

Followership constructions in a complex organisation: a qualitative analysis

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores how followers in a complex public sector organisation construct and enact followership. It aims to deepen understanding of followers' implicit followership theories (FIFTs) and how belief-behaviour alignment is shaped by organisational dynamics, with implications for leadership development and organisational functioning.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative research design was employed, using 27 semi-structured interviews with employees in subordinate roles in a large South African metropolitan municipality. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in beliefs, behaviours and contextual influences across micro, meso and macro levels.

Findings – Participants articulated multidimensional beliefs about ideal followership, including self-, organisation- and leader-focussed orientations. However, the extent to which these beliefs could be enacted was shaped by contextual enablers and constraints. Proactive, self-focussed orientations were more consistently enacted, while organisational complexity – including political oversight, hierarchical bureaucracy and complex, overlapping accountability structures – constrained the enactment of other orientations.

Originality/value – This study contributes to followership theory in three ways. It extends followers' implicit followership theory research by examining how followership beliefs are translated into enactment under conditions of organisational complexity. By interpreting belief orientations through a co-production lens, it refines how co-production strength is expressed in a hierarchical, politicised public sector setting. It also develops a multilevel (micro-meso-macro) conceptual model of the enablers and constraints shaping belief-behaviour alignment.

Keywords Followership, Implicit followership theories, Implicit followership

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Although leadership has been practised for millennia (Bass and Bass, 2008), systematic scholarly inquiry into its nature and dynamics only began in the early 20th century (House and Aditya, 1997; Van Seters and Field, 1990). Historically, this research predominantly adopted a leader-centric lens, paying little attention to the role of followers, despite the acknowledgement that leadership cannot exist without followers (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014). More recently, relationship-based perspectives (Brower *et al.*, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2006) have positioned followers as integral to leadership through reciprocal influence (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014), prompting growing recognition of the need to examine followers as active agents shaping leadership and organisational outcomes (Carsten *et al.*, 2010; Uhl-Bien and Pillai, 2007).



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Against this backdrop, followership scholarship has emerged to examine more directly how followers define and enact their roles, influence leaders, and contribute to leadership processes (Lapierre and Carsten, 2014; McKimm and Vogan, 2020). A key area of interest within this field is implicit followership theories (IFTs), which refer to individuals' perceptions and implicit assumptions about followership (Sy, 2010). While most studies on IFTs have concentrated on leaders' perceptions of followers (see Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021; Gao and Wu, 2019; Kong *et al.*, 2019; Shondrick and Lord, 2010; Sy, 2010) – known as leaders' implicit followership theories (LIFTs) – research on how followers perceive themselves (followers' implicit followership theories, or FIFTs) remains underexplored (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2018; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi *et al.*, 2022). FIFTs play a critical role in shaping followers' attitudes, behaviours, and interactions in organisational settings, influencing job-related outcomes, ethical behaviour, and resistance to unethical leadership (Aghaei *et al.*, 2023; Coyle and Foti, 2022; Fan *et al.*, 2024; Megheirkouni *et al.*, 2025; Yang *et al.*, 2020).

Existing literature emphasises the importance of organisational context in shaping leadership (Porter and McLaughlin, 2006; Shamir and Howell, 1999; Vaccaro *et al.*, 2012). However, there remains limited understanding of how followership, and more specifically FIFTs, are influenced by organisational context, particularly within complex organisations.

To address this limitation, the present study builds on prior work on follower role orientations and co-production beliefs (Carsten *et al.*, 2010; Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2012) by shifting the focus to how followers reflect on their own enactment of followership in context. It contributes by examining the influence of organisational complexity on belief-behaviour alignment, and by offering a nuanced description of followership constructions grounded in participants' lived experiences. This study focuses specifically on followers' IFTs, which “provide a useful framework for exploring followership constructions” (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi *et al.*, 2022). While Aghaei *et al.* (2023) advance understanding by conceptualising IFTs as dynamic cognitive structures shaped by experience and exposure to prototypes, their focus remains largely at the level of individual cognition. Less is known about how followers translate these implicit beliefs into enacted followership, particularly within complex organisational contexts.

In extending followership research to address these gaps, this study investigates how followers in a large, local government organisation in South Africa construct their followership. Drawing on followership theory and qualitative methods, it explores how individual beliefs, behaviours, and contextual dynamics interact to shape the meaning and enactment of followership in a complex organisational setting.

The following research question guides the study:

How do followers in a complex organisation construct their followership?

To address this, the study examines:

- (1) What beliefs about followership do employees hold?
- (2) How do they describe their followership enactment?
- (3) What factors shape these constructions?

This question is addressed through a qualitative analysis of interview data from employees in a large South African metropolitan municipality. The findings show that participants construct followership through multidimensional self-, organisation-, and leader-focussed beliefs, but that the enactment of these beliefs is uneven and strongly shaped by contextual conditions. In particular, self-focussed orientations were more consistently enacted, while the enactment of other followership orientations was shaped and at times constrained by hierarchical, bureaucratic, and political conditions.

The study contributes to followership scholarship and organisational studies in three ways. First, it extends recent research on followers' implicit followership theories by examining how

followership beliefs are translated into enactment under conditions of organisational complexity, thereby building on work that has deepened understanding of followers' schemas and followership constructions (Aghaei *et al.*, 2023; Coyle and Foti, 2022; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi *et al.*, 2022). Second, by interpreting belief orientations through a co-production lens, it refines work on follower role orientations and co-production beliefs by showing how co-production strength is expressed unevenly in a complex organisational setting (Carsten *et al.*, 2010; Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2012), including in forms of bounded deference and institutionally anchored followership. Third, it advances work on the contextual shaping of followership by developing a multilevel (micro–meso–macro) conceptual model of the enablers and constraints shaping belief–behaviour alignment in practice (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2017; Zeng *et al.*, 2023; Barney and Felin, 2013; Felin *et al.*, 2012). The analysis also offers implications for leadership and followership development in complex organisations, particularly those characterised by bureaucratic hierarchies and politicised environments, by highlighting how organisational conditions can enable or constrain follower agency.

Literature review

From the role of followers in leadership to the study of followership

Although leadership research has historically focussed on leaders, calls to account for the role of followers have been evident since as early as 1933, when Mary Parker Follett observed that followers were receiving insufficient scholarly attention (Baker, 2007; Bjugstad *et al.*, 2006; Gilbert and Hyde, 1988). Over time, followers were included in leadership studies, though often as an undifferentiated collective (Collinson, 2006), moderators of leader behaviour (see Bennis, 2007; Dansereau *et al.*, 1975; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Meindl, 1995) or as passive recipients of influence (McKimm and Vogan, 2020; Shamir, 2007). These leader-centric approaches typically cast followers as background actors, studying their responses to leaders rather than their own beliefs and roles (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014).

The emergence of follower-centric and relationship-based perspectives shifted this view (Bligh and Schyns, 2007; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014), positioning followers as active participants in leadership processes. These perspectives convey leadership through the eyes of the followers by examining their perceptions of leadership (Carsten *et al.*, 2010; Kean *et al.*, 2011), including the reasons people prefer to follow certain leaders over others (see Ehrhart, 2012; Popper, 2015). However, distinct from studies that ask followers about leaders, followership research is concerned with how followers define and enact their roles (Carsten *et al.*, 2014). In this research tradition, followers are viewed as engaged actors who contribute meaningfully to leadership dynamics and organisational performance (Chou, 2012; Read, 2020), reflecting the broader idea that leadership and followership operate as complementary coordination mechanisms that enable collective action (Van Vugt, 2006).

In contemporary management scholarship, a microfoundations view similarly emphasises that organisational dynamics and outcomes are produced through individuals' cognitions, actions and interactions (Barney and Felin, 2013; Felin *et al.*, 2012, 2015). For followership research, this offers a bridge between followers' implicit schemas and organisational functioning: in complex organisations, how followers interpret, enact and negotiate their implicit followership beliefs can help explain variation in followership constructions and the conditions under which follower agency is enabled or constrained.

Approaches to followership research

Studies on followership typically adopt one of two approaches, role-based and constructionist, distinguished by how the “follower” role is operationalised. Role-based approaches define and operationalise leaders and followers according to formal hierarchical positions within an organisation (Carsten *et al.*, 2018). In this study, we use this role-based, position-based

operationalisation (i.e. those in a subordinate role to another) as an operational boundary, providing a clear relational reference point for the leader–follower relationship and enabling participant identification.

Within the role-based approach, scholarship has explored role orientations, social constructions, and co-production beliefs (beliefs that followers and leaders jointly shape leadership processes) (Carsten *et al.*, 2010, 2018; Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2012), as well as follower typologies and styles (e.g. Chaleff, 2009; Kelley, 1988). Importantly, a position-based operationalisation does not require assuming fixed behavioural tendencies or equating followership with general employee behaviour. Instead, it specifies who is studied as a follower so that followership can be examined from the standpoint of the follower role. Recent synthesis work reinforces the value of such conceptual precision: Ribbat *et al.* (2024), reviewing empirical followership research since Uhl-Bien *et al.*'s (2014) Formal Theory of Followership, emphasise that genuine followership research should privilege the follower role and examine follower characteristics or behaviours enacted from the standpoint of a follower role (i.e. a position in relation to leaders) or in the act of following.

Constructionist approaches treat leadership and followership as socially constructed through interaction, such that these identities may be claimed and granted irrespective of formal position (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014; Uhl-Bien and Carsten, 2018). Accordingly, followership is not determined solely by positional authority but is situated within the shared social reality constructed by organisational actors (Uhl-Bien and Carsten, 2018). This approach highlights role fluidity and the situational negotiation of leadership and followership identities, including instances in which managers may take a follower role, and subordinates may assume leadership depending on expertise and task demands (Benson *et al.*, 2016; Sy and McCoy, 2014; Malakyan, 2014, 2015).

While such moments of role switching can occur, organisational hierarchies typically remain salient outside of these episodes. Accordingly, we adopt a role-based operationalisation as a practical approach for participant identification for studying followership in an organisational context. Analytically, the study focuses on participants' meaning-making; i.e. how they construct the follower role and how these constructions are shaped by contextual conditions, thereby engaging an interpretivist, social constructionist orientation that treats followership as socially constructed in context (Crotty, 1998; Gergen and Gergen, 2008; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). In line with this stance, we centre participants' accounts alongside the researchers' interpretation to develop a context-sensitive understanding of followership constructions (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln *et al.*, 2018).

Implicit followership theories and the emergence of FIFTs

Implicit followership theories are assumed or expected behaviours, characteristics, and traits associated with followers. These schemas influence both leaders' and followers' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours in organisational settings (Coyle and Foti, 2022; Stegmann *et al.*, 2020; Veestraeten *et al.*, 2021; Yang *et al.*, 2020), shaping leaders' performance expectations and evaluations of follower performance (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2013). A further distinction is drawn between leaders' IFTs, understood as an "other-schema" reflecting how leaders perceive followers, and followers' IFTs, conceptualised as a "self-schema" that captures how followers perceive and define their role in the leadership process (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2018). Building on this distinction, a growing body of research has explored FIFTs more explicitly, focussing on how followers construct and enact followership. Contributions to the literature have deepened our understanding of how followers conceptualise followership and the factors that shape these constructions (see Aghaei *et al.*, 2023; Coyle and Foti, 2022; Veestraeten *et al.*, 2021).

Beyond describing the content and antecedents of followers' schemas, recent empirical work shows that these schemas matter because they operate as identity standards that shape enactment and outcomes. Zeng *et al.* (2023) conceptualise followership prototypes derived

from IFTs as identity references and find that stronger followership is associated with greater alignment between employees' self-perceived following traits and their internalised prototype, partly through self-efficacy. [Megheirkouni et al. \(2025\)](#) similarly link follower identity to trust and organisational commitment, with trust partially mediating the effect of follower identity on commitment. [Fan et al. \(2024\)](#) connect dyadic identity processes to differentiated forms of followership enactment, operationalising followership as a multidimensional behavioural construct (including obedience, proactive behaviour and constructive resistance) and linking these behaviours to identification mechanisms. At the collective level social identity research suggests that leaders elicit active followership when they represent and affirm a shared ingroup identity: followers may support a leader's plans, but are more likely to "go the extra mile" when leaders are seen to advance collective ("us") rather than merely individual ("me") interests ([Haslam and Platow, 2001](#), p. 1477). This group-level identity lens is echoed in multilevel reviews of leadership and followership identity processes ([Epitropaki et al., 2017](#)). Taken together, these strands suggest that implicit followership schemas are consequential not only because they specify what "good followership" looks like, but because they function as identity standards that shape efficacy, identification and trust – pathways through which followership is enacted and evaluated. This emerging mechanism emphasis makes it important to consider how such schemas develop and evolve through ongoing relational and organisational experiences.

IFTs are believed to "develop through socialisation experiences" ([Thompson et al., 2018](#), p. 86). They are formed based on prior experiences and interactions with others, particularly in workplace settings, helping individuals categorise and evaluate followers' traits and behaviours quickly and efficiently ([Aghaei et al., 2023](#); [Veestraeten et al., 2021](#)). This pattern-matching process allows individuals to classify themselves or others as followers or non-followers, and shapes their interactions and perceptions ([Coyle and Foti, 2022](#); [Veestraeten et al., 2021](#)). Cultural norms and organisational environments shape IFTs: in high power-distance cultures, conformity and respect for authority may be expected; whereas in low power distance cultures, proactivity and challenging authority may be valued ([Yang et al., 2020](#)). IFTs are also shaped through implicit learning (unconscious internalisation of observed traits and behaviours), and explicit learning (e.g. training programmes that emphasise specific follower characteristics) ([Aghaei et al., 2023](#)). Accordingly, IFTs may evolve with new experiences, shifts in organisational culture, or interactions with different types of followers ([Coyle and Foti, 2022](#); [Veestraeten et al., 2021](#)).

From followers' perspectives, IFTs shape how they interpret their role and guide behavioural engagement in organisations. [Carsten et al. \(2010\)](#) showed that followers' beliefs about their role range from passive to proactive, depending on the extent to which they see followers as responsible contributors to organisational processes. Building on this, [Carsten and Uhl-Bien \(2012\)](#) introduced "co-production beliefs" – the extent to which followers see their role as partnering with leaders to advance the mission and optimise productivity. Followers with strong co-production beliefs adopt more proactive role orientations and maintain upward communication despite contextual constraints, whereas those with weaker co-production beliefs – who view the follower role as passive obedience and deference – are more likely to adjust their communication to fit the context ([Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2012](#)).

Related work suggests that FIFTs comprise two core dimensions – positive and negative followership prototypes – reflecting cognitive schemas of ideal and non-ideal followers ([Aghaei et al., 2023](#); [Coyle and Foti, 2022](#); [Gesang, 2022](#); [Ribbat et al., 2024](#); [Yang et al., 2020](#)). Positive prototypes include attributes such as hardworking, participative, industrious, and enthusiastic, while negative prototypes include being passive, insubordinate, and incompetent ([Coyle and Foti, 2022](#); [Veestraeten et al., 2021](#)). Yet, little is known about how these beliefs manifest in complex organisational settings – especially those characterised by hierarchical bureaucracy, political oversight, and overlapping accountability structures, as is common in the public sector – where contextual dynamics may profoundly shape how followership is made sense of and enacted.

Methodology

Study setting

This study was conducted in one of South Africa's metropolitan municipalities (local government). As the sphere of government closest to communities, local government comprises municipalities with legislative and executive authority and a constitutional mandate to deliver essential services and promote social and economic development (Pieterse, 2023). Metropolitan municipalities administer the country's most urbanised and densely populated areas (The Local Government Handbook, 2020), functioning as large, complex organisations within a politically mandated framework.

Municipalities comprise three interrelated domains: the council (political leadership), the administration (employed officials), and the community. The council is constituted through elections held every five years, and thus reflects shifting political affiliations and leadership. Although the administration is expected to operate independently of politics, its members often serve under multiple political regimes throughout their tenure. This creates a dynamic in which the administrative arm of the municipality must continually adapt to changing political leadership, highlighting the political-administrative hybridity characteristic of such institutions.

South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, following the end of apartheid, brought "profound societal change and transformation" (Booyesen, 2007, p. 1) and reconfigured local government. Through the amalgamation of previously racially segregated town councils, municipalities were reconstituted as democratic institutions responsible for inclusive service delivery, particularly to previously marginalised communities (de Visser, 2010). This history, together with the municipality's size, bureaucratic hierarchy, and political embeddedness, makes it an exemplar of a complex organisation and a fitting context for examining followership constructions (Zoogah, 2014).

Research design and participants

A qualitative research design was adopted to explore followers' beliefs about followership, how followership is enacted, and the contextual factors shaping these behaviours within a complex organisational setting. For participant identification, followers were operationalised as individuals occupying subordinate roles relative to others in the organisational hierarchy. However, "follower" was defined relationally rather than as synonymous with non-managerial status. Accordingly, holding a supervisory or management title did not automatically exclude participation, because many employees in complex bureaucratic organisations occupy dual positions: they may supervise others while simultaneously reporting to more senior managers or executives. Participants were therefore eligible if they occupied a subordinate role in relation to another organisational actor and could reflect on followership from that relational position. Given the municipality's hierarchical structure, this approach enabled access to perspectives from employees across organisational levels, while remaining consistent with the study's interest in how participants themselves make sense of followership in context.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball referrals, to include individuals from various departments and hierarchical tiers. Consistent with Devers and Frankel (2000) and Rowley (2012), this approach supported the collection of diverse, information-rich accounts relevant to the study's aims, thereby enhancing the depth and richness of the dataset. Data collection and preliminary analysis proceeded iteratively, and the final sample was judged sufficient when interviews were yielding recurring rather than substantively new insights across the study's central analytic domains of followership beliefs, enactment, and contextual influences.

Data were collected through 27 semi-structured interviews guided by an interview schedule derived from the research questions. Open-ended questions elicited detailed accounts of participants' beliefs, behaviours, and experiences. The resulting sample represented 11 departments and varied in tenure, gender, and age (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample profile

Information	Category	n (N = 27)
Age	30–39	10
	40–49	7
	50–59	9
	+60	1
Tenure in organisation (years)	0–9	11
	10–19	10
	20–29	3
	30–39	2
	+40	1
Tenure in current position (years)	0–5	9
	6–10	11
	11–15	4
	16+	3
Gender	Women	12
	Men	15
Highest qualification	Postgraduate	12
	Undergraduate degree	8
	Diploma	4
	Certificate/Vocational/School	3
Role level	Senior management	3
	Middle management	12
	Supervisory	5
	Professional/specialist	5
	Administrative/support	2

Source(s): Authors

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee, and the municipality granted permission to approach and recruit participants. Participants received an information sheet and provided written informed consent, confirming voluntary participation and understanding of the study's purpose. The consent process also outlined confidentiality and the anonymisation of personal information in all written outputs.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed and uploaded to Atlas.ti for data management and coding (Rowley, 2012). Thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret patterns across the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This method was selected for its flexibility and suitability for analysing meaning-making in context; unlike content analysis, it is not limited to frequency counts but enables interpretation of underlying meaning and context (Joffe and Yardley, 2011).

Analysis was primarily inductive, with codes and themes developed iteratively from participants' accounts. However, because the interviews were guided by a literature-informed schedule and the analysis was undertaken with theoretical sensitivity, the reasoning also incorporated deductive touchpoints, reflecting an abductive logic (Gioia, 2021; Joffe and Yardley, 2011; Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Coding proceeded in several stages. First, the interview transcripts were read alongside the recordings to verify transcription accuracy and ensure fidelity to participants' original accounts. The transcripts were then read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the dataset, after which initial open coding was undertaken across all interviews in Atlas.ti to capture participants' expressed beliefs about followership, their described enactment of followership, and the contextual influences shaping enactment. This process generated 529 codes (Figure 1). Second, the codes were exported to Microsoft Excel

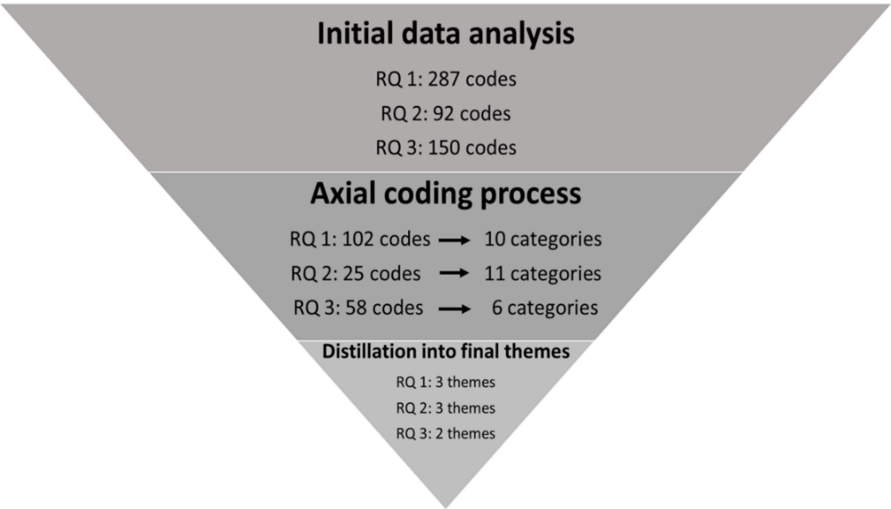


Figure 1. Illustration of data structure. Source: Authors

and compared, grouped, and refined through axial coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to reduce the data into fewer, meaningful categories and to identify relationships across the dataset. Third, these categories were reviewed iteratively against the interview transcripts, recordings, and analytic notes to refine the final themes and ensure that the interpretation remained grounded in participants’ accounts. Both manifest and latent content informed theme development (Joffe and Yardley, 2011).

The primary analysis was undertaken by the first author. Developing interpretations were tested and refined through independent input from readers external to the study, as well as through discussion of the emerging themes with the co-authors.

Credibility and trustworthiness

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the trustworthiness and plausibility of findings, rather than the statistical validity sought in quantitative traditions (Stahl and King, 2020; Tracy, 2010). It concerns ensuring “that the findings are a result of the appropriate implementation of methods” (Cilesiz, 2011, p. 501) and that interpretations accurately represent participants’ perspectives and the study context (Creswell and Miller, 2000). Qualitative trustworthiness is commonly framed in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba and Lincoln, 2001; Megheirkouni and Moir, 2023). In this study, trustworthiness was operationalised primarily through Morse *et al.*’s (2002) verification logic, which emphasises embedding verification strategies throughout the research design and analytic process. Accordingly, as summarised in Table 2, trustworthiness was strengthened through methodological coherence, sampling adequacy, and iterative “thinking theoretically” during analysis (Morse *et al.*, 2002).

Methodological coherence was supported through alignment between the research purpose and design, the use of semi-structured interviews, and a transparent analytic procedure (thematic analysis with open and axial coding, considering both manifest and latent meaning). Sampling adequacy was addressed through purposive sampling (supplemented by snowball referrals) across multiple departments and hierarchical tiers, enabling access to participants with relevant experiential knowledge of followership in the organisation. “Thinking theoretically” was enacted through iterative movement between emerging interpretations

Table 2. Verification strategies used to strengthen trustworthiness

Strategy	Description	Application in current research
Methodological coherence	Congruence between the research question and the components of the method	Research design, sampling approach, data collection and thematic analysis procedures are explicitly described and aligned with the study's purpose of examining followership meaning-making within the organisational setting
Appropriate sample	Participants who best represent or have knowledge of the research topic	Purposive sampling (supplemented by snowball referrals) recruited employees in subordinate roles across departments and organisational levels to access diverse experiential knowledge of followership in the organisation
Thinking theoretically	Emerging ideas are checked and refined through iterative engagement with the dataset	Analysis proceeded iteratively through open and axial coding/theme development, supported by reflexive memoing and repeated checking of emerging interpretations against the interview transcripts, recordings and notes, and comparison across participants as patterns were refined

Source(s): Compiled from [Mors et al. \(2002\)](#)

and the data, supported by reflexive memoing and repeated checks of interpretations against transcripts, recordings and notes as themes were refined, thereby strengthening credibility and confirmability ([Morse et al., 2002](#); [Morrow, 2005](#); [Krefting, 1991](#)).

Results

The analysis examined what participants believed about followership, how they described enacting these beliefs, and the contextual factors shaping or constraining enactment within a complex organisation. Findings are presented in three sections aligned with the research sub-questions: (1) beliefs about followership, (2) the enactment of followership, and (3) factors enabling or hindering enactment. These are considered across three analytical levels: micro (individual), meso (organisational), and macro (political-structural).

Beliefs about followership

Participants articulated varied beliefs about what constitutes ideal followership, clustering into three themes: self-focussed, organisation-focussed, and leader-focussed ([Table 3](#)). Many participants' beliefs drew on more than one theme, reflecting layered, multidimensional constructions of followership.

During initial coding, "good followership" (GF) and "bad followership" (BF) captured participants' own positive and negative framings of what they regarded as desirable and undesirable followership rather than evaluative categories imposed by the researchers. BF statements were therefore analysed as the inverse or contrast of attributes associated with desirable or ideal followership, enabling both positive and negative framings to inform the same underlying themes. [Table 3](#), therefore, reports the thematic belief dimensions, illustrated with quotations that participants may frame positively or negatively.

Self-focussed beliefs emphasised personal responsibility, authenticity, and principles. Participants suggested that good followers maintain integrity and speak up when necessary, even in challenging circumstances. Their descriptions centred on appropriate follower conduct.

Table 3. Themes on beliefs about followership

Themes for beliefs about ideal followership			
No.	Code category	Definition	Excerpts from raw data
<i>Self-focussed beliefs</i>			
1	Proactive and takes initiative	Contribute knowledge/inputs to solve problems. Innovate. Raise concerns, suggestions and differing views. Guide the leader if necessary	<i>must have the openness and the courage to come to the leader if they have suggestions or problems, or situations that they are not sure about (GF); always waiting to be told what to do (BF)</i>
2	Principled and has integrity	Discern what and who you follow (follow what you think is good). Be ethical, honest and trustworthy	<i>does not follow blindly (GF); thinks about what she or he is following (GF); being a sheep – just doing it because you are being instructed and everybody else is doing it (BF)</i>
3	Will and ability to learn	Learn from leader and others. Not afraid to make mistakes, they're an opportunity to learn	<i>you don't know everything, give yourself room to learn (GF); willing to learn and make mistakes (GF)</i>
<i>Self- and organisation-focussed beliefs</i>			
4	Professional conduct	Do your work as required and be productive regardless of individuals occupying the leadership position. Do not be swayed by politics, individuals or other external factors. Do not take things personally. Follower is your role in a particular context	<i>objectivity is important because, here in the City, this is a political office and then different political parties are involved, so a good follower should also consider those kinds of environments that the leader might be a member of the opposition party. (GF); followers don't make don't make distinction between politics and administration (BF)</i>
<i>Organisation-focussed beliefs</i>			
5	Responsible and accountable	Admit to mistakes. Be responsible and accountable for work	<i>doesn't take things seriously (BF); accountable (for) their work (GF)</i>
6	Purpose and dedication	Passionate, inspired, dedicated and committed. Apply effort. Following as a choice, not just based on hierarchy	<i>someone who is always there for the organisational needs (GF); Contributing nothing and they're just there to collect a salary (BF)</i>
<i>Leader- and organisation-focussed beliefs</i>			
7	Engaged and supportive	Understand organisational environment and objectives (organisational and specific job). Complement and support leader in achieving objectives	<i>complement the leader (GF); have a good understanding of what the objectives are or what needs to be achieved (GF); not delivering as required because they think they know more than the leader (BF)</i>
<i>Leader-focussed beliefs</i>			
8	Respectful deference	Comply with lawful orders, policies, organisational structure. Observe rank and be respectful. Raise issues if asked or wait for appropriate time	<i>someone who adheres to the policy of the organisation (GF); if you're not willing to take orders that are required for you as you signed your duties and responsibilities (BF)</i>
9	Positive attitude	Collaborative, team player. Have traits associated with being "nice" or "friendly". Being easy to work with	<i>it's very important to be a team player (GF); a good follower is friendly (GF); people with low morale (BF)</i>
(continued)			

Table 3. Continued

Themes for beliefs about ideal followership			
No.	Code category	Definition	Excerpts from raw data
10	An outcome of good leadership	Good followership emerges as a response to leaders who value followers (and their input) and allow open relationships, not dictator leaders	<i>Depending on what the leader gives out to his followers; chances are you will reciprocate. What you give is what you get . . . if you get a very good leader then people are willing and they put in the extra effort and they go the extra mile. Whereas if you get a leader who is more like a dictator kind of a leader, you get a lot of resistance from those followers (GF/BF); a dictator leader will get resistance and slacking from followers (BF)</i>

Note(s): *GF = descriptions of a good follower; BF = descriptions of a bad follower

If you are able to raise your opinion if you are not comfortable with something . . . then I assume you would be a good follower. Don't ever allow that working environment or your colleagues or your supervisors to change who you are . . . remain a good follower in spite of what situation you find yourself in. – Participant 20

I think you should be able to tell your leader when they're making a mistake. – Participant 8

Organisation-focussed beliefs emphasised objectivity, professionalism, and a commitment to the organisation's mission, even in politically charged or ambiguous environments. Ideal followership was associated with prioritising organisational goals over personal or relational considerations.

It is important to separate the person from the actual role that needs to be played within the work space. – Participant 22

Objectivity is important because, here in the (municipality), this is a political office and then different political parties are involved. A good follower should also consider those kinds of environments – that the leader might be a member of the opposition party. – Participant 19

(A good follower is) someone who is always there for the organisational needs. – Participant 21

Leader-focussed beliefs reflected followership as contingent on, and shaped by, leadership. Accounts emphasised obedience, alignment with leader expectations, and responsiveness to leadership style.

A bad follower is someone who refuses to take orders. – Participant 13

Followers are designed by the leader. – Participant 17

An ideal follower is obviously someone who is able to take an instruction from a leader. – Participant 4

The enactment of followership

When asked how they enact their followership, participants often described an intention to align their behaviour with their beliefs, but most acknowledged that this alignment was partial or inconsistent. Behaviours linked to self-focussed beliefs (e.g. initiative-taking) were more commonly enacted, whereas those associated with leader- and organisation-focussed beliefs

were less frequently translated into practice due to contextual constraints. For instance, although many participants valued organisational objectivity, few described actively enacting it in politically charged or hierarchical situations. This gap points to a tension between aspirational beliefs and contextual realities.

Whereas Table 3 reports the thematic belief dimensions (informed by participants’ positive and negative framing during the initial GF/BF coding), Table 4 presents behavioural categories descriptively; behaviours are therefore not pre-classified as “good” or “bad”. Eleven behavioural code categories emerged (Table 4). Eight map onto belief codes because participants often described enactment using the same language as their ideals. The remaining three capture context-driven responses not reflected in beliefs about followership.

Table 4. Followership behaviours

Themes for followership behaviours		
No.	Code categories for follower behaviours	Excerpts from raw data
<i>Self-focussed behaviours</i>		
1	Proactive and takes initiative	<i>I usually tell my boss if she has done something that I do not agree with</i>
2	Principled and has integrity	<i>The minute I see something that is not right, I tell you. I say, you know what, please. I respect you, but this is not acceptable</i>
<i>Self- and organisation-focussed behaviours</i>		
3	Professional conduct	<i>Whichever leader that you put in front of me, professionally I will be willing to follow</i>
10 ^a	Operates with political awareness: Is mindful of the political nature of organisation and navigates accordingly	<i>I knew what to do, what to say, what not to do, what not to say . . . What to say to who, what not to say to who. So that’s how politics are</i>
<i>Organisation-focussed behaviours</i>		
4	Purpose and dedication	<i>I have shown good commitment and passion and done everything that is expected of me</i>
5	Responsible and accountable	<i>I have that sense of accountability towards myself so I know that I need to be at work at a certain time, I need to do my work</i>
<i>Leader- and organisation-focussed behaviours</i>		
6	Engaged and supportive	<i>I really try to support my supervisor or my director in doing what is required to make his job easier</i>
<i>Leader-focussed</i>		
7	Respectful deference	<i>I respect my manager, so whoever he is, I respect that figure of authority</i>
8	Positive attitude	<i>I try my best to be a team player, to form part of the team</i>
9 ^a	Disengagement and minimum effort: Just does job, does not care anymore – completely disengaged	<i>You don’t even care now. You just do what you have to do but you don’t care . . . we just leave things as they are . . . as long as we get paid</i>
<i>Leader- and self-focussed behaviours</i>		
11 ^a	Respect as a precursor to followership: Follows instructions if issued respectfully (not ordered) – tone matters	<i>I do it more enthusiastically when he asks me to do something for him than when he says ‘you should have done this</i>
Note(s): ^a Additional code categories that were not part of followership beliefs		

As depicted in Table 5, participants predominantly enacted self-focussed behaviours, even when they held broader organisation- or leader-focussed beliefs. This suggests that when constrained, followers may retreat to behaviours within their personal control.

Factors influencing the enactment of followership

Participants identified both *enablers* and *hindrances* to enacting their ideal followership. These were categorised into *internal (micro-level)* and *external (meso- and macro-level)* factors (Figure 2 and Table 6).

Enablers

Micro-level enablers included personal values, career aspirations, prior work experience, and personality traits (Figure 2; Table 6). Participants described followership as an opportunity for growth and learning, noting that prior experience shaped how they approached their roles. Upbringing, values, and disposition were also seen as shaping enactment, including remaining constructive under frustration. Some described being naturally humble or non-confrontational as enabling more passive behaviours when preferred or appropriate, while being an independent thinker and having strong ethical character enabled more proactive enactment.

Table 5. Followership beliefs vs behaviours

Beliefs vs enactment						
	Self-focussed	Self- and organisation-focussed	Organisation-focussed	Leader- and organisation-focussed	Leader-focussed	Leader- and self-focussed ^a
Beliefs – total participants	26	19	21	11	24	0
Behaviours – total participants	22	12	13	3	9	2

Note(s): ^aOnly emerged as enactment and not a belief

Enablers		Hindrances	
Factors of internal origin	Work related factors · experience · career aspirations · big picture focus	Micro-level factors	
	Nature of person factors · personality & background		
Factors of external origin	Leadership factors · leaders as enablers	Meso-level factors	Leadership factors · leaders as hinderances
	Organisational factors · inclusive organisational culture · policies provide guidance		Organisational factors · rigid nature of organisation · lack of resources · lack of recognition · other followers (negative/low morale) · political interference
			Macro-level factors · rigid nature of organisation · political interference

Figure 2. Factors that influence the enactment of followership. Source: Authors

Table 6. Quotes for factors influencing followership enactment

Illustrative quotes for factors influencing followership enactment					
Enabler/ Hindrane	Level	Factor		Illustrative quote	
Enabler	Micro	Work-related	Experience	“... I’ve learnt a lot from (the) leaders. Luckily, I’ve been able to implement what I learnt from my previous department” (P23)	
			Career aspirations	“For me, being a follower is positive because it gives me hope – I’m learning and growing, which prepares me for the next level.” (P22)	
			Big-picture focus	“I know where our City wants to be ... how it wants to look like in 20- or 30-years’ time, so it is easy for me to make a contribution and be part of that process.” (P19)	
	Meso	Nature of person	Disposition/ personality	“My personality ... I’m not always fighting with everybody.” (P2)	
			Leaders as enablers	“They used to call me when there was a problem ... That motivates me to work harder.” (P26)	
		Organisational	Inclusive organisational culture	“What I will say about the organisation ... when we communicate, everything is transparent.” (P23)	
			Policies provide guidance	“[I keep] paper-based stuff – policies, agreements, Acts ... I’ve got a folder where I put in all my applicable information ... If somebody asks me, ‘What about this? Where do you get it?’, then I can ... say, ‘I get it from the BCA ... this is the answer.’” (P9)	
	Hindrane	Meso	Leadership	Leaders as hindrances	“You do it their way or get out of this place. They even tell you ‘Resign, leave, get a job elsewhere.’” (P24)
			Organisational	Rigid nature of organisation	“The problem is that we, as the followers, where most people are ... the lower level, they are in contact with the community and then there are ideas that they want to bring up, but, since they are not involved in strategy, it is difficult for them to do so.” (P19)
		Macro	Organisational	Lack of resources	“I write my report every month. I will just state [in] the report that, you know what, I need more manpower to help. I have been doing this for more than six years now ... the environment seems to be frustrating, I feel like I could leave my job.” (P25)
				Lack of recognition	“Every employee, to an extent, knows, no matter how hard you try, you’ll never be recognised.” (P4)
				Other followers (negative/low morale)	“Another thing is that people do wrong things and we end up normalising the situation ... We also ... we follow to do the wrong things, knowing very well it’s wrong. You do it. You know why? Because they have normalised it. It is like it is a normal way of doing things.” (P18)
			Political	Political interference	“Here, every five or four years there is a change of leadership that comes through and whoever that is comes through with their own ideas and new strategies, new everything if I can just sum it in that way. But the reality is that people don’t like changes ... and a lot of times information doesn’t filter downwards.” (P7)
		Macro	Political environment	Political environment	Political interference

Meso-level enablers included supportive leadership and inclusive organisational cultures. Leaders who listened, encouraged input and recognised contributions were described as enabling conditions for enacting ideal followership. Organisational enablers included open communication, transparent decision-making, and clear policies.

Hindrances

Participants rarely identified micro-level factors as primary hindrances; instead, constraints were located at the meso- and macro-levels, with individual-level responses described largely as downstream effects of these conditions. Meso-level hindrances included rigid hierarchies, bureaucratic processes, limited upward communication, unreceptive responses to suggestions, and lack of recognition. Participants described how these organisational conditions and leadership behaviours could stifle initiative and discourage input.

Macro-level hindrances centred on political interference, including the appointment of politically connected but underqualified individuals and pressure to implement politically motivated projects. Participants expressed that these dynamics generated disillusionment and undermined motivation to enact their ideal followership.

Summary

The findings suggest that followers hold rich, multidimensional beliefs about what constitutes ideal followership, but enactment is shaped – and sometimes constrained – by the organisational and political context. Self-focussed behaviours are more commonly enacted because they depend less on structural support or leadership receptiveness. In practice, micro-level ideals are negotiated in relation to meso- and macro-level organisational conditions, including bureaucracy, leadership style, and political interference. Figure 3 illustrates how followers construct their followership through the interaction of:

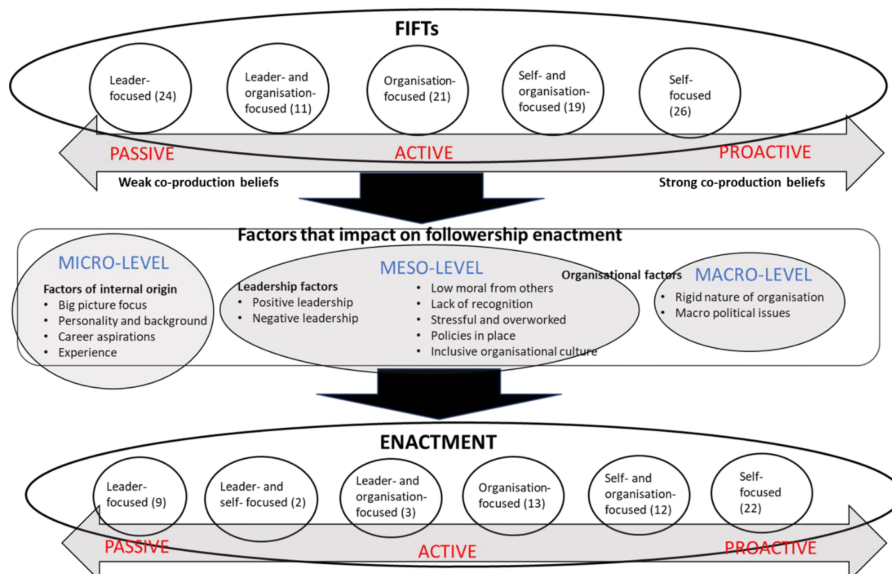


Figure 3. Summary model of findings. *Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of employees for each FIFT and enactment of behaviour. Source: Authors

- (1) Implicit beliefs about followership;
- (2) Contextual influences, including leader behaviours, organisational structures, and personal history; and
- (3) Behavioural enactment as an adaptive response to the relationship between belief and context.

Discussion

This study examined how followership is constructed in a complex organisation, focussing on followers' beliefs, enactment, and contextual conditions shaping this process. Drawing on interviews with employees in subordinate roles in a large metropolitan municipality, the findings show that followers hold multidimensional beliefs about followership and that enactment is negotiated in relation to organisational and political constraints.

To interpret these findings, we apply a co-production lens grounded in the works of [Carsten et al. \(2010\)](#) and [Carsten and Uhl-Bien \(2012\)](#). This lens offers a useful overlay for conceptualising FIFTs as self-schemas that shape how followers define and perform their roles. Participants' beliefs can be understood as oriented toward the self, the leader, the organisation, or combinations thereof, and can be located along a continuum of co-production strength from more passive to more proactive orientations ([Carsten et al., 2010](#); [Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2012](#)).

Interpreting belief orientations along the Co-production continuum

Leader-focussed beliefs aligned with the passive end of the continuum, reflecting weaker co-production orientations. These beliefs emphasised deference to leaders, alignment with leader expectations, and an assumption that outcomes are primarily determined by leaders' actions – resonating with [Kelley's \(1988\)](#) “yes-people” and [Chaleff's \(2009\)](#) “implementers”. However, participants' accounts suggested a bounded form of passivity: while they preferred to implement rather than challenge, they still assessed the appropriateness and legality of instructions before complying, indicating compliance constrained by personal and professional ethics.

Organisation-focussed beliefs, whether held independently or in combination with leader- or self-focussed orientations, reflected co-production anchored in institutional accountability rather than personal loyalty. Positioned around the middle of the continuum, these beliefs framed followership as serving organisational purpose and continuity, including maintaining standards of work irrespective of who occupies leadership roles. Where paired with a leader focus, support appeared contingent: leaders were supported insofar as their direction advanced institutional mandates, rather than as unconditional deference. Where paired with a self-focus, followership was framed as balancing personal responsibility and collective contribution, often expressed as “doing one's part” within role boundaries while remaining committed to broader organisational outcomes.

This organisation-centred positioning aligns with identity-based accounts emphasising that enactment is shaped not only by individual standards but also by collective identifications and shared understandings of what is valued in a setting ([Epitropaki et al., 2017](#)). From a social identity perspective, anchoring followership in organisational purpose supports sustained cooperation: when organisational goals are internalised as salient, commitment is less dependent on the personality or preferences of particular leaders, and coordinated action is more likely to follow from shared purpose ([Haslam and Platow, 2001](#)). In a public-sector context with a service delivery mandate, it is therefore unsurprising that organisation-focussed followership was frequently articulated in terms of duty, continuity, and responsible performance.

Conceptually, this also clarifies why organisation-focussed beliefs can resemble “good employee” discourse. Consistent with Ribbat *et al.*’s (2024) emphasis on conceptual precision, the significance of these accounts lies not in generic work virtues *per se*, but in how they were invoked as standards for what it means to follow appropriately within a leader–follower relationship and in service of institutional aims. Organisation-anchored followership may thus function as a stabilising orientation in contexts characterised by leadership turnover and politicised pressures, while also helping explain why some followers narrow their enactment to what sits within their formal remit when broader conditions constrain voice and influence.

Self-focussed beliefs aligned with the proactive end of the continuum and reflected stronger co-production orientations, framing followership as active contribution and personal accountability. Participants described followers as independent agents expected to contribute ideas, question directives when necessary, and engage critically with their organisational environment – aligning with exemplary and courageous followership (Kelley, 1988; Chaleff, 2009). A key nuance, however, was that dissent was framed as principled and professionally grounded rather than oppositional. Participants emphasised followers’ proximity to operational realities and the responsibility this creates to speak up where decisions appear impractical, unlawful or unethical. Interpreted through Carsten and Uhl-Bien’s (2013) argument, these accounts suggest that proactive schemas may help guard against “crimes of obedience” by enabling resistance to uncritical compliance when directives conflict with organisational values or public interest obligations.

The interaction between beliefs, context, and enactment

The findings indicate that followership beliefs function as normative reference points for how followership ought to be enacted, but enactment is negotiated in context rather than directly determined by beliefs. The recurring gap between aspirational beliefs and enacted practice suggests that alignment depends not only on the strength of a belief orientation but also on whether contextual conditions make certain behaviours possible, safe, or consequential. Applying an identity process lens, we argue that follower identities are enacted, affirmed, or constrained through ongoing interaction and contextual cues (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2017).

At the same time, proactive enactment sometimes occurred even when beliefs were more deferential, implying that behaviour can reflect situational demands and adaptation rather than a stable one-to-one “match” between schemas and action. This extends work showing that alignment between followership standards and self-views can support enactment (Zeng *et al.*, 2023) by highlighting that enactment may also be situationally driven, particularly when deference is not workable or when contextual demands require more proactive behaviours. Building on the summary model (Figure 3), the sections below locate these belief-behaviour patterns within multilevel influences on followership enactment.

Multilevel influences on followership enactment

A multilevel reading suggests enactment is shaped by the interaction of micro-level dispositions and motivations, meso-level relational and organisational conditions, and macro-level political and regulatory dynamics (Figure 2; Table 6; Figure 3). Micro-level enablers (e.g. values, career aspirations and personal disposition) supported agency, particularly among followers with stronger co-production orientations, but did not operate independently of the organisational setting; rather, they shaped how participants read situations and decided which forms of followership were feasible in practice.

At the meso level, leadership behaviours and organisational culture acted as key gatekeepers of active participation. Supportive leaders and receptive relational climates enabled constructive engagement, consistent with the broader logic of leader–member exchange research linking relational quality to discretionary contribution and willingness to speak up (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Conversely, rigid hierarchies, siloed communication and low receptiveness to suggestions narrowed the space for co-production enactment. While

proactive behaviours may still emerge episodically when circumstances require initiative, prior work suggests that whether such enactment can be sustained depends on how it is received: where proactive enactment is affirmed, it is more likely to continue; where it is dismissed or penalised, followers are more likely to narrow enactment toward safer, more compliant behaviours (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2017; Zeng *et al.*, 2023; Megheirkouni *et al.*, 2025).

At the macro level, participants located major constraints in political interference and the regulated nature of the public sector, including shifting mandates and politically appointed authority. Viewed through a microfoundations lens, the findings position followership enactment as a consequential site through which organisational dynamics are reproduced or resisted under multilevel political and regulatory conditions (Felin *et al.*, 2012, 2015; Barney and Felin, 2013).

Complexity, contradiction, and adaptive enactment

The coexistence of seemingly contradictory beliefs (e.g. deference alongside initiative, loyalty alongside independence) suggests that followership in complex organisations is negotiated and situational rather than a single stable orientation. This aligns with post-structural accounts emphasising ambiguity, power relations and competing expectations in shaping follower identities, rather than fixed role categories (Collinson, 2006; Thompson, 2020). It also supports treating followership constructions as adaptive responses to context: even where deference is valued, enactment may shift toward initiative when circumstances demand it or when deferential enactment is not workable.

Through a co-production lens, these dynamics extend Carsten *et al.*'s (2010) schemas by showing that belief–behaviour alignment is conditional, and that the enactment of co-production orientations is shaped by contextual opportunity and constraint (Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2012). In this present study, proactive orientations appeared more sustainable under constraint because they were anchored in personal accountability and professional judgement – sources of agency that remained within followers' control. By contrast, externally oriented beliefs, particularly those relying on leader receptiveness or organisational responsiveness, were more vulnerable to bureaucratic procedures, hierarchical signalling and politicised conditions that narrowed the space for voice and discretion. The implication is that organisational complexity does not simply influence followership; it shapes which forms of followership can be enacted and sustained in practice.

Finally, many municipal employees occupy dual positions – subordinates in some relationships and supervisors in others – which may foster adaptive enactment as individuals draw on both following and leading logics across situations. In this respect, strongly proactive orientations also resemble “follower substitutes for leadership” (Howell and Mendez, 2008, p. 31), enabling contribution even where leadership or organisational support is inconsistent. Overall, these insights highlight the importance of examining followership as an adaptive practice situated within organisational complexity and structural positioning, rather than as a uniform set of follower traits or behaviours.

Implications and conclusion

Theoretical contributions

This study makes three contributions to followership scholarship. First, it extends research on followers' implicit followership theories by showing that the relationship between followership beliefs and enactment is not direct or stable, but negotiated in context. Recent FIFT research has deepened understanding of followers' schemas and followership constructions, and has increasingly shown that such schemas matter because they operate as identity-relevant standards shaping enactment and outcomes (Aghaei *et al.*, 2023; Coyle and Foti, 2022; Zeng *et al.*, 2023; Fan *et al.*, 2024; Megheirkouni *et al.*, 2025). Building on this work, the present findings show that belief–behaviour alignment is uneven in practice, and that enactment is often negotiated rather than flowing directly from a single belief orientation.

Second, existing work has distinguished between weaker and stronger co-production beliefs, with the latter associated with more proactive role orientations and sustained upward communication (Carsten *et al.*, 2010; Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2012). The present findings extend this line of work by showing that these orientations are not simply expressed uniformly in practice. Rather, deference may be bounded by legality and professional ethics rather than equating to blind compliance, extending Carsten and Uhl-Bien's (2013) ethical followership argument by showing how resistance to uncritical compliance is negotiated in a hierarchical, politicised public-sector setting. Organisation-anchored followership may also reflect accountability to institutional purpose rather than personal loyalty. These nuances extend accounts that treat deference as synonymous with passivity or define followership primarily through alignment with leaders. In this respect, the study also responds to calls for greater conceptual precision in followership research by showing how apparently similar behaviours may carry different followership meanings in context (Ribbat *et al.*, 2024).

Third, the study develops a multilevel (micro–meso–macro) conceptual model of the enablers and constraints shaping belief–behaviour alignment. While prior work has highlighted the importance of identity processes, contextual influences, and microfoundations in shaping leadership and followership (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2017; Zeng *et al.*, 2023; Megheirkouni *et al.*, 2025; Barney and Felin, 2013; Felin *et al.*, 2012, 2015), the present findings show more concretely how followership enactment is shaped across interacting personal, relational, organisational, political, and regulatory conditions. By foregrounding these multilevel influences, the study strengthens the case for examining followership as an adaptive, contextually embedded practice rather than as a uniform set of follower traits or behaviours.

Practical implications

The findings suggest several practical implications for complex organisations. At the meso level, leadership behaviours and organisational processes act as gatekeepers of whether active and proactive followership can be sustained. Where organisations expect initiative, ethical judgement, and constructive voice, leaders' receptiveness to input and the availability of credible upward communication channels are especially important.

At the organisational level, policy inconsistency, siloed communication, and bureaucratic friction can narrow the space for co-productive enactment, encouraging withdrawal into minimal compliance. Interventions that clarify escalation routes, protect principled dissent, and recognise constructive contribution may help sustain followership enactment without positioning voice as oppositional.

In settings characterised by political oversight or shifting mandates, clarity around institutional purpose and role expectations may help sustain followership enactment across leadership changes. Finally, because many employees occupy dual positions as both followers and supervisors, development initiatives that explicitly address navigating following and leading across situations may support more adaptive enactment in practice.

Limitations

The sample was shaped by participants' willingness to take part in the study. Those who self-selected may be more reflective or more willing to speak openly, qualities associated with more agentic orientations, such that the study may overrepresent voices with stronger co-production beliefs. In addition, because the study focussed on one complex public-sector organisation, transferability will depend on the degree of contextual similarity across settings. Finally, while the analysis considered micro-, meso-, and macro-level influences on enactment, it did not measure interactions among the multilevel contextual factors.

Conclusion

This study examined how followers construct and enact followership in a complex organisational context, drawing on qualitative interviews with employees in subordinate roles in a large local government institution in South Africa. By centring followers' perspectives, it contributes to a more relational and context-sensitive understanding of followership within leadership processes.

The findings indicate that followers draw on multiple belief orientations – including self-, leader-, and organisation-focussed perspectives – often combining these in ways that reflect both role expectations and organisational realities. Enactment is not uniform: participants described adapting their behaviour in response to contextual conditions, including hierarchical structures, bureaucratic demands, and politicised dynamics. Overall, the study reinforces the understanding of followership as a dynamic and contextually embedded process shaped by multilevel enablers and constraints.

Future research could examine how beliefs and enactment evolve over time in response to leadership change, organisational reform, or shifting political conditions. Comparative studies across sectors and national contexts may clarify how governance arrangements and organisational cultures condition followership constructions. Further work could also identify organisational conditions that support ethical, co-productive, and proactive followership in environments characterised by complexity and ambiguity.

Overall, the study affirms the value of examining how followers define and enact their roles, and how these insights can inform more grounded and inclusive conceptions of leadership in complex organisational settings.

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