

Reconceptualizing Followership Identity: Why Leadership Educators Should Care About
Followership

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Abstract

Research into followership is becoming increasingly popular, however, many have claimed that followership is not a genuine field of inquiry as there is a lack of follower self-identity. As a result, some have gone as far as to suggest that followership should be left unexplored. In this paper, we have addressed the issue of lack of follower self-identity while arguing for the legitimacy of followership. We prescribe new ways of approaching followership, examine how these new approaches fit within the modern discourses of leadership and recommend how leadership educators should incorporate followership into their academic programs. The review has important implications for leaders, followers, leadership educators, organizations, and researchers.

Introduction

It is no secret that the field of followership is gaining prominence in the broader field of leadership – and rightfully so. We all have been followers at one point or the other and many of us are more likely to be followers than leaders (at least positionally) in our lifetime (Kelley, 1992). While leadership literature has been relatively silent about followership, the role of followers in the leadership process cannot be overemphasized, as there cannot be a leader without a follower (Chaleff, 2008). Recently, there have been many critical perspectives contesting the authenticity of followership. Ford and Harding (2018) argue the term follower is a fiction that exists only in the imaginative realms, as nobody really identifies as a follower, and as a result the study into followership is meaningless. Similarly, Schedlitzki, Edwards, and Kempster (2018) alluded to the notion that the follower is an absent identity in the leadership process while going a step further to state that the leader-follower process is a creation of our imagination as there are no stable leader-follower relationships – except, of course, in our fantasies.

On one hand, these authors argue that leadership identity construction as described by many popular leadership models is devoid of reality (Ford and Harding, 2018; Schedlitzki, Edwards, & Kempster, 2018). For example, they claim the transformational leadership behaviors posited by Bass (1985) are unrealistic, as nobody truly identifies with these heroic traits. According to these authors, leaders are always trying to live up to these heroic behaviors but are usually let down when they are not able to attain such lofty standards. On the other hand, the authors claim the followership identity construction is just as bad or even worse, as nobody really identifies as followers.

The critics of followership then recommend we leave followership unexplored while we try to fix leadership (Ford & Harding, 2018; Schedlitzki et al., 2018). This recommendation, however, offers little insight into new ways of approaching followership – except to end it. To solve this conundrum of follower/ship identity, however, we need to reconsider how we have always approached followership.

Review of Relevant Literature

In this paper, we will prescribe new ways of approaching followership (and leadership), examine how these new approaches fit within the modern discourses of leadership and recommend how leadership educators should incorporate followership into their academic programs.

Dynamic Follower Identity Versus Stable Follower Identity

First, we need to embrace the idea of followership as a dynamic identity rather than a stable identity. While some aspects of our identity (e.g., gender orientation) are established at adolescence, many of our identities are still under construction well into adulthood (Waterman, 1982) – many would argue that even gender identity is not fixed these days. We have multiple identities that are constantly changing, and features of the environment such as language go a long way in influencing our identity (Burke, 2003; Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999). Schedlitzki and colleague (2018) identified the insufficiency of the language as a major reason why people may not identify as followers. For example, children grow up learning that leadership is about being popular and being in charge; they are constantly bombarded with the adulation and reward of leadership in their schools, religious groups, television etc. So, yes, they grow up identifying with leadership because of language (Schedlitzki et al., 2018). Followership, on the other hand, is often characterized by degrading connotations (Chaleff, 2015). The traditional leadership discourse has mostly viewed the follower as someone who lacks imagination and is always reliant on the leader (Agho, 2009). This kind of degrading characterization is inimical to follower self-identity and could undermine the saliency of follower identity (Burke, 2003).

However, followership behaviors include many desirable behaviors that are rarely mentioned in leader-centric literature. For example, a follower while being a subordinate can be an independent critical thinker who can think outside the box to solve problems and help the leader out of a difficult situation (Kelley, 1988). A follower can also be a courageous person who discreetly disagrees with the leader or even intelligently disobeys the leader if need be (Chaleff, 2008); such followers make their leaders better by being effective. Therefore, we need to work on changing the narrative and connotations associated with follower/ship to foster followership identity. This followership identity then continues to develop as the features of the environment (e.g., language) continue to reinforce it.

Followership as Roles Rather Than Stable Identity

The perspective that followership should be based on a stable identity is concealed in the assumption that followership is person-based – that is, the person makes the follower (Grint, 2000). This is reflective of the great man theory that leadership is dispositional (Yukl, 1999); and while many leadership scholars would argue they have since moved on from this approach, their current perspective on followership is still reflective of this. The implication of seeing followership as a person is that it makes some people preclude themselves from being followers as soon as they identify as leaders. However, we can approach followership/leadership from a role perspective (Baker, 2007). Using a role perspective would invalidate the notion that we are constantly seeking a stable workplace identity as suggested by Schedlitzki and colleagues (2018), since the role perspective would then allow us to constantly switch between leader-

follower roles (and leader-follower identities) in organizations. This would make followership (and leadership) like the hats we wear, such that we can choose to wear different hats depending on the situation. Perhaps, a good example would be middle-level managers who often switch between leader-follower roles in organizations – they are leaders to their subordinate while at the same time followers to their superiors (Agho, 2009; Baker, Mathis, & Stites-Doe, 2011; Nielsen & Cleal, 2011).

Learning Followership Behaviors

Consequently, approaching followership as roles would necessitate individuals possess the requisite behaviors to function in such roles (Baker et al., 2011), which would then require them to learn these behaviors – and as is the case with leadership, followership can be learned. However, it almost sounds counterintuitive to learn about followership, since the general notion is that we automatically become followers the moment we are not leading. While this may be true, this perspective conceptualizes followership as a unitary concept, ignoring that there is good and bad followership, just as much as there is good and bad leadership (Kellerman, 2013). Moreover, researchers have claimed that followership is foundational to leadership (Agho, 2009). The statement, ‘he who must be a leader must first be a follower,’ has become a catchphrase among leadership scholars, which suggests that the possession of good followership behaviors is a prerequisite to good leadership (Agho, 2009). In fact, to test these assumption, Baker and colleagues (2011) explored the relationship between middle-managers’ exemplary leadership behaviors and effective followership behaviors in organizations across the United States, and found that middle-managers’ exemplary leadership behaviors predicted their effective followership behaviors. It then follows that effective followership is important to exemplary leadership, and should be developed together with leadership behaviors. However, leadership development intervention programs are still predominantly focused on developing leadership behaviors while little to no attention devoted to developing followership behaviors. This might explain why we have many mediocre leaders and few exceptional ones, and why many believe we have a leadership crisis in the United States (Rosenthal, 2012).

Followership is also important for working effectively in teams. According to the Job outlook 2018 survey of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), the percentage of employers that indicated ‘ability to work in a team’ as their most desired attribute in college graduates increased from 78.9% in 2016 to 82.9% in 2018 (moving from second place to first place), while the percentage of employers that indicated ‘leadership skills’ as their most desired attribute reduced from 80.1% to 72.6% in the same time period (moving from first place to fourth place) (NACE, 2018). This changing trend de-emphasizes the significance of the individual leader while highlighting the importance of working effectively as a team. Moreover, the fact that preference for ‘leadership skills’ decreased while the ‘ability to work in a team’ increased suggests that employers perceive the ‘ability to work in a team’ requires more than just the possession of ‘leadership skills.’ Team work requires team members to switch between both leadership and followership roles – that is, knowing when to lead and when to take a step back and follow.

Identifying Important Followership Behaviors

Many leader-centric scholars have argued that followership and leadership seem almost indistinguishable, as many followership variables now look like leadership variables (Crossman & Crossman, 2011). For example, in some followership theories, you would see variables such as communication, building trust, working with others, embracing change, among others (Rosenbach, Pittman, & Potter III, 1996) – these variables are also common in leadership theories. Then one begins to wonder if followership research is not a replication of effort – are we not, in essence, studying leadership while we claim to study followership? For example, Agho (2009) identified honesty/integrity as common to both leaders and followers. Moreover, Chaleff (2015) identified intelligence disobedience as a follower behavior, while McGannon (2011) contends it is a leader behavior.

However, while leaders and followers share many behaviors in common, there is a difference in the saliency of those behaviors in each role (follower or leader role). Agho's (2009) study of the differences in the leader and follower behaviors explain this phenomenon. Agho (2009) collected rankings of 20 behaviors from leaders and followers, to examine if there was a similarity in leader and follower rankings. According to Agho (2009), only five behaviors (i.e., honesty, broadminded, straightforward, determined, and independent) were similar in ranking, while the rest of the behaviors differed in rankings. It then follows that leader-follower behaviors, while similar in content, are different in their importance to either leaders or followers. The onus then lies on leadership educators and those involved in leadership development interventions to find and teach those behaviors that are most important to followership.

The challenge, however, is that some of these important follower characteristics would be perceived as elitist in modern discourses. For example, the follower behavior of 'identifying with the leader's vision' would likely be frowned upon by many follower-centric scholars (Rosenbach, & Potter, 1998). However, this is the reality that comes with the role of followership. Followers do not primarily pursue their own vision; they pursue their leader's vision, and it is in achieving their leader's vision that they achieve their own vision. Moreover, the follower behaviors of supportiveness, dependability, cooperativeness, and loyalty occupy the top seven rank in Agho's (2009) study. While these behaviors are important to follower/ship, follower-centric scholars would argue these behaviors make the followers subservient to the leader. However, the issue of power and hegemony, while vehemently refuted in modern discourses, cannot be completely eradicated, as this is the reality of leadership and followership. We should, therefore, shun this elitist rhetoric (at least in this case) and instead focus on identifying important follower behaviors that are capable of informing reality, and not one that is devoid of reality.

New Measurement Strategies for Followership

There is a need to change the way we approach measurement and theory in followership and leadership. Almost every construct in followership/leadership is a latent construct. While this

latent model is prevalent in social science research, some scales may be better conceptualized as formative (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Lee, 2003). According to the latent model, followership is a function of a followership construct that is within an individual, which is then reflected by indicators. These indicators are the behaviors we measure with questionnaires. This latent construct seeks to measure an individual's 'real self' by measuring their response to items on an instrument, and their 'real self' is believed to have caused those responses (Schedlitzki et al., 2018). However, with measuring the real-self comes the issue of identity construction, as followers do not even identify as followers except when they have to describe their leaders (Ford and Harding, 2018; Schedlitzki et al., 2018). However, what if we replace this latent model with a formative model? Unlike the latent construct model, where followership is causing behaviors, under the formative construct model, followership behaviors would be causing followership (Podsakoff et al., 2003). It then follows that followership theories do not need to explain or measure the stable identity of followers (that is, followership that resides in individuals); but rather prescribe followership behaviors that reflect and inform reality. Moreover, this formative model would better account for the dynamic nature of leader-follower identities and would be better suited for the role perspective of followership/leadership, such that individuals can switch between leader and follower roles (and behaviors) without being cocooned into one identity (Baker et al., 2011).

Looking at many followership (and even leadership) instruments, many of these constructs, although posited as latent, are formative in nature. For example, Kelley's (1988) model of followership classified followership behaviors along two dimensions – critical thinking and level of involvement. Just visually analyzing these two scales suggests there is going to be a low intercorrelation between how one critically thinks and their level of involvement; and as a result such scales would likely yield low fit statistics, making it difficult to validate. However, if we approach these scales as formative indicators that are causing effective followership, then we would not need to satisfy fit indices criteria, in which case, face and content validity would be sufficient (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Developing a Followership Curriculum

Throughout this paper, we have seen how important the roles of the followers are in the leadership process. There is no gainsaying that followership is a natural phenomenon; it is one we cannot continue to deny. Despite its importance, followership has not been given the attention it deserves by leadership scholars. However, many follower-centric scholars have now proposed that leadership development programs develop a curriculum that is particularly designed for followership development (Dixon & Westbrook, 2003; Johnson, 2009; Kellerman, 2013). While there are clear justifications for this recommendation, it is, nonetheless, aspirational. Moreover, since followership derives its essence from leadership as much as leadership derives its essence from followership, it makes little sense to have a stand-alone followership program, at least for now. In addition, as Ford and Harding (2018), as well as Schedlitzki and colleagues (2018), have noted, there are few people who identify as followers. Therefore, starting a stand-alone program/certificate for a field that is relatively unpopular might be taking on too much too soon. Perhaps a good starting point would be a followership curriculum infused into the leadership curriculum. For example, a leadership educator might teach some topics on followership using followership models (e.g., Chaleff, 2008; Kelley, 1988), in addition to the standard leadership

topics being taught. In this way, we would start teaching aspiring leaders how to be effective followers. In the modern discourses of leadership, there is a general sense that leaders need to learn to step back and follow sometimes, because they do not always have the answer. However, what better way to teach leaders how to follow than to teach them followership alongside leadership? These programs may then offer an ‘effective leader-follower’ certificate instead of a stand-alone followership or leadership certificate.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this paper, we have argued for the legitimacy of followership as a field of study and rebuffed the sentiment that followership should be left unexplored (Ford & Harding, 2018). Since followership occurs in the same space with leadership, an attempt to explore followership is, in essence, an attempt to explore leadership (Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Hurwitz and Hurwitz, 2009). The extant knowledge on leadership could be more profound if we commit to studying followership and the context in which leadership and followership take place (Kellerman, 2013).

We have recommended we study followership as roles – this perspective would allow us to switch between leader-follower roles, knowing when to lead and when to take a step back and follow (Baker et al., 2011). While roles sometimes come with position, seeing leadership as a role should not be confused with seeing leadership as a position. Leadership as a position suggests you cannot exercise leadership until you have a formal authority (Grint, 2000). On the other hand, seeing leadership as a role is not exclusive to those having formal authority and can include anyone who steps up to function in a leadership capacity, which makes leader emergence and leader identity so dynamic – one minute you are a leader, and the next minute you could be a follower. This, we believe, is in consonance with many modern discourses on leadership and followership (Agho, 2009; Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Hurwitz and Hurwitz, 2009; Nielsen & Cleal, 2011).

Lastly, we recommend leadership educators incorporate followership into leadership by having a followership curriculum infused into the leadership curriculum (Johnson, 2009). Rather than a stand-alone certificate of its own (Chaleff, 2008), we suggest having a joint ‘effective leader-follower’ certificate. This would expose aspiring leaders to followership while teaching them to see leadership and followership as roles, rather than a position they hold – they should then be taught the behaviors important for functioning in each role and how to switch between those behaviors. This, we believe, would begin to change the narrative around followership, foster appreciation of followership, and encourage the willingness to identify and function as effective followers.

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