consider the follower's perspective exclusively, and none that explore the possibility that followership attitude is independent of activity; that a worker with strong followership would exhibit that attitude regardless of leader or environment.

In the Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) review of followership theories, the researchers examined 24 followership approaches and divided them into five followership perspectives. Of the five perspectives, three considered follower perspectives together with leadership perspectives in developing the approach (Follower-centric, Relational view, and Constructionist followership). Of the 24 listed approaches, only seven of them provided a definition for the term followership, and two of those definitions are more guidelines than definitions (see Table 2).

Author	**Followership Defined**
Crossman and Crossman (2011)	Followership is a relational role in which followers have the ability to influence leaders and contribute to the improvement and attainment of group and organizational objectives. It is primarily a hierarchically upwards influence.
Kellerman (2008, xx)	"The response of those in subordinate positions (followers) to those in superior ones (leaders). Followership implies a relationship (rank) between subordinates and superiors, and a response (behavior) of the former to the latter"
Heller and van Til's (1982)	'leadership and followership are best seen as roles in relation'
Townsend and Gebhart, (1997, p. 52)	"a process in which subordinates recognize their responsibility to comply with the orders of leaders and take appropriate action consistent with the situation to carry out those orders to the best of their ability. In the absence of orders, they estimate the proper action to contribute to mission performance and take that action
Chaleff (2009, p. 4):	Courageous followership is built on the platform of courageous relationship. The courage to be right, the courage to be wrong, the courage to be different from each other. Each of us sees the world through our own eyes and experiences. Our interpretation of the world thus differs. In relationships, we struggle to maintain the validity of our own interpretation while learning to respect the validity of other interpretations.
Kelley (1988: 146–47) .	People who are effective in the follower role have the vision to see both the forest and the trees, the social capacity to work well with others, the strength of character to flourish without heroic status, the moral and psychological balance to pursue personal and corporate goals at no cost to others, and, above all, the desire to participate in a team effort for the accomplishment of some greater common purpose."
Bjugstad (2006, p.304)	Followership may be defined as "the ability to effectively follow the directives and support the efforts of a leader to maximize a structured organization."

Table 2 Followership definitions

Followership Approaches

In their study of followership theories, Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) identified 24 approaches to followership and how followers were addressed in each of those approaches. In their study, the authors divide existing research into five perspectives that account for the fundamental differences expressed in each approach/perspective. The five categories: Leader-centric (4), with followers as recipients or moderators of leader influence in producing outcomes; Follower-centric (3), where followers construct leaders and leadership; Relational view(7), where followers engage with leaders in a mutual influence process; Role-based followership(5), with the leader as recipient or moderator of follower influence in producing outcomes; and, Constructionist followership(4), with followers as co-creators with leaders of leadership, highlight the disproportionate number of leader oriented studies of followers and followership identities. Of these five perspectives, three address approaches that consider follower identities or followership outcomes: Follower-centric, Role-based, and Constructionist followership.

Follower-centric approaches. Of the 24 followership studies evaluated, only three studies were follower-centric (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014): Romance of leadership, which considers the romantic view of leadership held by followers; Implicit leadership theory, which examines expectations followers have of their leaders (Sy, 2010); and, Social identity theory of leadership, which studies how leaders are considered through a social constructed and accepted view of leadership. While each of these approaches begin with a consideration of how leadership is viewed, these studies consider the construct of the leader from the follower's perspective and do not address how follower identities are constructed or considered.

Role-based followership. Role-based followership approaches do consider the follower's perspective with a view toward leadership, at the expense of follower behavior or

followership attitude development. In the give and take of leadership versus followership development, these theories form a solid base for evaluating how leaders might be developed through follower intervention: “Leaders as recipients or moderators of follower influence in producing outcomes” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 85). Role based followership studies offer a different perspective of the leadership/followership behaviors and identities, are unique to hierarchal organizations and are organized by followership typology/approach. Kellerman (2008, p. xix) describes ‘followers’ in relation to hierarchy, as ‘subordinates who have less power, authority, and influence than do their superiors and who therefore usually, but not invariably, fall into line’. And then goes on to suggest, “Followership implies a relationship (rank), between subordinates and superiors, and a response (behavior, of the former to the latter”(Kellerman, 2008, p. xx). Additionally, she differentiates between following and followership by the amount of effort the follower exhibits, which although essentially correct is only a surface level distinction.

Constructionist Followership. Constructionist views describe how people come together in a social process to co-create leadership and followership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). What differentiates constructionist views is that they are necessarily processual views. They see people as engaging in relational interactions, and in these interactions co-producing leadership and followership (e.g., relationships, behaviors and identities) (Collinson, 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). “Human existence is, ab initio, an ongoing externalization. As man externalizes himself, he constructs the world into which he externalizes himself. In the process of externalization, he projects his own meanings into reality. Symbolic universes, which proclaim that all reality is humanly meaningful and call upon the entire cosmos to signify the validity of human existence, constitute the farthest reaches

of this projection" (Berger, 1966, p. 104). Constructionist views speak directly to the leadership-followership relationship, but they do not address follower identity, or how followership attitudes are developed.

"Any organization is a triad consisting of leaders and followers joined in a common purpose. The purpose is the atomic glue that binds us. It gives meaning to our activities" (Chaleff, 2009, p. 34). A summary of the relationship between followership attitudes and follower behaviors, as they relate to leadership expression is provided in Table 3.

Author/s	Follower Types organized by leader dependency				
	High	→			Low
Kellerman (2008)	Isolates	Bystanders	Participants	Activists	Diehards
Chaleff (2006)	Resource	Individualist	Implementor		Partner
Kelley (1988)	Alienated	Passive	Conformists	Pragmatists	Exemplary

Table 2 Followership construction models

How followership is understood from the follower's perspective, especially in contrast to leadership, will enable more focused research on when and how followership identities are developed or adopted, and then to how followership characteristics/traits/behaviors can be developed. This research has wide reaching implications for peer influenced performance in organizational structures with distributed leadership roles and project-oriented models, civic engagement, volunteerism, and may even contribute to relationship behaviors. Given the available research, the following questions would contribute to our understanding of followership by isolating how individuals understand follower roles and their likelihood to employ followership behaviors without extrinsic motivators:

RQ_1: How do individuals who have held subordinate roles view the role of follower?

RQ_2: How do individuals who have held follower roles understand the term followership

Method

I will employ a qualitative approach to answer the research questions in this study. The use of qualitative methods, specifically interviews, is appropriate and well supported as the primary research tool because it allows the terms “follower” and “followership” to be deconstructed (Bresnen, 1995; Carsten et al., 2010) and facilitates a wide range of contextual variables that are grounded in personal experience (Bryman, Bresnen, Beardsworth, & Keil, 1988). I will interview 20 individuals who are current or former employees in a subordinate role at: Kansas State University, Farm Bureau Financial Services, Carson Property Management, and other personal acquaintances who have experience as a follower in order to gain an understanding of how these individuals viewed their roles and responsibilities as a follower and how they understand and articulate the term followership.

I will employ convenience sampling for this research because participants who have been, or are currently, employed in a subordinate role are readily available. Participants will be chosen based on their prior work experience in a subordinate role. As observed by Carsten, et al. (2010), operationalizing subordinates as followers may generate some overlap between follower and subordinate in the same way it would generate overlap between managers and leaders. Interview outcomes that are not related to the act of following will be summarized separately in my findings. Because this method provides the opportunity for participants to define their ideas of followers and followership based on personal work experiences and other social interactions, while responsive to organizational or project leader, the data produced should embody a more complete (broader) representation of identity construction than data acquired through surveys, cohort research, or individual observation.

I will conduct interviews based on my submitted interview schedule at an agreed upon public space with the expectation that the interview will not exceed 60 minutes. Participants will read and sign the informed consent form and will be verbally reminded that they have the right to stop the interview at any time, for any reason, without penalty of any sort. After the interview process, I will transcribe the interviews and look for themes in communication patterns that support follower identity and followership construct.

Results / Findings

Discussion

Conclusion

Limitations

Future Directions

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