

How Do We Talk About Followership? Uncovering Followership Discourse(s) through World Café

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to uncover emerging followership discourses and themes. Additionally, this study examines how current and historic trends have shaped the direction of followership research and studies.

Design/methodology/Approach: The research utilizes the World Café approach in collecting data from participants of three professional conferences: the Global Followership Conference, the Association of Leadership Educators conference, and the International Leadership Association global conference. Artifacts from the sessions were analyzed thematically by manual sorting.

Findings: The findings reveal three followership discourses — Maintaining, Reframing, and Transforming discourses. Furthermore, the study highlights the influence of social media, the COVID-19 pandemic, power relations, etc. on followership discourses.

Research limitations/implications: The fluid and dynamic nature of World Café increases the risk of different interpretations and misconstruals of participants' contributions. Further research is needed to confirm the findings and advance the understanding of followership discourses.

Practical implications: This paper will be beneficial to scholars and practitioners who are seeking understanding on how to build, recognize and appreciate a followership culture within their environment, including management development and related educational programs.

Originality/Value: This study adopts the World Café approach, an unconventional qualitative data collection method for followership research and studies, highlighting its potential within participatory research. Additionally, the research presents a novel effort to explore the influence of historical and current trends in followership discourses.

Keywords: Change Management, Facilitation, Followership, Group dynamics, Leadership, Transformational Leadership

Introduction

Despite the recent surge and prominence of followership as an academic field of research, discourses and traditional practices of followership have existed for more than three decades (Oc *et al.*, 2023). Many of the management theories developed in the 20th century—such as bureaucratic, behavioral, administrative, and scientific management—were postulated with the aim of getting followers to adapt to organizational demands and produce maximal results (Kwok, 2014). This, however, contributed to the glamorization of leadership and the underappreciation of followership, as employees were perceived as resources and tools needed to achieve organizational results (Riggio *et al.*, 2023).

Nevertheless, the research on leadership continues to evolve and the narrative on followership is beginning to change, including in the context of management development (Hayes *et al.*, 2015; Hoobler and Dowdeswell, 2023; Sposato, 2024). The recent increase in followership research has been linked to the realization and acceptance that leaders and followers play complementary roles in achieving organizational success; and while leaders may clearly communicate their vision and strategies, followers are the core actualizers (Collinson, 2006; Oc *et al.*, 2023; Tripathi, 2021). It was for this reason Uhl-bien *et al.* (2014) suggested that to fully understand leadership dynamics, a comprehensive study and understanding of followership is imperative. However, even as researchers are starting to immerse themselves in followership study, arguments have arisen to discredit why followership research and study should exist (Ford and Harding, 2018; Kempster, 2021).

Contemporary events—such as the COVID-19 pandemic, international and political unrests, globalization, and technological revolution—have exposed the complementary role both followers and leaders play within an organizational setting and revealed why followership studies and research should be advanced (Gallegos *et al.*, 2024; Uhl-bien, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2023). The need for advancement in followership discourse and related research is underpinned by the assumption that it is not possible to gain a full understanding of leadership without examining the contribution and uniqueness of followers and followership to the leadership process (Moosavinia *et al.*, 2019; Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien and Carsten, 2018). As a result, this research seeks to illuminate how researchers and practitioners describe the trends and emerging followership discourses. The research question that guided this study was: “What are the characteristics and influencing factors associated with followership discourse(s)?”

Literature Review

To fully conceptualize this study, it is helpful to consider the literature associated with three different frames: (1) discourse as a concept, (2) followership discourses over time, and (3) implicit followership theory.

Discourse as a Concept

The study of discourse from a critical standpoint began in the 1970s and has been used in many connotations (He, 2017; Liu and Guo, 2016). While the term has been widely associated with the field of linguistics (He, 2017; Rysová, 2017), it has also been employed in other contexts. For instance, the terminology of discourse was used to describe how human and non-human species share certain similar gestures that form the basis of their interaction and engagement (Patel-Grosz *et al.*, 2023). Equally, in a political context, several discourse strategies (e.g., mental and

contextual models) were embedded in ways the United States and China held conversations and exchanges during the COVID-19 pandemic (Al-Mwzaiji, 2021). Additionally, discourse has been used to connote the perceptions and definitions of experts about different subject matters such as climate delay and artificial intelligence (Bearman *et al.*, 2023; Lamb *et al.*, 2020). Notably, the study of discourse has been linked with the work of Michael Foucault (He, 2017). Foucault's proposition on discourse masks itself as an a-historical, universal, and scientific construct that often decides how knowledge is organized and structured (Adams, 2017). His works focused on establishing the relationship between power and knowledge, and how there are underlying social rules and systems that influence meanings given to knowledge and what is considered truth (Adams, 2017; Moosavinia *et al.*, 2019; Zhiyi, 2023). Therefore, it is important to recognize that discourse is influenced by and created for power.

Followership Discourse(s) Over Time

While Bastardo and Van Vugt (2019) trace the evolutionary nature of followership across thousands of years, the discourse on followership seems to be more recent. Oc *et al.* (2023) account that between 1910 and 1970, followers were only considered as passive recipients of leadership influence with no power in a leadership process. In the 1970s and 1980s, they were treated as part of the leader's context. From 1990 to the 2020s era, discourses on followership became more prominent, and it became more common to research the role of followers in leadership, the typologies of followership, and followership identity. Equally, Western's (2019) work on the four discourses of leadership provides insight on the development of followership discourse. Western (2019) characterized 1900 to the 1950s as the controller era, where followers were treated as objects for production, efficiency, and implementation; the 1960s to 1980s, referred to as the therapist era, was primarily when followers were treated as programmed participants, needing motivation to produce results; the messiah era, from 1980s through the 2000s, viewed followers as participants needing culture and compelling vision in order to work; and the decades since have focused on shared creativity and work between followers and leaders.

Systematic reviews of literature reveal much of the scholarship stems from a formal theory of followership (Kahn *et al.*, 2019; Loyola and Aiswarya, 2023; Otham and Busari, 2024; Ribbat *et al.*, 2024). Notably, Uhl-Bien *et al.* (2014) framed followership with two core perspectives: rank-based and constructionist. The rank-based perspective views followership through the lens of hierarchical exchanges, where followers are seen as subordinates while the leaders are managers. This long-standing view resulted in the development of theories such as the Scientific Management theory, Abraham Maslow's Theory of Need, and McGregor's Theory X and Y, among others, aimed at getting subordinates to perform well at work and contribute to organizational goals (Kwok, 2014). In contrast, the constructionist approach perceives followership in the context of a leadership process that treats followers as co-creators of leadership. As articulated by Shamir (2007), this constructionist approach involves a more relational and interactive process between followers and leaders. In support, Carsten *et al.* (2010) emphasized that "followership schemas are generalized knowledge structures that develop over time through socialization and interaction with stimuli relative to leadership and followership" (p. 546). In the constructionist approach, followers are tied to the behavior exhibited by them during socialization or any interpersonal process with leaders (Jun *et al.*, 2023; Lilleaasen, 2023). In contrast, Jun *et al.* (2023) introduced personal identification as an approach whereby followers embody behaviors like their leaders, and this is influenced by how inspiring and authentic the leaders are. In many cases, followers who apply the personal identification approach see themselves through the lens of their leaders or someone who they hold in high esteem (Ashforth

et al., 2015). These kinds of followers change their behaviors based on their relationship with a leader or their interests in reaching the goals that a leader sets (Yost, 2024).

Implicit Followership Theory

At the nexus of followership discourse is implicit followership theories (IFTs), which represent the views and opinions individuals hold about followers (Junker and Van Dick, 2014). While IFTs are important in predicting leadership processes and outcomes, research on IFTs is notoriously conducted from the leaders' lens, who already have certain expectations about their followers (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi *et al.*, 2022). During interactions among leaders and followers, the IFTs serve as cognitive frameworks that influence social perceptions, interpretations, and judgments that consequently determine how information is processed and comprehended, and how others respond to followership behaviors (Veestraeten *et al.*, 2021).

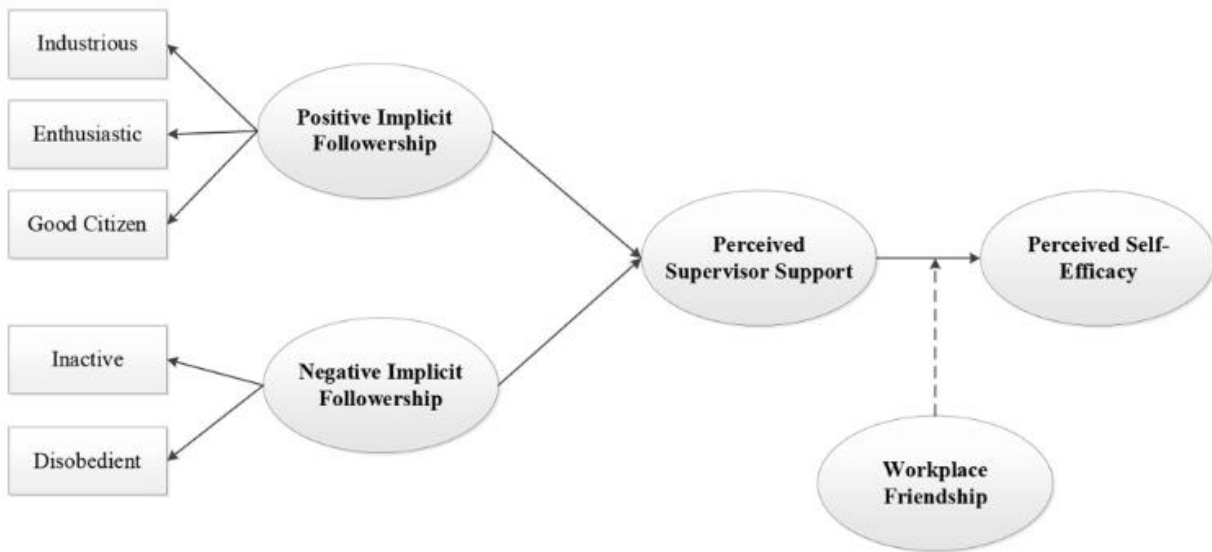
In research on personal assumptions about the traits and behaviors of followers, Sy (2010) found IFTs impacted the performance assessments of followers. Organization members are sense-makers, and they develop cognitive categorization that influences their perception and the identification given to followers (Foti *et al.*, 2017). For instance, the ideal IFTs reflect informative prototypes and definitions leaders hold about who effective followers are and how they should behave towards their assigned duties and tasks, while typical IFTs—also known as central tendency prototype—describe the average expression of certain positive or negative attributes followers should demonstrate, which should inform a leader's expectations and actions (Junker and Van Dick, 2014; Stegmann *et al.*, 2017).

Formal roles individuals hold within an organizational setting create norms and inform expectations. Coyle *et al.* (2023) noted that there are three typologies of behaviors followers display in their assigned roles: (1) active versus passive, (2) self-directed versus relationship directed, and (3) stability-focused versus change-focused followers. Additionally, Steffens *et al.* (2017) posit that followers derive their sense of self from categorizing themselves at various levels of abstractions. The two most fundamental levels are the individual level (i.e., personal identity) and the collective level (i.e., social identity). The collective level is where followers come together and adopt a shared identity and belief system about themselves and how they should be perceived in an organizational setting. Nevertheless, Zeng *et al.* (2023) posit that follower identity in the workplace provides a psychological framework for actions in the workplace, and this has a significant potential impact on followership as a practice and field of study.

Related, Zhang and Wang (2021) outlined the potential influence of positive and negative implicit followership theories on perceived supervisor support, which contributes to perceived self-efficacy (Figure 1). Positive implicit followership theories are cognitive schemes that focus on followers' positive attributes, such as diligence, enthusiasm, and good citizenship; while negative implicit followership theories focus on negative features such as incompetencies and rebellion.

Figure 1

Implicit Followership Theories Model



Note. This figure demonstrates the relationship between perceptions and followers’ outcomes. Source(s): Zhang and Wang (2021), Licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

As with most theories, IFTs is not without criticism and limitations. Foti *et al.* (2017) argue that the implicit theories individuals hold about followers are fluid and context sensitive, which makes them subject to changes at the individual, relational, or organizational level of analysis. Therefore, IFTs should not be generalized (Coyle *et al.*, 2023). Accordingly, there is value in further exploring how IFTs (and related discourses) have evolved with time and across contexts. That realization drove the focus of our study and the related methodology.

Methods

Returning to the research question [“What are the characteristics and influencing factors associated with followership discourse(s)?”], this study applied a qualitative approach. As noted by Klenke (2016), qualitative research is increasingly important for understanding the complexities of both leadership and followership, particularly considering the fluid nature of the implicit theories and related discourses.

Samples and Procedures

The research applied purposive sampling, engaging participants from three major professional conferences in 2023: the Global Followership Conference, the Association of Leadership Educators conference, and the International Leadership Association global conference. As part of participants’ attendance at a workshop session held in these conferences, data was collected using a World Café approach. World Café is a simplified qualitative technique for collecting data that fosters dialogue among research participants (The World Café Community Foundation,

2020); it is particularly useful when research aims to explore a topic from multiple perspectives (FSG, 2021; Lohr *et al.*, 2020).

While this approach is an unconventional qualitative methodology, researchers have found it beneficial in numerous ways (Clements *et al.*, 2024). For instance, Lohr *et al.* (2020) asserted that adopting the World Café approach is helpful in gathering valuable data from a large group of participants while simultaneously facilitating a mutual learning experience. Similarly, Schiele *et al.* (2022) found that contrary to other popular qualitative approaches, the World Café provides researchers with speedy and relevant data and closes the divide between academia and practitioners. This is particularly beneficial to management scholars seeking to conduct research that combines management research and practice in a timely manner (Schiele *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, in the context of community research, Kitzie *et al.* (2020) asserted that World Café is an action-based approach for developing “collective knowledge among individuals and communities to address shared problems” (p. 1). Typically, the World Café approach follows a process of creating a café-like environment where participants gather in small groups around tables, sharing their thoughts and perspectives on various issues relevant to the study (Lohr *et al.*, 2020).

In advance of the workshops, the authors’ Institutional Review Board (IRB) unit reviewed data collection plans and classified the study as “not research.” Even still, at the start of each workshop session, participants were informed of the intent to analyze the data collected and share the findings broadly. Furthermore, following each respective conference, summary reports were shared with participants so they could see how their input was represented. The first set of data was collected from 15 participants at the 2023 Global Followership Conference held at Christopher Newport University, Virginia, USA; the second set of data was collected from eight participants at the 2023 Association of Leadership Educators’ annual conference in Nashville, Tennessee, USA; and the third set of data was collected from approximately 35 participants at the 2023 International Leadership Association global conference in Vancouver, Canada.

Instruments and Data Analytic Techniques

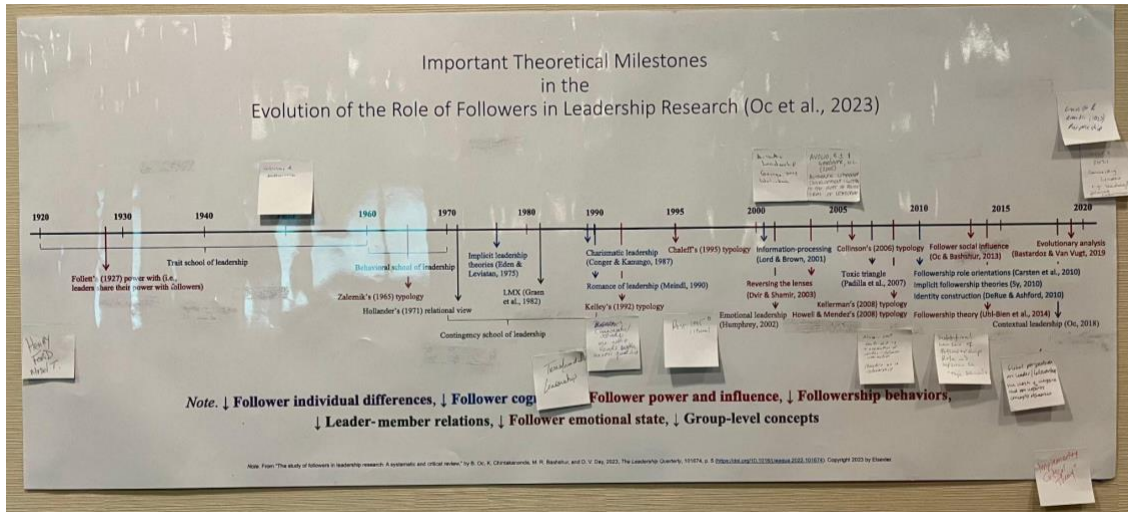
Data was collected using three workshop components: (1) Gallery walk, (2) World Café dialogue, and (3) Large group reflection. At the end of the sessions, participants were invited to complete a reflection survey.

As part of the World Café approach, the participants engaged in a gallery walk, contributing ideas on sticky notes to three published timelines related to leadership and followership: “Leadership Through the Ages” (Harrison, 2012), “Taxonomic Organizational Branching for Ancient worlds Versus modernity” (Markham, 2012), and “Important Theoretical Milestones in the Evolution of the Role of Followers in Leadership Research” (Oc *et al.*, 2023). Following the gallery walk of the timelines, participants engaged in a World Café dialogue surrounding the following question: “What are the characteristics and influencing factors of followership discourse (or social implicit theory)?” To conclude the workshop session, table groups shared notes from their dialogues and discussed potential followership discourses, themes, and trends.

Data were thematically analyzed. Notes and jottings retrieved from participants (Figures 2 and 3) were coded and categorized into themes, with the use of Microsoft Excel as an organizational tool. The data was checked by hand and cross-checked to ensure accurate coding.

Figure 2

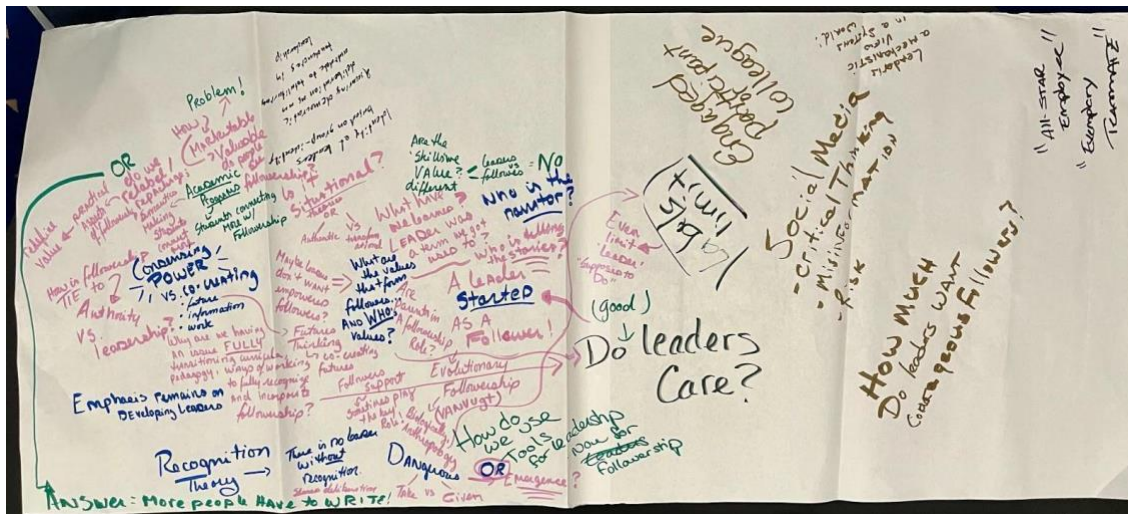
Sample of Sticky Note Contributions to a Timeline as Part of Gallery Walk Activity



Source(s): Author's own photograph.

Figure 3

Sample Jotting from World Café Dialogue on Followership Discourses



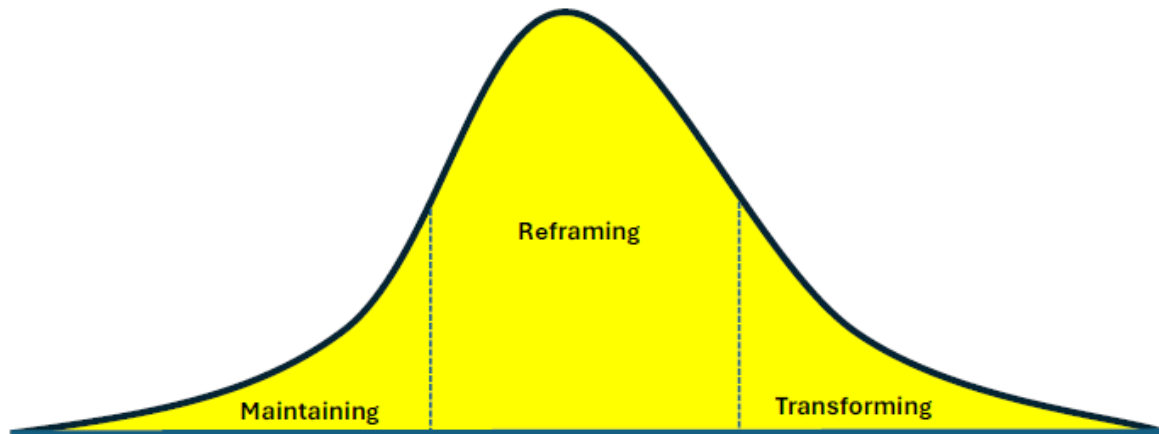
Source(s): Author's own photograph.

Findings

Based on the data collected, the prominent followership discourses may be categorized into three themes: “Maintaining,” “Reframing,” and “Transforming” (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Followership Discourses Emerging from World Café



Source(s): Author's own creation.

Maintaining

The data revealed a Maintaining discourse that views followership in the context of preserving order, rules, and ethics. Moreover, in the Maintaining discourse, followers (and leaders) might prefer to adopt conventional approaches to work because they appreciate stability. For some study participants, the importance of maintaining stability surfaced in the concerns they identified, such as “followers challenging everything,” when they believed it may be more important to prioritize “following rules.” Furthermore, while some participants believed there are followers with a “completely different mindset” who have the “courage” and ability to start a “movement,” they wondered if leaders really want courageous followers and to what extent (Figure 5). Importantly, those advancing this discourse believed that followers who maintain stability can decide when they are “willing to be led or lack of wanting to be led.” While leaders and followers have distinct roles within an organization, the Maintaining discourse suggests the relationship benefits from predictability.

Figure 5

Examples of “Maintaining” Theme from World Café Dialogue on Followership Discourses

DO LEADERS REALLY WANT COURAGEOUS FOLLOWERS?

Emphasis remains on DEVELOPING LEADERS

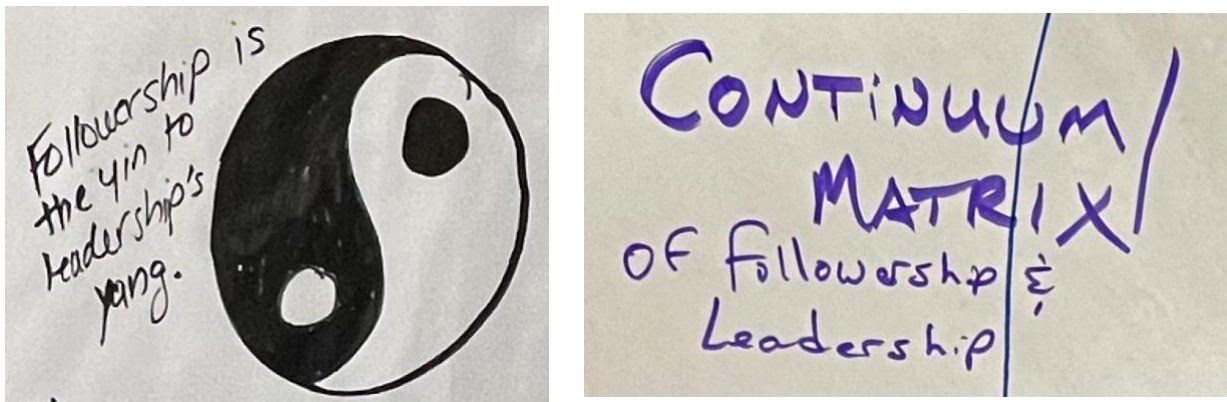
Source(s): Author's own photographs.

Reframing

Adjacent to the Maintaining discourse, we observed a Reframing discourse that connotes followers being able to adapt or adjust to diverse contexts and situations. Some participants believed that in the era of “social media,” followers are easily able to adapt to the demand of “reciprocity - Follow me back.” Additionally, some participants highlighted “social network analysis” and “organization network analysis” as tools for exploring alternate relationships when existing structures seem dysfunctional. Furthermore, some participants believed that while leaders and followers have “differing goals,” the symbiotic relationship (Figure 6) encourages adapting the “culture - new ways to handle it differently.” Moreover, some participants believed that the global pandemic “covid 19 gave mutual trust between followers and leaders” such that there became an obvious “presence of value exchange” and a deconstruction of “power distance.”

Figure 6

Examples of “Reframing” Theme from World Café Dialogue on Followership Discourses



Source(s): Author’s own photographs.

Transforming

Lastly, our findings revealed a Transforming discourse that places followers as initiators of “purpose, alignment and commitment” to work. Participants noted that there are followers whose actions are motivated by the need to transform and “achieve goals.” Some participants believed that followers are responsible for their own “learning and continuous improvement,” while at the same time providing “support in forms of encouragement, emotional and physical support, and allyship.” Moreover, the Transforming discourse suggests there are followers who are “all-star and exemplary teammates” and are inspired by the need to “collaborate with leaders in achieving and exceeding goals.” We found out that while followers may embrace “independent critical thinking,” they sometimes “condense power” by playing the “co-creation role with leaders” in fulfilling purpose (Figure 7). Importantly, some participants believed that followers who have transformational attributes are “future thinking” and “help leaders avoid costly mistakes.” In some ways, the Transforming discourse elevates the role and importance of followership to a status greater than leadership.

Figure 7

Examples of “Transforming” Theme from World Café Dialogue on Followership Discourses



Source(s): Author’s own photographs.

Discussion

Our findings revealed an overlapping relationship between the three discourses — Maintaining, Reforming, and Transforming. These overlapping relationships are not absolute but highly contextual based on numerous factors that can either be dependent or independent of the behaviors of the leaders. For instance, the mention of “followers challenging everything” may be independent of a leader’s behavior and based instead on the followers’ willingness to ensure accountability and avoid violation of rules. Furthermore, our findings revealed that it is practical for a follower to perform the functions of Maintaining, Reforming, and Transforming at different times and levels within a given organizational context.

These findings on followership discourses illustrate the dynamics of the study and practice of followership, and how there is no “one size fits all” approach to the categorization of followership discourses. The findings reiterate Coyle’s (2023) typologies of followership behaviors, highlighting the categorization of followers as individuals who ensure the maintenance of stability, including ethical conduct in the conventional relationship between leaders and followers. At the same time, participants seemed to acknowledge an evolving relationship between leaders and followers, requiring some reframing and flexibility, based in part on the context. Finally, the findings furthered Uhl-bien *et al.*’s (2014) assertion on followers playing the constructionist and co-creation role in a leadership process. This assertion best aligns with the transforming discourse, where followers are motivated by the need to achieve results, perhaps taking an outsized role compared to the leader-centric view of the relationship.

Implications for Followership Theory and Practice

In the last decade, there has been a surge in scholarly interest in tracking the development of followership research over the years (Oc. *et al.*, 2023; Google books, n.d.; Portela, 2024), with most acknowledging the significant increase in research focusing on followership, particularly since the year 1995. Yet, research focusing on the discourses of followership are grossly scarce. Although there are closely aligned terminologies such as follower identity (Collinson, 2006) and

implicit followership theories (Foti *et al.*, 2014), this research provides a unique perspective in aggregating the collective perception of both leaders and followers about followership discourses (i.e., how people might be talking and thinking about followership).

Findings from this research serves as building blocks for the development of followership theories as existing theories have been reliant on a leadership framing, including, Implicit Leadership Theory versus Implicit Followership Theory (Foti *et al.*, 2014; Sy, 2010), and Leader Categorization Theory versus Follower Categorization Theory (Shondrick and Lord, 2010). In fact, at two recent conferences — the 2024 Global Followership Conference and the 2024 International Leadership Association — emerging theories such as Adaptive Followership and Transformational Followership were presented as ongoing areas of study. While these theories have deepened our understanding of followership and the interplay between leaders and followers, this study provides a starting point for conducting independent followership theory, thereby, addressing the argument of Ford and Hardings (2018) about followership not having its own independent identity.

Lastly, findings from this study are consistent with the role-based categorization of followership (e.g. Coyle *et al.*, 2023; Uhl-bien *et al.*, 2014; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi *et al.*, 2022). In the past, the role-based approach has focused on the behaviors of followers vis-a-vis behaviors and expectations of the leader (Carsten *et al.*, 2018; Shamir, 2007; Wang *et al.*, 2020); however, this study provides a holistic framing of roles of followers, independent of the behaviors of leaders. For example, regardless of the behaviors of their leaders, some followers can choose to assume the maintaining, reframing, or transforming roles; indicating flexibility and fluidity in the role of followers based on the context at any given time (see the dotted lines in Figure 4). From the standpoint of followership practice, a follower may adopt the maintaining role during times of organizational chaos or crisis by being at the forefront of ensuring roles are adhered to (Rangachari & Wood, 2020), while they may choose to adopt the reforming or transforming role during times of organizational change management (Li *et al.*, 2021).

Recommendations/Conclusions

In this paper, we have established that followership as an academic field of study and in practice is an ongoing journey of development. Historically, leadership has dominated the field of academic research, with limited emphasis on followership (Thompson, 2020; Yost, 2024). However, the recent increase in attention given to followership is inspiring an inquiry into emerging followership discourses and trends, thus transforming the lens through which followership is viewed (Gallegos *et al.*, 2024).

The three discourses identified in this study (i.e., Maintaining, Reframing, and Transforming) reveal the multifaceted roles followers play in achieving leadership outcomes and the different identities leaders hold about followers (Sy, 2010; Uhl-bien *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, while followership research is beginning to attract attention from researchers and practitioners, we recommend giving similar attention to the different contexts followers function within and how these contexts influence their identity (Coyle *et al.*, 2023). Although this study presents an overlapping relationship between the three discourses, we recommend that researchers conduct studies that treat each discourse independently while examining attitudes and behaviors aligned with each discourse and their implication for the field of followership.

Moreover, recognizing the exploratory nature of this study (and much of the existing followership research), we recommend more research be conducted. The debate on whether

followership research can survive without a leadership focus is on-going (Chaleff, 2008; Oc *et al.*, 2023; Tripathi, 2021). To ensure followership is an appreciated field of study and research, it needs its own independent identity (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2017). Thus, we recommend that more studies be conducted exploring the independency of followership and follower identity. Lastly, we recommend that more research be conducted exploring how social powers define and influence followership discourses and research (Adams, 2017; Zhiyi, 2023). There are numerous implicit followership theories (Coyle and Foti, 2022; Robinson and Fiset, 2021; Sy, 2010), and uncovering the influences of social power will give followership researchers more insight on new approaches to advancing the co-creation attributes of followership and demoting a general conception of followership by rank (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014).

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