

Follower Identity and Behavior Construction

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Communication 433

December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017

**Abstract**

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. This is a qualitative study that will include interviews of five students and two faculty/staff members from each of four university departments that advance ideas related to leadership. The study seeks, through purposive sampling of university students, faculty and staff, to advance our understanding of the term "followership," the construction of followership behaviors and how followership behaviors construct follower identities.

How we understand the role of follower identities and followership behaviors has a significant impact on construction of functional follower/leader relationships. The lack of consistent labeling and a shared understanding of these terms contribute to a disjointed view of how followership behaviors relate to leadership behaviors and how those behaviors are created and exhibited.

The study of leadership, followership, and the relationship between leaders and followers has significant implications on how we understand the characteristics, motivation, and attitudes of the people who interact to make progress toward shared objectives. The study of leader/follower relationships has historically focused on the behavior of the leaders, and more specifically, the leader in an organizational role (Barge & Little, 2002; Crossman & Crossman, 2011; de Vries, Bakker-Pieper, & Oostenveld, 2010; Junker & van Dick, 2014; Sy, 2010).

Studies that examine the role of followers within an organization do not consider the construct of the follower identity or followership behavior beyond the organizational context. Even when followers, or the idea of followership are specifically examined, it is most often within the context of how followers help shape the leader (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008) and not the construction of the follower identity, or the understanding of followership behavior on its own merit. In their study of socially constructed followership, (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010) suggest that differences in followership definitions may depend on both individual level followership schemas and relevant contextual variables that operate in the followers' organizations. Although their study examines the followership identity on its own merit, its goal was to evaluate the individual contribution to an organizational situation while applying a social construct.

Few studies have undertaken the task of examining what it means to “follow,” or to demonstrate “followership” behaviors from the followers’ perspective. How or why did the person set aside their autonomy and commit their best effort in support of another – when there is no requirement or external incentive to do so? Understanding the construct of the competence identity, self-authorizing behaviors, and situational awareness would help to understand the motivation underpinning one’s willingness to subscribe to the leadership of another when they may have a comparable degree of competence and there is no formal authority.

The language surrounding followership and follower identities may contribute to a lack of commonality in their definitions. Are followers “subordinates,” or are they “co-creators” of their relationship (Kellerman, 2008)? Are they obedient and responsive to orders or are they on equal footing but with different roles? Is the expression of followership a submission to another’s authority or is it a positive action that contributes to overall success without regard to existence of authority? How does our use of language represent the difference between a subordinate and a follower or between follower and followership? In the book, *Leadership in Organizations*, Gary Yukl (2006) uses “subordinate” or “direct report” to represent the presence of a formal authority and the term ‘follower’ for those being influenced in the absence of formal authority; i.e. peers and teammates. Even when steps are taken to differentiate followers from subordinates, most studies do not differentiate between following and followership.

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. This is a qualitative study that seeks to advance our understanding of the term “followership,” the construction of followership behaviors and how followership behaviors construct follower identities. The following literature review

examines existing studies to consider how followership identities are created and exhibited from the follower's perspective in isolation from leadership development.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review is structured around five categories of leadership/followership study: *leader-centric*, *follower-centric*, and *relational* views, which are considered from a traditional leadership perspective, and *role-based followership* and *constructionist followership* which represent emerging areas of followership oriented studies (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). The review then examines how social constructionism allows for the co-creation of leader and follower identities, but does not account for the construction of the individual identities that compel one to follow in the absence of authority.

### **Leader-Centric Approaches**

Generally described as, "Followers as recipients or moderators of leader influence in producing outcomes" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 85). Follower-centric approaches place the leader squarely in control and study how leader actions directly shape follower actions and their progress toward organizational objectives. Leader centric approaches include: scientific management approach, trait approach, behavior approach, contingency approach, and charismatic and transformational approaches (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

**Principles of scientific management.** Fredrick Taylor (1947) contends that followers require direction and control and that leaders must dictate the behaviors required to obtain desired outcomes. Although Taylor acknowledges that his approach might seem tough at times, he rationalized that it is necessary and not unkind because "mentally sluggish" followers need managers who are directive (Taylor, 1947).

**Trait approaches.** Trait approaches isolate the traits exhibited by those in leadership positions assess leader effectiveness and to predict follower behavior. Leader traits represent the personal characteristics attributed to, and displayed by, leaders across organizations and organizational structures (Zaccaro, 2007). Trait approaches do not consider follower or followership contributions to leaders' success.

**Behavior approaches.** Behavior approaches study how leaders' actions and reactions drive followers' compliance and performance. More recently, behavior approaches have expanded to include how leaders respond to followers' actions.

The traditional leadership perspective revolves around the assumption that something that formal organizational leaders do, that is, their leader behavior, has a subsequent influence on a subordinate employee. However, several researchers have suggested the idea of "reverse" causality. According to this viewpoint, the behavior of the leader is not solely an "independent" stimuli but can also be "dependent," and one of the sources of influence may be the behavior of the subordinate (Sims & Manz, 1984, p. 222).

Task oriented leaders display more direct behaviors while a relationship oriented leader may display more positive interpersonal behaviors.

**Contingency approaches.** Contingency approaches come close to exploring the idea of co-constructing leader/follower relationships when it considers the follower as contributing to the leader's approach. Leadership research experienced a shift in focus when it began to consider followers as situational factors in contingency leadership models (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

**Charismatic & transformational leadership approaches.** Charismatic leaders often do not rely exclusively on their appeal, but are sensitive to followers' needs and responsive to their

challenges (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Charismatic leadership theory emphasizes how followers relate to their leader, but from a leader-centric perspective. (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). While transformational leadership views credit leaders with challenging, inspiring, and motivating followers to accomplish designated goals (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Leader-centric approaches are attentive to how leaders shape the behaviors of followers within an organization from positions of authority. Leader-centric studies generally serve to inform organizations on leadership development and techniques for enhancing follower knowledge, contributions, and compliance. Leader-centric studies do not address followership from the perspective of the follower.

### **Follower-Centric Approaches**

Followers construct leaders and leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 85). Follower-centric approaches grew from the dominance of leader-centric studies in the leader-follower dyad. Follower-centric approaches favor the follower perspective in evaluating leader impact and the role followers play in shaping leader behaviors (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Followers consider leadership as a social construct that emergence from the cognitive, attributional, and social identity processes of followers. Follower-centric leadership approaches are similar to co-constructed leader/follower theories in that it attributes leader identification and creation to followers.

**Implicit leadership theories (ILT).** ILT are focused on how pre-existing personal constructs contribute to the identity assigned to individuals within a system. Examination of leadership through the ILT lens serves to isolate how followers view leaders and how leaders view leaders based on previously developed leader characteristics. These theories do not examine how previously developed ideas were shaped or how those conceptions shape how the

followers represent their preconceived leader characteristics (Alipour, Mohammed, & Martinez, 2017; Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, & Topakas, 2013; Junker & van Dick, 2014; Shondrick & Lord, 2010).

**Social identity theory of leadership.** Social identity theory of leadership depersonalizes the individual and relies on socially constructed conceptions of a prototypical leader. Like ILT and IFT, the social identity theory of leadership relies on the extension of previously held beliefs or idealized leader “prototype” to identify leaders (Hogg, 2001).

Follower-centric approaches to generally focus on the fulfillment of the follower role and do not address the attitudes and perspectives of followers in relation to the task or organization. Follower-centric approaches position function over attitude and is closely related to follower-role approaches.

### **Relational View**

“The recognition that relational dynamics are important in leadership is addressed in relational approaches to leadership. These approaches view leadership as a mutual influence process among leaders and followers” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 85). Lord's connectionist information-processing, Weierter's charismatic relationships, Follett's power with, Hollander's relational view, leader–member exchange theory, Klein & House's “Charisma On Fire,” and Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser's “toxic triangle” are all representative of relational views of leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). These relational leadership views contribute to understanding the role of relationships in leader/follower identities, but do not contribute meaningfully to co-constructed identities, or respond to the idea of followership.

### **Role-Based Followership**



“Leaders as recipients or moderators of follower influence in producing outcomes” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 85). Studies that examine role-based followership include implicit followership theories (IFT), followers as shapers of leaders' actions, and followership behaviors (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Role based followership studies offer a different perspective of the leadership/followership behaviors and identities. Role-based followership is unique to hierarchical 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.

**Carsten's followership role orientations.** Carsten’s followership role orientations evaluate how followers view themselves and their leaders considering how the follower sees their own role. Followers who see themselves as obedient but work in a highly independent workplace experience distress. The same is true for high commitment followers who find themselves in a structured, highly directed environment (Carsten et al., 2010).

**Implicit followership theories (IFT).** IFT focuses on how pre-existing personal constructs contribute to the identity assigned to individuals within a system. Examination of followership through the IFT lens serves to isolate how followers view followers and how leaders view followers based on previously developed follower characteristics (preconception of leader and follower identities and characteristics). These theories do not examine how previously developed ideas were shaped or how those conceptions shape how the followers

represent their preconceived idea (how closely the follower matches their own preconceived notion of a follower (Sy, 2010).

Role-based follower approaches generally evaluate the impact followers have on organizational success, leader development, and follower functions relative to the specific role the follower is fulfilling. These studies do not explicitly speak to the essence of followership or the construct of a followership attitude.

### **Constructionist Followership**

“The sociology of knowledge is concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality”(Berger, 1966, p. 4). Constructionist views describe how people come together in a social process to co-create leadership and followership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). What signifies 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). The following constructionist processes contribute to the co-creation of follower identities from different vantage points.

**DeRue & Ashford's leadership identity construction.** DeRue & Ashford's leadership identity construction process relies on the granting and claiming of identities in a reciprocating, alternating manner. Co-creation of identities occurs when both individual claim and grant the

identified and the ascribed identities in each applicable context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) .

Leadership identity construction provides a straight forward process for arriving at a mutually agreed upon relationship between followers and leaders, but fails to provide a definition for followership and seems to represent identity development within an organizational structure to co-create leader and follower identities. Further limiting broad application of this process is that it fails to account for situations in which no foundational authority exists; this limitation results in a failure to account for the leader/follower identities beyond the structural limitations of their study.

**Shamir's co-production process.** Shamir's co-production process suggests that followers construct the “leader” by providing boundaries for leader behavior that sets the groundwork for leader development and the exercise of transformational leadership. This idea supposes that charismatic leaders are unable to provide objective assessments of themselves to applied in a self-development feedback loop. Consequently, followers’ input is used to help keep charismatic leaders from inadvertently exploiting their power (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

**Collinson's post-structuralist identity view.** Collinson's post-structuralist identity view suggests that to understand an object (e.g., a text), it is necessary to study both the object itself and the systems of knowledge that produced the object. “Rejecting the common stereotype of followers as timid, docile sheep, these writers argue that in the contemporary context of greater team working, “empowered, knowledge workers”, and “distributed” and “shared” leadership, good followership skills have never been more important” (Collinson, 2006, p. 180). Collinson (2006) suggests that leader’s pre-occupation with their own identity development inhibits their ability to objectively interact with their followers. According to Collinson’s characterization of

followership, this study considers any who follow to be exercising followership – there is not a set of behaviors assigned to the follower that represent followership.

**Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien's relational (discursive) approach.** Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien's relational (discursive) approach offers an approach to leadership that positions followers as “actors” who “engage, interact and negotiate” with leaders to influence organizational understandings and produce outcomes. Leadership is viewed as a “relational process co-created by leaders and followers in context” (p. 1024). According to Fairhurst (2010), Viviane Robinson provides the best definition of leadership that can be applied to discursive leadership, “Leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them” (Robinson, V. M. J. 2001). The concept of discursive leadership is founded on four components. First, leadership is a process of influence and meaning management among actors that advances a task or goal. Second, leadership is an attribution made by followers or observers. Third, the focus is on leadership process, not leader communication alone, in contrast to heroic leadership models. Finally, leadership as influence and meaning management need not be performed by only one individual appointed to a given role; it may shift and distribute itself among several organizational members (Fairhurst, 2008).

Constructionist approaches to leader-follower identity creation and leadership-followership attitude development is positioned to address the co-creation of role definitions and how these identities are characterized. Constructionist approaches are situated to support future research into the construct of a more nuanced understanding of followership definition, attitudes, and characteristics.

## **Summary**

A review of available literature indicates that although followership is considered within the context of leadership, there is little research that evaluates followership from the perspective of the follower or the co-construction of the follower identity from the follower's perspective. Given the available research, the following questions would contribute to our understanding of followership by isolating how individuals understand followership behavior, and their likelihood to employ followership behaviors without extrinsic motivators:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: How do people define what it means to be a leader?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: How do people define what it means to be a follower?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: How are the definition of leadership and followership rooted in personal experience?

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

I will employ a qualitative research approach to answer the research questions in this study. This study will include students, faculty and staff from a large mid-western university's (Kansas State University) Leadership Studies, Communication Studies, Student Government, and Veteran's Services departments (sections). These four departments were selected because they embody different, if overlapping, constituencies that each represent a unique perspective on leadership and followership behaviors. Data gathered from this study may be applied in future studies that consider participants who are not associated with leadership oriented departments or organizations.

I am familiar with the leaders for each department and will coordinate directly with them to obtain approval to conduct this study in accordance with university policy and the Institutional Review Board provisions. I will comply with all Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements to ensure approval is obtained prior to conducting any portion of this study.

Departments were chosen to participate because they each offer a different perspective on leadership and advance different learning outcomes for their populations. I include the School of Leadership Studies because they represent a population of approximately 2,000 students who have volunteered to participate in leadership training. The Leadership School is representative of students across each class year and because the students they are engaged in the adaptive leadership process, they are appropriate to this study. The Student Government is comprised of over 50 students who have volunteered and been elected to serve in a leadership capacity. Given that the Student Senate regularly engages in a deliberative process that involves following and leading in a co-constructed manner, they are appropriate for inclusion in this study. The Communication Studies department is comprised of students pursuing degrees that include persuasion, argumentation and debate, rhetoric, organizational communication, political communication, and other courses that introduce or reinforce the idea of leadership and followership to their students. Because the Communication Studies department is closely aligned with Leadership Studies, and given the diversity of courses taught, students from this department may offer more theoretically based responses than other department participants and are appropriate participants in this study. Finally, the Veteran Services serve about 1,500 veteran students who have experienced hierarchical and adaptive leadership across multiple environments and circumstance. The Veteran Service section is comprised of current and former service members who have engaged in leadership/followership behaviors and are appropriate for this study.

### **Participation**

I will use maximum variation sampling to select five students and two faculty members from each identified department. Maximum variation sampling will provide a diverse set of

perspectives from across a variety of leadership oriented populations. I will interview five students from each department to gain an understanding of how student perspectives are represented according to affiliation with leadership oriented departments. I will interview two faculty or staff members from each department to gain an understanding of how staff and faculty department affiliation impacts followership perceptions.

### **Data Collection**

This study will be advertised in each department and I will request opportunities to address classes or gatherings within each department to solicit volunteers. Student, staff, and faculty who volunteer to participate will be contacted via email or telephone to arrange an interview. Interviews will be conducted in Nichols Hall, the Student Union, or Staley School of Leadership to provide convenient location choices and consistent interview environments. This study is open to all individuals described in the sample section. This study will be conducted through interviews of a purposeful sample selected from among the four departments listed in the Sample ample section. I will identify and organize volunteers for this study and ensure that they are aware of their right to autonomy. I will inform them if the purpose of the study and how I will use the results they provide. I will safeguard interview material appropriately according to the IRB guidelines and prudent security measures. I will request permission from each participant to video record our interview. If the respondent is unwilling to conduct a video interview, I will seek authorization to use an audio recorder. If audio recording is unacceptable, I will take notes. As the interview progresses. I expect each interview to last between 30 and 60 minutes depending on the responsiveness of respondents.

### **Measures**

This study is intended to identify how individuals view leadership behaviors, followership behaviors, leader identities, follower identities and their perceived relationship between leaders and followers and leadership and followership. Responses to the sensitizing questions listed in Appendix A will be followed up with probing questions that provide detail and/or context to the sensitizing questions. The questions listed at Appendix A are well suited to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of how individual students, staff, and faculty's perceptions respond to the research questions.

### **Data Analysis**

I will employ thematic analysis to categorize responses from interviews to answer all three research questions. Thematic analysis is the most appropriate analysis based on the ability to identify and categorize terms and phrases based on their recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness of expression. I will establish categories that align with the sensitizing and probing questions identified in my interview guide and that capture recurring and repeated responses. I will evaluate individual responses and collective responses from a phenomenological perspective to evaluate responses based on lived and perceived understandings of leader-follower dynamics.



**("Implicit leadership theories; essays and explorations," 2006)**

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### **Appendix A – Interview Guide**

- How has your experience been in (whichever department they represent)?
- **What is your idea of leadership?**
  - Do people you identify as leaders always display leadership behavior?
  - How do you see yourself as a leader?
  - How does leadership usually show up in your conversations?
  - How do leaders influence the behavior of followers?
- **What is your idea about following or followers?**
  - How do you see yourself as a follower?
  - How do followers influence the behavior of leaders?
  - Do people you identify as followers always display follower behavior?
  - Have you ever seen followers who display leadership behaviors?
- **How do you understand the term “followership?”**
  - How do you differentiate between following and followership?
  - How does followership usually show up in your conversations?
  - How does your life experience contribute to your followership?

## **Appendix B – Informed Consent**

### **Project Title: Followership Identity Development**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

You are invited to join a research study to look at how followership identities are developed. Please take whatever time you need to discuss the study with your family and friends, or anyone else you wish to. The decision to join, or not to join, is up to you.

In this research study, we are investigating how the idea of followership is understood and applied in goal specific relationships. Results of this study will be used to construct a cohesive idea of the term, its adoption, and its application.

#### **WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY?**

If you decide to participate you will be asked to participate in one interview that addresses leader/follower identities. Follow-up interview(s) may be required to clarify responses. We think this will take you 30-45 minutes. This study will be conducted over the course of Spring semester of the 2017-2018 academic year and will be completed by April 30, 2018.

The investigators may stop the study or take you out of the study at any time they judge it is in your best interest. They may also remove you from the study for various other reasons. They can do this without your consent. You can stop participating at any time without penalty or negative consequence.

#### **RISKS**

This study involves the following risks: There are no unique physical risks associated with this study. You will be asked to disclose your opinion and experiences related to leading and following in scenarios that you describe. You risk disclosure of your personal story and the impact that disclosure might have on you. Your responses are confidential, so risk is limited to the possible exposure of your responses. There may also be other risks that we cannot predict.

#### **BENEFITS TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?**

It is reasonable to expect the following benefits from this research: A participant can expect to gain an understanding of their perspective on the leader-follower relationship, the leadership-followership identities, and how followership identities are developed. However, we can't guarantee that you will personally experience benefits from participating in this study. Others may benefit in the future from the information we find in this study.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

We will take the following steps to keep information about you confidential, and to protect it from unauthorized disclosure, tampering, or damage: Personally Identifying Information (PII) will be scanned and stored in an encrypted file on a secured cloud server. Your interview responses will be tracked by a serial number randomly applied to you for use in data coding. Your identity will not be connected with your responses in any way. Results of your interview will be protected as either scanned transcript or audio recording; either of which will be encrypted and stored on a secure cloud storage site. This study will compile and reference aggregated data. Paper copies of demographic data will be scanned and immediately cross-shredded.

**INCENTIVES**

*As of this writing, I do not have an incentive plan. This may developed in conference with my faculty advisor.*

**YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled, and it will not harm your relationship with Kansas State University or the organization/department your were selected from. You will be asked, but not required, to notify the researchers to announce your withdrawal from the study.

**CONTACTS FOR QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?**

Call Scott Heise at 785-317-7738 or by email [sasheise@ksu.edu](mailto:sasheise@ksu.edu) if you have questions about the study, any problems, unexpected physical or psychological discomforts, any injuries, or think that something unusual or unexpected is happening. The University Research Compliance office may be reached at 785-532-3224, [comply@k-state.edu](mailto:comply@k-state.edu)

**Consent of Subject (or Legally Authorized Representative)**

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Signature of Subject or Representative

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Date

*Upon signing, the subject or the legally authorized representative will receive a copy of this form, and the original will be held in the subject's research record. Unless otherwise required by the HSRO, Exempt research does not require a signature. For all other research, in some cases it may be in the best interest of the subject not to collect a signature and the HSRO will advise you if that is the situation.*