Followership Research: Looking Back and Looking Forward

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Abstract

This paper briefly reviews the historical limitations of research on leadership in an effort to avoid these same pitfalls in the study of followers and followership. In particular, research on leadership has been overly leader-centric, and research on followership should avoid simply "reversing the lens" and focusing exclusively on followers. Specific issues addressed include discussion of the appropriate term to identify followers and the intertwined nature of leaders and followers in the co-production of leadership. Finally, suggestions are made for guiding future research on followership.

Introduction

As scholars pay greater attention to the follower in the leadership-followership equation, it is important to consider several things. First, although it is important to gain a better understanding of followers and followership, we want to avoid the mistakes that early leadership scholars made by focusing *too much* on the leader. This leader-centric approach, one that James Meindl and colleagues (Meindl, 1990; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985), referred to as the "romance of leadership," led to a very narrow and limited view of leadership. For example, one early line of research focused on the characteristics possessed by leaders (referring to "trait theories" of leadership; see Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002, for an overview). Another early research program addressed the behaviors displayed by effective leaders – the so-called "behavioral approaches/theories of leadership (see Riggio, 2006). Even more sophisticated theories, such as situational models (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969) and contingency approaches

(Fiedler, 1967), as well as charismatic (Conger & Kanungo, 1987) and transformational

leadership (Bass, 1985), put the leader front-and-center and views the leader as the primary force

in affecting group or organizational outcomes. In reality, we know that leadership is not just

about leaders. Followers matter, as do situations. Leadership is complex. We do not now simply

want to "reverse the lens," and focus on the follower's role – creating a follower-centric

approach -- without considering the leader and the context.

Second, in our effort to put the spotlight on the follower, we need to make sure that we

examine how leaders and followers work together to "co-produce" leadership (Carsten & Uhl-

Bien, 2012). Leadership is not just the purview of the leader, and followership is not just done

by followers. We know that many times in teams and organizations, followers develop ideas,

strategies, and courses of action, and push these forward. In other words, followers engage in

leadership behaviors. Conversely, wise leaders may elect to follow the initiatives of team

members. Thus, in the real world, leaders don't "do leadership" and followers don't just follow.

They work together to move the collective forward.

Third, we need to give serious attention to followership development. This is a serious

challenge given the glorification of leadership, and the rise of what Barbara Kellerman (2012)

calls "the leadership industry" – with billions of dollars spent each year in the U.S. alone on

programs to develop and enhance leadership skills. In a culture where everyone wants to be a

leader, and few are happy embracing the follower role, follower development is a tough sell.

Indeed, noted followership expert, Ira Chaleff, mentioned that followership development

programs often either need to be embedded in broader leadership development programs, or

focus on developing hierarchical work relationships, in order to get motivated and willing

participants to work on followership development (I. Chaleff, personal communication, 2014).

Fourth and finally, we need to work to legitimize the term "follower," to recognize the critical role that followers play in co-producing leadership, and to change stereotypical views of followers and followership. Pejorative stereotypes of followers as "sheep," blindly and unquestionably following the leader's orders, or as the members who were unable or unwilling to "win" the leadership role have made "follower" an undesirable, and sometimes ridiculed, term. Of course, the traditional term used in the management literature was "subordinate," (as in "manager-subordinate," or "leader-subordinate") which itself carries a number of negative connotations. Indeed, there has been a great deal of discussion about what the appropriate term should be to describe the follower role. A number of alternative terms have been suggested, such as "constituent," "collaborator," "member," "participant," and others (see Rost, 2008). However, we can all observe that there has been some legitimizing of the terms "follower" and "followership" in the academic community. More and more, leadership researchers are referring to "followers" (as opposed to "subordinates" or "employees"), and the use of the term "follower" in research articles is slightly, and steadily, on the rise.

So, looking forward, what are recommendations for leadership (and followership) scholars and practitioners?

Keep Using the "Follower" Term.

I realize that many colleagues dislike the term and the negative associations it conjures in the public eye, but words that once carried negative connotations can, through repeated and legitimate usage, develop more positive associations (e.g., the acceptance of the term "queer" by many in the gay community, or the more positive association given to the terms "nerd" and "geek" among the Silicon Valley crowd). The reality is that repeated use of a term in the

research literature often leads to greater acceptance of the term, so I believe it is futile to continue to search for an acceptable substitute. Embrace the terms follower and followership.

Move Away From Leader-Centric Approaches.

It is going to be difficult to move research on followership, the leader-follower relationship, and leadership in general forward, if we continue to focus only (or primarily) on the leader. We need to take the leader out of the center in our research and thinking about leadership. David Day (2000) made the important distinction between leader development – focusing on enhancing the individual leader's ability to lead – and leadership development – improving the collective leadership capacity in the group or collective. In the same way, we need to view "leadership" as what is co-constructed by leaders and followers working together.

Talk About the Co-Production of Leadership.

As has been emphasized, leadership is something that leaders and followers create together. Leaders do not do leadership, and followers do not do followership. As Jim Maroosis (2008) notes in citing the work of Mary Parker Follett, leadership is a partnership in reciprocal following – both leaders and followers follow the common purpose. Leaders and followers, together, do both leadership and followership.

For the Time Being, It's OK to Be Follower-Centric.

What I mean here is that we have a long way to go with research on followers and followership before we "catch up" to the voluminous work on leaders and leadership. So, until we catch up, it is ok to reverse the lens, to study followers in depth, but we should always end this work with a discussion of the co-production of leadership. It is also imperative that situational and contextual factors be included in our research and thinking about leadership and followership. There is still quite a bit that we do not know about followers, followership, and the

process of following (and not following). So, filling in the gaps in research on followership is an

important endeavor. As noted by Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten (2014), "…followership

theory is not the mirror of leadership theory. It requires new ways of thinking, new types of

theorizing, and operationalizing, and testing different kinds of variables." (p.100). We cannot

really understand leadership if we do not understand followership in all its complexity.

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