

Constructions of Following from a Relational Perspective: A Follower-Focused Study

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Abstract

The followership field remains overshadowed by the leadership field, with traditional assumptions attached to the *follower* concept further undervaluing the importance of progressive understandings of leadership. This paper considers following as a relational process and provides illustrative extracts from empirical research. Future areas for research are discussed, as well as the importance of incorporating followership into the leadership education agenda.

Key words: Followership, relational social constructionism, qualitative, visual research methods.

Introduction

It is widely recognised that the leadership field has overshadowed the followership field to date, and continues to do so despite recent increases in attention to followership studies. Articles have been published demonstrating the significant differences in outputs for both fields respectively; for instance, Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson and Morris (2006) found that between 1928 and 2004 there was a ratio of 1:120 for books published on followership compared to leadership books. This study adopts a follower-focused approach to ensure that followers are the *central* focus of the study, both theoretically and methodologically. However, as this paper supports, there is growing attention to shift the label of followers from one of passivity to one of valuable contributors to organisations (Raffo, 2013). Similarly, there is a growing recognition to further understand followership from a social constructionist perspective, and from a relational stance. Relational approaches are increasingly present in the leadership field, recognising the

need to understand the interactions of leaders with multiple others (Watt, 2014). Adopting a relational social constructionist approach, this study focuses upon processes of following, acknowledging the complexity of this concept and looking to explore how following is experienced and the different meanings individuals attach to it. The research has therefore been designed to enable insight into followers' experiences, addressing calls for the use of qualitative (Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe & Carsten, 2014), multi-method (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera & McGregor, 2010) and visual research methods (Ray & Smith, 2012).

Approaches to Inquiry

Conceptual and Empirical

Kelley (1988) was one of the first authors to publish on followership (Ferrell, Boyd, & Rayfield, 2013) and is considered a leading author within the followership field. Although a seminal piece within the field, Kelley (1988) was conceptual in nature and therefore arguably lacked credibility without application to context. Similarly, the next significant publication came from Chaleff (1995) who chose a striking title, introducing the concept of *courageous followers*. Both authors have since gone on to publish and inspire others; however, there seems to be a continued focus on conceptual discussions (Baker, 2007; Carsten et al., 2010). This study therefore addresses this gap by conducting empirical research to further understandings within the followership field.

Quantitative and Qualitative

As recognized by Uhl-Bien et al. (2014), research that has incorporated empirical data has predominantly adopted essentialist and trait perspectives, attempting to measure aspects such as follower performance and trait. As a result, qualitative approaches have been largely neglected not only in the followership field, but also the leadership field (Billsberry, 2009). The

followership field is also unbalanced with regards to the ways in which followers are incorporated into the study. For instance, Kean, Haycock-Stuart, Baggaley and Carson (2011) suggest that there are two approaches to studying followership: *follower-focused* which explores the doing of following and how this is socially constructed by followers, and *follower-centric* which places emphasis on understanding the ways in which individuals collectively construct leadership.

There has been a tendency in the extant literature to adopt a follower-centric approach by investigating followers' perceptions of their leaders. Similarly, it has also been common to involve leaders and seek to understand their perceptions of followers. Resulting from this approach is a need to pursue follower-focused studies whereby followers are involved to understand their views on followership and their experiences of following. A qualitative study by Carsten et al. (2010) raised this issue suggesting that there needs to be better recognition that individuals will each have different understandings of followership. Reflective of a social constructionist perspective, an emerging and currently demanded research orientation within the field (Uhl-Bien et al., 2013), this study aims to address this concern.

Understanding Followership from a Relational Perspective

Within the broad approach of social constructionism, this study places particular emphasis on the relational nature of reality and thus draws upon a relational social constructionist perspective. The key premises of this approach are centred around the belief that individuals do not exist in isolation (Cunliffe, 2008; Burr, 2003); instead meaning is created, or constructed, in relation to multiple others and within multiple contexts (McNamee & Hosking, 2012). This approach also allows an appreciation of focusing upon processes of *doing* following, rather than *being* a follower. This study argues that individuals will continuously engage in

processes of following and leading interchangeably, influenced by who they are in relation with, and the contexts that they are in relation to, addressing calls to understand the complex social and relational processes that individuals engage in when following (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Research Methods

Qualitative in nature, this research study consists of data collection methods as illustrated in table one.

Table 1: Research Design

Data collection phase	Data collection method
Phase one	Semi-structured interview
Phase two	Visual research diary
Phase three	Photo-elicitation interview

The use of multiple methods enables richer insights (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009) into participants' lived experiences (Radcliffe, 2013), and is yet to be used to a great extent within the followership field (Carsten et al., 2010). Participants first engage in an interview before being provided with a diary to insert images and photographs that reflect their understandings and experiences of following. This diary is then brought to the photo-elicitation interview, where the participant and researcher engage in conversation around the images, achieving deep reflections and co-construction of meaning (Van Auken, Frisvoll & Stewart, 2010).

Each data collection method was designed to explore the lived experiences of participants and to gain insight into their understandings which emerge through responses to interviewer questions and also naturally through the participants' storytelling. Each data collection method

enabled open reflection from participants through conversations and also “individual space” away from the researcher in the visual diaries (Ortega-Alcazar & Dyck, 2012, p.109). The study was based within the UK public sector and adopted a purposive heterogeneous strategy for engaging participants, to gain insight across a range of UK public sector contexts. Fourteen participants were recruited through self-selection and snowball sampling methods, deemed suitable for the exploratory research approach (Endrissat, Muller & Kaudela-Baum, 2007), and each participant engaged in the data collection process over a period of approximately two months. All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and then transcribed verbatim, allowing the researcher to familiarize themselves with the data and to continue to engage in the iterative process of data interpretation (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). Next, the researcher then analyzed the approved transcripts thematically drawing upon the framework offered by Braun and Clarke (2006). The data was coded, key themes were identified, and thematic maps were created.

Findings and Discussion

This study aimed to explore following as a relational process and to contribute empirical findings to the field which address calls for qualitative research and, in particular, narratives (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). As previously discussed, there are acknowledgements of the need to better understand following as a process and to view followers and leaders as interrelated; the findings presented below contribute empirical findings to support these requests. This was achieved through direct questions and the wider data set narratives provided by participants. Data relevant to this theme also emerged from the visual research diaries, where participants utilized images to construct their understandings; this then resulted in rich narratives in the final interview. This paper will now present a series of illustrative extracts from the narratives

provided in the first and second interviews, relating to the themes of *hierarchies; shifting between following and leading*.

Following and Hierarchies

Arising from the analysis of the interview transcripts, participants' responses indicated that the constructions of followers (and leaders) were more complex than presumed in much of the literature. For instance, one participant commented, "*It's not that simple, ...leadership isn't always based on seniority...it's about how they act and how people react to them as much as your kind of hierarchical leaders.*" This not only demonstrates that following and leading is not always determined by organisational hierarchies, it also places emphasis on followers as having a central and active role in these processes. This is in line with DeRue and Ashford (2010) who recognize the claiming and granting of roles; here, followers are accepting of others as leaders regardless of their hierarchical positioning, and leaders to perform these processes regardless of their hierarchical positioning or ranking.

The hierarchy did however appear to still play a role, albeit adverse, in the ways in which following and leading occur. One participant reflected upon a responsibility they had been assigned, to help facilitate change within their department, and commented: "*...because we don't carry with us the legitimacy that comes from being senior, it makes our task that little bit harder [sic]*". This makes problematic the claims by DeRue and Ashford (2010), who consider claiming and granting of following and leading roles without giving sufficient consideration to the challenges that may be faced during this process. For instance, from this illustrative quote and the extended narrative, it appears that the rejection and questioning of individuals who are claiming roles can cause difficulties and thus add complexity to processes of constructing following and leading.

When asked what the ideal relations between followers and leaders would be in their experience, responses included: *“feeling that you know you’re all the same, but no one is better than another person...no one is belittled; and “they’re no bigger than you, they work **with** you, they understand”*. These responses suggest that although organisational hierarchies may be present, experiences of following are best when hierarchical positioning’s are not explicit. This opposes traditional followership and leadership theories, which tend to label followers as powerless and passive individuals (Alcorn, 1992). Instead they propose notions of equality and togetherness and are more aligned to contemporary, conceptual, discussions in the followership field which search for more balanced terminology to lose the stigma (Bjugstad et al., 2006; Kellerman, 2008; Rost, 2008). This sense of togetherness and equality allows followers and leaders to be viewed as interconnected and perhaps less isolated and distinct from one another, leading on to the second theme to be presented in this paper, which focuses on shifting between following and leading processes.

Shifting between Following and Leading

As discussed earlier in the paper, this study focuses on following as a relational process. Through participants responses, following began to emerge as less of a constant process but instead one into and out of which individuals move. Participants described experiences where they had shifted between following and leading: *“if I have a higher level of expertise than my line manager in some cases, then I can take the lead and she’ll follow...it’s like invisible whereby if you’re deemed to have more knowledge or more experience and expertise in a field it’s almost like right, no questions asked you’re automatically put into that position”*.

Furthermore, one participant included in the diary an image of birds flying in a linear formation with annotated notes of *“synchronised”* and *“working together”*. They then went on to

describe why this looked like effective following to them: *“they’re all headed in the same direction there is a leader at the front, but one takes over as the one at the front needs a break”*

These responses illustrate how followers and leaders are not static objects; instead, they are individuals who shift through processes of following and leading continuously depending upon the situation and on aspects such as expertise and experience. These thoughts were further reflected in other interviews, with another participant describing following as being a *“circular, kind of thing”*. They go on to explain that their approach to following sometimes involves leading too; they describe a situation where an initiative had been set from upper management and that because they agreed with this and could see the value in doing this, they not only supported the upper management with this but went on to attempt to influence others to see the value and support it: *“the way that I follow is to lead others”*.

The illustrative extracts above portray following as a process in which individuals continuously engage, alongside leading. Through this imagery, following can be understood as a complex process that involves followers and leaders; it is not a simplistic process, but instead one that is continuously evolving and changing as individuals shift between claiming and granting roles of follower and leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) depending upon aspects such as perceived levels of expertise and experience. It is for this purpose that researchers should move from discussing followers and leaders separately to directly focusing on processes of following and leading which acknowledge the interrelatedness and fluidity of them. While hierarchies were recognized as remaining relevant to processes of following, they were not viewed as the sole influence; this should be further explored to understand what other influences are acting upon individuals and the conflicts that occur as a result. This will further understandings of the complexity of following. Furthermore it will shed light on the contemporary views of followers

in the literature, providing empirical findings to support more balanced and equal views of followers working together with, rather than for, their leaders.

Implications for Leadership Education Agendas

As an underexplored and unfamiliar concept, this paper argues for the need to further understand processes of following. As a member of staff within a UK Business School, the author recognizes the lack of presence of followership across the programs which offer business-related degrees globally.

Leadership education needs to more actively incorporate followership into its agenda (Johnson, 2009) to prevent the romanticizing of leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich, 1985) to the detrimental effect on followership. As the literature is beginning to recognize, and the illustrative extracts in this paper indicate, followers are no longer passive individuals who are removed from leaders and unable to have influence. Therefore, it is important to not only introduce the concept of followership to students studying leadership, but to warrant this topic sufficient space on the agenda for understandings to move beyond the traditional assumptions and to shift to understanding following and followers as important and influential in organizations (Raffo, 2013).

Conclusion

This paper has presented illustrative extracts from a qualitative study focused on exploring experiences of following from a follower's perspective. Following should be understood as a relational process and future research should focus on improving our understanding of this process. Future studies should also provide empirical findings to shed light on contemporary views of following which currently tend to be restricted to conceptual discussions.

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