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"Of the Utmost Importance" A Study of Followers and Followership

Jennifer L. Thorson
St. Catherine University

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"Of the Utmost Importance"

A Study of Followers and Followership

by Jennifer L. Thorson

Leadership Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Research Advisor: Sharon Radd, Ed.D.

Research Reader Committee:

Jeanne Bailey, Ph.D.

Amy Ihlan, Ph.D.

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Abstract

In most research, scholarly writings, and popular literature about leadership, it is presented as a given that there must be followership to achieve leadership outcomes. However, followership scholarship significantly trails its leadership counterparts; what does exist either attempts to define or describe followership or discusses it only in relation to leadership outcomes. Very little centers on how the person in the follower role experiences followership and even less on defining a theory of followership. The purpose of this research is to add to the knowledge of followership as an intentional act that can build skills and create opportunities. A qualitative study of workers or members of organizations aged 18-40 endeavors to discover how followers understand and evaluate their own experience working or acting in a follower role, with special attention paid to their understanding of followership and how they describe its significance. A survey of both closed- and open-ended questions provided opportunities to analyze responses by participant category; the most interesting finding was the differences in construction and effectiveness by those who "mostly lead" and those who "mostly follow." The value of followership to organizations and individuals was affirmed, and followership was defined in active, intentional ways.

Keywords: Followership, follower, leadership, followership theory

It seems self-evident that if there are leaders, there are followers. It is almost cliché to state that without followership, there is no leadership. Yet in my 25 years of experience in leadership roles and after countless books, seminars, and certificate courses (and even this master's program), I have studied almost nothing about the theory or practice of followership.

This is a problem, and not just for me. No matter how skillful, well-trained, or experienced a leader may be, without competent and willing followership, organizational objectives will simply not be achieved. In *Followership: The Other Side of Leadership,* McCallum (2013) is blunt in his assessment: "Where followership is a failure, not much gets done" (p. 2).

I went looking for learnings on followership for a very practical, tangible reason – I was out of leadership ideas. In one of the teams I lead, "not much" was getting done, no matter what I and other leaders did, or thought we were doing, to improve the situation. We tried nearly everything: team building, trust exercises, coaching, over-management, under-management, extra training, autonomy, command-and-control, situational leadership, servant leadership, and more. The results were consistent and consistently not much. Not much in terms of results, and not much in terms of employee satisfaction and engagement.

My years of studying leadership left me unequal to the task. We might have been trying to lead, but no one was following. While "follower" is a role assigned by circumstance, practicing followership clearly must be an intentional choice. How does that happen? What makes a follower choose to follow, or choose not to? What if, in my personal and our collective focus on leadership, we've been studying the wrong side of this equation all along?

Most people are followers in at least some settings or parts of their lives. Even leaders are almost always simultaneously followers. Knowledge, theory, and skill in followership could certainly benefit many people in all kinds of settings.

Yet in all aspects of knowledge and skill creation – academic, practical, and otherwise – the focus, at least in Western cultures, remains firmly on leadership, leading, leaders, and leadership development. Even within the small but growing body of scholarly research intended to fill this acknowledged gap, relatively little centers on how the person in the follower role experiences following or decides to enact followership. There's even less on defining a theory of followership or the implications for followership practice.

While "follower" is a role assigned by circumstance, my study assumes that practicing followership can be an intentional choice. I wanted to examine followers' perception and construction of the follower role in organizational settings, as well as how they describe their decisions to practice followership.

My findings are numerous and varied, ranging from how followers perceive followership, their attitudes toward it, and the value they ascribe to it to examples of two theories of followership, role orientation theory and proactive followership theory (much more on that later), at work in the participants' stories.

Two themes stood out among the findings. The first is the observation that participants described conducting thorough and iterative assessments of the organization, their coworkers, their leader, the assignment or task, and their ethics and values before choosing and enacting their following behaviors. The other is that participants who have also experienced a leadership role tend to define followership in more positive and active ways and are more likely to consider

followership important and impactful. Participants who only follow tend to construct followership in less active, intentional, or positive ways.

There are significant limitations to this study, and plenty more to learn. However, there are interesting practical implications as well. Through this research, I also wanted to begin a new discussion about how followers use their skills and follower practices to create outcomes for their organizations and opportunities for themselves. It's not enough for leaders to learn various ways to inspire, direct, motivate, or control their followers; if the followers refuse to participate, no amount of leader knowledge will help. It's time to share at least some of the leadership spotlight with followership.

Reflexive Statement

My identities as a white, cisgender, straight, upper-middle-class American woman and my roles as both a leader and a follower are present in this research. I came to this topic through a personal need and I both reflect and impact the framing, method, and outcome of this study.

Further, this study is situated within a very specific cultural setting. Conducted within the dominant culture of businesses and organizations in the United States, definitions of leader and follower, leadership and followership, and even "good" and "effective" in this study are necessarily culturally bound. I am not exempt from this; I, and these efforts, are part of this dominant culture and system.

I have been in leadership roles for more than 25 years. I've also been a follower in every one of those roles. I have personally and academically studied leadership, but my reflections on followership have been on my own, through experiences good and bad. This has fueled my curiosity for this topic and helped me structure this study.

I am currently a nonprofit executive in a senior leadership role. I lead multiple programs and business functions and have a high level of operational and strategic responsibility, autonomy, power, and influence. There are many people in roles that follow my lead; you could say I have many followers. I seek to better understand their experience and motivations.

I am a life-long learner and a student with an interest in theory and ideas and a practitioner with a bias for action. I seek to combine both in this work.

Definitions

The terms "leader" and "follower" can hold multiple meanings. In this study, I define leaders as those holding a recognized, positional role of leader within an organization of any kind that is attempting to achieve outcomes. The organization must have at least one person in the positional role of follower. Other types of leaders, such as informal or political leaders, are not included in this definition.

I define followers as those holding a recognized, positional role of follower in an organization of any kind that is attempting to achieve outcomes and has at least one person holding a positional role as leader. Other types of followers, such as political or movement followers or religious followers, are not included in this definition.

Background

Most research, popular literature, and scholarly writings about leadership assume that there must be followership to achieve leadership or organizational outcomes (see, for example, Carsten et al., 2014; McCallum, 2013; and Riggio, 2020), yet there is little formal study or exploration of "followership" (see, for example, Carsten, et al., 2014; Stern, 2021; and Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). There is broad agreement among scholars and researchers on these two claims.

The field of leadership studies or leadership theory is relatively new. While the concept of leadership may be based on evolution and our very humanity (Popper & Castelnovo, 2019), the English term "leadership" didn't emerge until the 1700s. It was close to the 20th century before it was formally studied (King, 1990).

If leadership theory, at just 150 years old or so (Carsten et al., 2014), is an adolescent in the world of academic research, then followership theory is in its infancy. The first references to followers in leadership literature define them as recipients of leader actions or as subordinates if they are included at all (Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). One early and notable exception was Mary Parker Follet, a management scholar who urged attention to followership as early as 1927. Followership, she said, is "of the utmost importance, but which has been far too little considered" (in Bjugstad et al., 2006, p. 304). [1]

In the following decades, research and scholarship recognize followers as having a moderating impact on leader action, but the explorations, theories, and practical solutions still focused on what leader behaviors and attitudes might be used to influence (or mitigate) follower behaviors toward the outcomes (Carsten et al., 2014; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Followers may have been present, but it was still all about the leader.

Five decades after Follett's assertion, Robert E. Kelley published a seminal essay, "In Praise of Followers," in the 1988 *Harvard Business Review* that changed the conversation. In it, Kelley put forth the first known theory of followership and urged scholars and practitioners to consider the independent importance of followership (in Riggio, 2020). Kelley (1988) defined

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[1] Parker Follet's admonishment to consider followership "of the utmost importance" inspired this paper's title. It should be noted that a woman identified this gap in the leadership and organizational scholarship very early on to little notice. Several decades later a man published a "seminal essay" on the importance of followership and is credited with launching contemporary interest in the topic.

five followership typologies and asserted that there was, in fact, an ideal type of follower; he called them "effective followers."

Kelley's assertion effectively (re)launched the topic of followership in scholarly research and a new body of scholarship emerged that either attempted to categorize and describe the people in the role of follower, creating typologies (see, for example, Chaleff, 1995; Howell & Mendez, 2008; Kean et al., 2011), describe follower behaviors and attitudes (see, for example, Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012; McCallum, 2013; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007), or expand the role followership plays in relation to leader efficacy or leadership outcomes (see for example Blom & Alvesson, 2014; Foti et al., 2017; Stern, 2021).

These and other scholars often cited the changing nature of work and organizations, globalization, increased education, access to knowledge, and flattening organizational structures for why followership was now a more important and urgent topic of study (see, for example, Agho, 2009; Baker, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007). And they recognize that long-ingrained stereotypes and negative associations with the concept or role of being a follower (see, for example, Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2020; Riggio, 2020; Stern, 2021) and the Western cultural obsession with leadership (Blair & Bligh, 2018; Dixon & Westbrook, 2003) may have something to do with the relative lack of attention "followership, the other side of leadership" (McCallum, 2013, p. 2) has received in leadership scholarship.

Statement of the Problem

There is a significant gap in the formal study of "followership" as a theory or practice. What does exist either attempts to define or describe the people in the role of follower, describe follower behavior, or discuss followership only in relation to the leader. Yet if followership is not understood, studied, or trained/practiced, organizational objectives may not be reached or

leadership outcomes may fail, which can negatively impact the organization and the follower (Carsten et al, 2014).

Despite the growing body of scholarly research intended to fill this acknowledged gap, one remains: There is relatively little that centers on how the person in the follower role experiences following and even less on defining a theory of followership or the implications for followership practice.

This persistent gap is problematic. Without followership, there can be no leadership or leadership outcomes (Uhl-Bien et al, 2014). Or, more bluntly: "A leadership theory without a complementary followership theory is like the sound of one hand clapping: it has no impact at all" (Stern, 2021, p. 61).

While "follower" is a role assigned by circumstance, this study assumes that practicing followership can and must be an intentional choice. This study aims to examine *followers' perception and construction* of the follower role in organizational settings, as well as their *intentional decisions to practice followership*. Its findings seek to help us understand how followers use their skills and practice to create outcomes for their organizations and opportunities for themselves while encouraging us to "reverse the lens" (Shamir, 2017) and accord followership the same consideration as leadership.

Literature Review

My interest in the topic of followership is both theoretical and practical. I am interested in the theory and ethics of followership, and I am looking to learn new skills that I can apply in my leadership role. Therefore, I approached the literature review as a sort of scavenger hunt, looking for followership knowledge and practical applications, wanting to find a guide or a roadmap. I

did not, but I was able to learn about followership within the context of several disciplines and theories and understand its inseparable position within the study of leadership.

In the next few sections, I will provide a summary and overview of scholarly literature that *defines followership*, *offers followership typologies,* and *explores the role of followers* in leadership creation and efficacy from several different perspectives and disciplines. I will also review the emerging *followership theories* in greater detail. Two of those theories, proactive followership and role orientation theory, provided the theoretical frameworks that guided this research and analysis.

Definition(s) of Followership

Followership definitions hold "a multiplicity of meaning" (Carsten, 2010, p. 558). Indeed, the literature describes follower, following, and followership in myriad ways: as an assigned identity, a role, a set of behaviors and attitudes, a construction, an affect, a stereotype, an orientation, a theory, and an action. This study uses role-based and constructionist definitions.

Role-based Definitions

Role-based definitions describe followers' behaviors and attitudes within an organizational hierarchy. These explorations include follower typologies, follower schemas, and implicit followership theories (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) that center the leader's or the organization's characterization of followers and their impact, positive or negative, on the leader or leadership outcomes (Carsten et al., 2010; Sy, 2010). Definitions of this type are leader-centric, in which followers are "moderators of leader impact" (Shamir, 2007), sources of "social influence" for leaders (Oc & Bashshur, 2013), or an "analytical category" through which to better study leadership (Kean et al., 2011).

Constructionist Definitions

Constructionist definitions of followership apply concepts from social identity, (Peters & Haslam, 2018; Shamir, 2007; Tee et al., 2013) cultural values (Blair & Bligh, 2018), psychological (Hollander, 1992, Popper, 2011); evolutionary (Popper & Castelnovo, 2019); sociological (Baker, 2007), self-determination (Leroy et al., 2015), and post-structuralist (Collinson, 2006) theories to define followership as something constructed among individuals in a given social and relational context. Individuals co-create leadership and followership through a continuous interchange of "claiming and granting" leader or follower roles or identities (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) that shift depending on context (Carsten et al., 2010). Constructionist definitions are more focused on "following behaviors," than the role itself, including claiming, granting, deferring, obeying, resisting, negotiating, and influencing, among others (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Followers are also "reframed as active, engaged partner(s) in the leadership process" (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2020). This creates a richer definition of followership from which to explore or develop theories of followership.

Followership Typologies

Followership "typologies" are categories of follower styles based on behaviors and attitudes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). All typologies assume a role-based definition of followership.

Many scholars cite Kelley as one of the first scholars to explain followership through typologies (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Several others followed, creating a multiplicity of ways to describe followership by the behaviors, attitudes, and attributes they exhibit.

Kelley's Followership Styles

Kelley's typologies start with two dimensions – critical thinking and active, positive engagement. Based on these two dimensions, Kelley (1988; 1992; 2008) places followers into one of five styles, **passive, conformist, alienated, pragmatist,** and **exemplary**.

Passive followers wait for instruction and motivation; conformists are "yes people" that do the work assigned and then ask the leader for what's next; alienated followers think for themselves (but mostly negatively); pragmatics are survivors, changing as needed; and exemplary followers think for themselves with active, positive energy. Kelley says this last category may consist of "leaders in disguise" (2008, pg. 8).

Chaleff's Courageous Followers

Chaleff (2008, 2016) asserts that followers must exhibit several forms of courage to ensure the best possible leadership and organizational outcomes. He describes these as the "courage to" support, contribute, assume responsibility, challenge, and change.

Depending on the individual's level of courage to take these actions, followers are assigned to one of four types: **resources**, who offer low levels of support and challenge and will do the minimum required for the task; **individualists**, who offer low support with high levels of challenge and will speak up when others won't, risking becoming marginalized due to being "chronically contrarian"; **implementers** who offer high support and low challenge, carrying the risk that leaders will value this style and lose the necessary caution against mistakes; and **partners**, who offer high support, high challenge, and "assume full responsibility for own and leader's behavior and acts accordingly" (Chaleff, 2008, pp. 74-75).

Additional Followership Typologies

In addition to Kelley and Chaleff, many others have offered follower typologies, including Adair's "4D Model" – **disgruntled, disengaged, doer,** and **disciple** (2008); Kellerman's political science model of followers as **isolates, bystanders, participants, activists,** and **diehards** (2008); and Lipman-Blumen's caution about the "dark side followership" or "toxic followership" with the types **benign, leader's entourage,** and **malevolent follower** (in Riggio, 2020; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Table 1 provides a summary of several of the follower typologies discussed in the literature.

Table 1

FOLLOWER TYPOLOGIES

Author	Year	Typologies
Kelley	1995	Passive, Conformist, Alienated, Pragmatist, Exemplary
Chaleff	1995	Resources, Individualists, Implementers, Partners
Lipman-Blumen	2005	Benign, Leader's Entourage, Malevolent Follower
Adair	2008	Disgruntled, Disengaged, Doer, Disciple
Kellerman	2008	Isolates, Bystanders, Participants, Activists, Diehards

Followership typologies assume a role-based definition of followership and categorize followers by the behaviors and attitudes discernable by others. They are an antecedent to later explorations of followership and are relatively dated. However, typologies are useful in this study as a framework for asking followers to define the salient characteristics of followership.

Follower Role in Leadership

The largest body of scholarly work about followers and followership appears in leadership literature or as part of leadership theories, focusing on followers' role in constructing leadership or in the efficacy of leadership outcomes. Beyond typologies, the *follower role in*

leadership scholarship explores followers with more frequency, depth, and, if not primacy, at least as a necessary and equal phenomenon to creating leadership and organizational outcomes (see for example Meindl, 1993; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007; Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995).

This is not the focus of my study; therefore, I will very briefly summarize the themes of *follower psychology*, *follower constructions of leadership*, and *follower-leader relationship* from this body of followership literature.

Follower Psychology

Noted leadership scholar Jim Meindl made a significant contribution to the study of followership by introducing the radical idea that it was followers who create leadership, not the other way around (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007). Using a social psychological perspective, Meindl (1993) coined the term "romance of leadership" to describe the way individuals in organizations ascribe outcomes (positive or not) to acts of the leader, based on followers' "naïve psychological perspectives" (p. 97). Uhl-Bien and Pillai (2007) would later define the romance of leadership as "an infatuation with what leaders do, what they are able to accomplish, and the effects they have on our lives" (p. 187).

Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs) are psychological theories that consider the beliefs or schema followers have for leaders, and how that influences their evaluation of leader efficacy, almost regardless of the leader's actions (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Followers may hold implicit theories of leadership prototypes, such as sensitivity, intelligence, and dedication, and antiprototypes, such as dynamism, tyranny, and masculinity, or assign other traits or attributes according to their theories of leadership (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005).

Follower Constructions of Leadership

Theories of leadership construction between leaders and followers include DeRue and Ashford's (2010) claiming and granting model and Blom & Alvesson's (2014) "leadership on demand" (p. 354). Even though these are leadership theories, they begin to cast followers as agents and to shift the theoretical focus away from leaders and toward followers.

Follower-Leader Relationship

Relational approaches to leadership recognize that interpersonal dynamics are important and view leadership as co-created through mutual influence between leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Hollander is one of the early leadership scholars to recognize the relational nature of leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) and described leadership activities as an "interlocking system of relationships between leaders and followers" (Hollander, 1996, p. 46). He also declared that "leadership operates within constraints and opportunities that followers create" (p. 46).

Although followers' relationship to and impact on leaders is not the focus of this study, this topic represents the largest body of scholarly explorations of followership and does begin to move toward understanding followers as a primary topic of inquiry.

Followership Theories

Given the emerging nature of the study of followership, it might be easier to define *followers, followership,* and *followership theory* by what it is not than try to pin down exactly what it is. A *follower* is not an identity or a person, it is a role (Howell & Mendez; Carsten & Uhl Bien). *Followership* is not passive or prescriptive, it is active, responsive, and co-constructed (Uhl-Bien & Pillai); it is not static, but dynamic, relational, and contextual (Collinson). Followership may not be followership at all; instead, it may be leadership (Peters & Haslam; Carsten, Uhl-Bien, & West).

Last, but likely most important: *followership theory* is not the study of leadership from the follower perspective, it is not universal, and it is not complete. Instead, it is the emerging study of "how followers view and enact following behaviors" in a specific context, time, and place (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 96).

In the following sections, I examine the followership theories of *follower identities*, *follower role orientations*, and *followership as leadership*. What these theories have in common is they place the *follower at the center* of their explorations and consider follower beliefs, actions, and impacts as the primary topics of interest.

Follower Identities

Collinson (2006) asserts the need to create a "deeper understanding of follower identities" (p. 179) and how they interact with context and leaders beyond a fixed role or attribute-based approaches, such as typologies. This post-structuralist view, which he defines as one that views identity as contextual and "highly ambiguous, multiple, and potentially contradictory" (p. 181), supports followership explorations on a more dynamic and layered level. Collinson explores three follower identities: conformist selves, resistant selves, and dramaturgical selves.

Conformist selves. Conformist selves can be "position-based followers" who respect the formal, social position of leaders; "calculated followers" who believe that following will help them achieve their own goals; "safety-based followers" looking to the leader for a sense of security; "meaning-based followers" who look to leaders for order and meaning; and "identity-based followers" that seek to build their self-esteem by aligning with leaders they believe are powerful and attractive (p. 183). While conformist followers may be very dutiful and obedient and to some leaders, appear to be ideal followers, Collinson's post-structuralist view is that this

can be deceiving. Conformist followers may lack boundaries, work long hours, or lose the ability (or be too afraid) to make decisions on their own. Organizations are also at risk if there is not enough constructive dissent among their followers.

Resistant selves. Follower resistance can be positive or negative and can appear in several ways. Individuals may become resistant for many reasons, including a desire to construct a more positive identity for themselves, real or perceived risk of discipline or job loss to the follower, or awareness of inconsistent or unethical business practices. Resistant followers may restrict their "output, effort, knowledge, and communication" (p. 184), employ cynicism, construct other identities in opposition to leaders, psychologically distance themselves from the organization, or simply leave.

Dramaturgical selves. These followers are concerned with impression management, especially in environments replete with performance assessments, key performance indicators, and other measures. Under this "gaze of authority, individuals become increasingly aware of themselves as visible objects" (p. 185) and may seek to construct the kind of follower they believe whoever is doing the assessing wants to see. This can include the strategic staging of communications, including whom it is sent to, when, and how (Collinson calls it "flame mail" (p. 186); I call it "tattle CCing") and even go as far as manipulating records or information to improve the expected assessment. Collinson also points out that conforming and resisting followers can also be dramaturgical, or a mixture of all three.

Role Orientation Views

Howell and Mendez (2008) describe three follower role orientations – interactive, independent, and shifting – that assume followership is an active role that complements leaders

in creating leadership or leadership outcomes. Role orientation is concerned with how followers

themselves construct or understand their duties and position within an organization or hierarchy.

Interactive. Interactive follower role orientations complement the leader and, if effective,

are "equivalent to leadership in importance for achieving group and organizational goals" (p. 27).

Effective interactive role behaviors include job knowledge and competence; collaborative and

supportive relationships with coworkers and leaders; defending and supporting the leader;

exerting influence to help the leader avoid mistakes; concern for performance and a supportive,

friendly, atmosphere; and willingness to participate in organizational changes. Less effective

interactive role behaviors can include being "sheep" or "yes people"; having calculated motives;

yielding too much to the leader; saying what the leader wants to hear or withholding information

the leader may not like, or other "political gamesman" activities (p. 28). Other ineffective

interactive follower orientations could include those who lack a sense of personal identity and

identify too much with the leader, which could lead to unethical or "fanatic" behaviors (p. 29).

Independent Role. Independent follower role orientations are self-led or "follower

substitutes for leadership." (p. 32). These are individuals with a high degree of follower ability,

experience, education, training, and job knowledge, such as pilots, air traffic controllers,

professors, or doctors, who can perform their work without technical guidance and for whom

"directive leadership is relatively unimportant" (p. 31). Others with the independent follower role

orientation could be individuals who have worked many years with the same supervisor and

share "mental maps" that allow them to work without directive leadership (p. 32). Independent

followership can be less effective if the follower begins to interfere with the leader's attempt to

influence others.

Shifting Role. The shifting role orientation recognizes that individuals spend time as both followers and leaders, shifting between the two depending on the context. This is especially common in organizations that rely on flexible team-based work structures. Behaviors for this role include monitoring the environment to identify needed changes; actively participating in group decision-making; taking responsibility for achieving goals; challenging the team; maintaining a critical perspective; being a role model; maintaining relationships; and ensuring rich communication.

The shifting role orientation can be ineffective if followers fail to challenge the group; feel under pressure to conform, censor themselves, or decrease their critical thinking. It can also fail if individuals are not invested in achieving goals or are "loafers, who obtain their proportion of benefits from the team without contributing their proportional share of the work" (p. 36).

Followership as Leadership

While many followership and leadership scholars explore followers as co-producers of leadership (see, for example, Blom & Alvesson, 2014; Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Kean et al., 2011) or discuss shared leadership theories (Shamir, 2007; Stern, 2021), few state outright that followership can be leadership. However, two studies came to this conclusion.

To lead, follow. So much of the literature assumes leadership and followership, while related, are separate, if not oppositional, phenomena. Despite this, Peters and Haslam (2018) claim that people who identify as followers are not less likely to become leaders and that individuals do not have to suppress their follower identities to be seen as a leader.

To test the assumed "antagonistic opposition" between leadership and followership (p. 709), they measured individual British Marines' perceptions of themselves as followers and leaders, as well as the perceptions of their peers. They found that the best predictor of being

granted a leadership identity by their peers was not having a leadership self-perception; rather the

Marines who saw themselves as followers and enacted good followership behaviors were more

likely to be seen as leaders (Peters & Haslam, 2018).

"In other words," they write, "it seems that those who want to lead are well served by

first endeavoring to follow" (p. 3).

Upward Leadership. In 2010, Carsten, Uhl-Bien, and West conducted a study to

deconstruct how followers define their roles in organizations and made an even bolder claim that

some kinds of followership are, in fact, leadership.

Using semi-structured interviews of workers in the United States and Canada from a

variety of roles and industries, they investigated the socially constructed definitions of

followership, "followership schema," or assumptions of followership held by individuals, and the

contextual variables that impacted these definitions (Carsten et al., 2010).

This study is one of few that asked followers to discuss followership, and the findings

were rich, suggesting that the "follower role is more complex and multifaceted than previously

thought" (Carsten et al., 2010, p. 556). Followers in their study defined followership as passive,

active, or proactive, which mapped to their followership "schemas" or assumptions. Passive

followers reporting that it is important to do things the "leader's way" (p. 556) and to be obedient

and deferent; active followers wanted opportunity to give input on decisions but would do so

only when asked; and proactive followers reported desire for ownership and accountability and

valued constructive challenges to leaders and raising concerns.

Active and proactive followers in the study also noted that leadership and organizational

style and climate match to their followership definition or schema was critical for them to act in

alignment with their schema and define their followership as effective. (It's interesting to note that passive followers did not comment on contextual variables.)

The study's findings around proactive followership found that these followers "actively influenced their leaders through constructive challenge and upward communication in an attempt to advance positive change in their department or organization" (2010, p. 558). Put more bluntly, they did not follow, conform, comply, or obey; they led. This has implications for understanding followership and leadership and the authors' discussion is worth quoting in full:

> Perhaps these findings offer implications for an 'expanded view' of leadership that goes beyond leading 'down' to a concept of leading 'up' . . . In particular, an implication of proactive constructions of followership may be the need to broaden our views of leadership beyond top-down managerial leadership to leadership that can also flow upward in organizations. While this type of upward leadership would obviously be quite different . . . it seems to still be leadership in that it involves using influence to create change toward a common purpose. (Carsten et al., 2010, p. 558).

Summary of Followership Theories

Followership theory is an emerging field of scholarship and study and has roots in many theoretical and scholarly fields. Current research has focused on follower identities, follower construction and understanding of their role, and followership as leadership. Summarized in Table 2, followership theories not only "reverse the lens," they create a new one where followers and followership are the primary topics of empirical and theoretical research.

Table 2

FOLLOWERSHIP THEORIES

Followership Theory	Author(s)	Summary

Follower Identities	Collinson	Identity is highly ambiguous, multiple, and dependent upon context. Follower "selves" include conformist, resistant, and dramaturgical
Role orientation	Howell & Mendez	Role orientations are how followers understand their duties and position; interactive, independent, and shifting orientations
Followership as Leadership	Peters & Haslam	Good followership and holding a follower identity can be seen as leadership by an individual's peers
	Carsten, Uhl-Bien, & West, et al	Proactive follower behaviors of constructive challenge, communication, and influence are leadership, defined here as "upward leadership"

Gaps in the Literature

It is important to recognize that any definition and theory of followership phenomena is culturally specific and should not be presented as universal.

With few exceptions (see, for example, Agho, 2009, Blair & Bligh, 2018, Chaleff, 2016, and Sy 2010), studies that examine historical and emerging definitions of followership do not acknowledge the cultural context in which they occurred. Therefore, I assumed that all the literature is situated within Western, dominant, and capitalist cultures and worldviews. In the implications and recommendations sections, I will return to this gap and limitation in the research.

In addition, scholarly explorations of followership and leadership could reasonably be expected to examine the power dynamic inherent in leading and following, especially in Western dominant culture. This was also a gap in the literature reviewed; it was not meaningfully addressed. Therefore, it was not part of my survey design, analysis, or discussion. Incorporating the dynamics of power would be an important future line of inquiry.

Theoretical & Applied Frameworks

The multiple perspectives and disciplines of followership scholarship described in the literature review provide a broad theoretical landscape that guided my research design, analysis, findings, and discussion.

In this study, I use social construction theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) as the basis for the notion that followers construct their own follower identities, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs with others and within a specific context. I use Carsten, Uhl-Bien, and West's (2010) emerging theory of proactive followership or "upward leadership" and Howell and Mendez' (2008) interactive, independent, and shifting follower role orientations to guide my analysis of the study results and construct my argument that followership can be an active, intentional act. Lastly, I "reverse the lens" of Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership model (1996) to discuss potential implications for followership (and leadership) practice.

The following sections include a brief discussion of these theories and the applied model, and how each informs this study.

Social Construction Theory

Sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann introduced social construction theory in their 1966 book *The Social Construction of Reality.* This theory is used widely across social science disciplines.

Social construction theory holds that people and groups construct roles and meaning through their interactions and mental models, effectively constructing reality. Social construction theory supports qualitative research analysis because it seeks to broaden "the possibilities of understanding," instead of trying to "prove and persuade the other about the correct interpretation of the phenomenon." (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013, p. 2).

Social construction theory is necessarily contextual and dynamic. From a constructivist perspective, an individual's construction of reality is not solely the consequence of that person's thinking, rather; "meanings are socially constructed via the coordination of people in their various encounters; therefore, it is always fluid and dynamic." (p. 2). It also provides a framework for bringing theory and practice closer together, "strengthening the liaison between research and intervention, claiming the need of involvement and collaboration of those who will use the knowledge in its production." (p. 3).

Social construction theory is foundational to this study's design, methodology, analysis, and discussion.

Followership Theories

Proactive Followership. Carsten, Uhl-Bien, and West (2010) identified what they called an emerging theory of proactive followership or "upward leadership" through a study of followers. Using social construction theory, they deconstructed follower identities, behaviors, and schemas to better understand followership from the perspective of the follower. Among many rich insights discussed in greater detail in the literature review section, Carsten et al (2010) found that followership can be proactively constructed by the follower and make the claim that proactive followership can also be described as leadership.

The notion that followership can be constructed by the follower in active and intentional ways and may even be described as leadership significantly impacted my understanding of followership and my analysis of the data.

Role Orientation. Role orientation assumes that followership is an active role and is concerned with how followers themselves construct or understand their duties and position within an organization or hierarchy.

Howell and Mendez (2008) describe three follower role orientations, interactive, independent, and shifting, discussed in greater detail in the literature review. Followers with interactive role orientations complement the leader, exhibit job knowledge and competence, and collaborate with and support coworkers and leaders; followers with independent role orientations are self-led or "follower substitutes for leadership" (p. 32) and are usually held by individuals with a high degree of experience, education, training, and job knowledge; and individuals with shifting role orientations recognize spend time as both followers and leaders, shifting between the two depending on the context.

Howell and Mendez's role orientations move beyond typology into theories of followership that inform the findings, discussion, and conclusions of this study.

Both proactive followership theory and role orientation views share a foundation of social construction theory and active construction of followership by followers, and all contribute to my understanding and analysis of followership in this study.

Applied Framework: Situational Leadership Model

In their book *Management of Organizational Behavior*, Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson (1996) take care to define their notions of situational leadership as a *model*, not a theory, although it was based on the three-dimensional management style theory by W. J. Reddin, first published in 1967 (in Northouse, 2019).

The situational leadership model has been updated several times and is used extensively in management, leadership, and organizational development (Northouse, 2019). As all followership scholars and researchers recognize, Hersey et al (1996) declare that "followers in any situation are vital"; in fact, they may be "the most crucial factor in any leadership event." Therefore, situational leadership posits that there is no "one best way to influence people."

Rather, the leadership style used "depends on the readiness level of the people the leader is attempting to influence." (p. 190).

The situational leadership model plots leadership and followership behaviors on a four-quadrant matrix of leader task behaviors (guidance) and leader relationship behaviors (support). Follower readiness levels are situated on a continuum of readiness that assesses both knowledge, ability, and skills with willingness and confidence. The leader's task is to "match" their leadership style to the follower's readiness level.

Figure 1 is a representation of the situational leadership model currently in use by the Ken Blanchard Companies under the name "SLII" (Blanchard Companies, n.d.). In this newer version, "developmental level" or D1-D4 replaces the former term "follower readiness."

Figure 1

SLII SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP MODEL
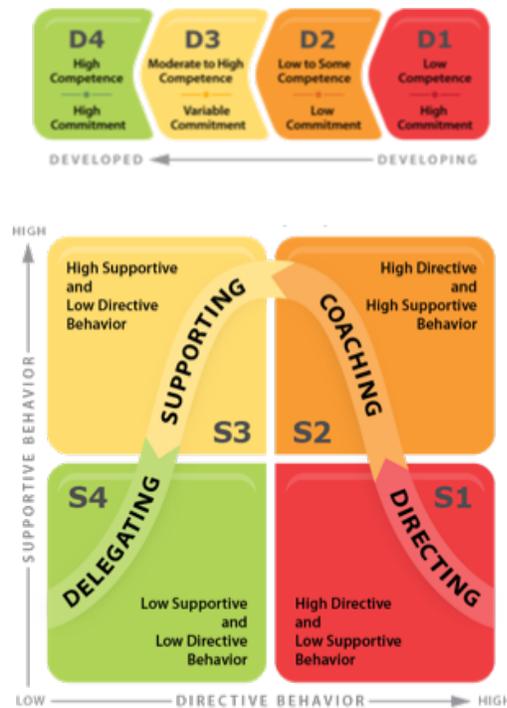
© The Ken Blanchard Companies

Like social construction theory, proactive followership theory, and follower role orientation theory, the applied model of situational leadership is fluid, dynamic, and contextual. If we reverse the lens from leadership to followership, as so often called for in the followership literature, this model may provide an interesting, applied framework for developing effective followership skills. I will return to this idea in the recommendations.

Method

In this study, I sought to understand followership from the perspective of the follower. Therefore, I designed this qualitative study of workers or members of organizations ages 18-40 who serve in follower roles to discover how *followers describe their experience working or acting in a follower role*, my original research question.

This study was designed to assess *followers' perceptions of followership* and create space for followers to *construct followership from their perspective*. (As noted earlier, most followership study occurs, somewhat ironically, from the lens of leadership.)

I chose a survey as the data-gathering method because I wanted to capture as large a sample as possible within the timeframe of this study. The survey was conducted online using Qualtrics software. The virtual nature allowed participation from any location. I recruited participants through email and social media (including Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook), as well as through requests of my personal and professional network to share the opportunity.

I defined potential participants broadly: they could be workers or volunteers in any organization in any sector (government, nonprofit, community, or corporate/business) that had at least one person in a follower role and one in a leadership role. Participants were required to be within the ages of 18-40 and spend at least some of the time in a role they defined as a follower. Participants answered two required qualifying questions; the first to ensure they were within the

age range sought, and the second to ensure they served in a follower role at least some of the time. If the answer to either was no, the survey ended.

The survey included both closed- and open-ended questions that I developed based on follower typologies and followership theories from the literature. The closed-ended questions included multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions that assessed participants' awareness, level of agreement, and/or experience with followership typologies and behaviors. The open-ended questions captured participants' descriptions of and reflections on acting in a follower role by asking participants to elaborate on their closed-ended question choices or describe scenarios and their responses or reactions to them. The survey ended with optional, closed-ended demographics questions. Full survey questions appear in the appendix.

While my original research design included the potential for follow-up interviews, the open-ended responses yielded a sufficient volume and quality of both closed- and open-ended data. Therefore, I chose not to conduct interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Inspired by Parson (2019) to broaden the practice of consent and Jeffers and Fournillier (2020) to interrogate the notion of authorship and representation, I made some intentional decisions with my survey and study design to ensure ethical consent and allow participants to represent their data if they chose to do so.

Interactive Consent

Parson (2019) notes that the "minimum requirement" for all human subject research includes approval by an Institutional Review Board. However, she argues, this may lack sufficient context for truly ethical consent. Researchers should receive consent in multiple

formats or "interactive consent," from each participant in every stage or setting of the study (p. 25).

I designed the survey using "interactive consent" practices. I did not require answers to any of the survey questions beyond the two qualifying questions. I allowed participants to define their answers for themselves wherever possible; for example, gender was a free-text field instead of a pre-determined list, and optional open-ended opportunities to explain or elaborate followed each set of closed-ended questions. In this way, participants could consent multiple times and in interactive ways by choosing what and how they would answer. They had opportunities to answer in ways that were authentic to their identity or experience. Or they could choose, at any time, to not participate at all.

This decision may have reduced the size of my data set; while more than 80 people began the survey, just 37 answered enough of the questions to supply adequate data for this study. I removed any participant who answered only category questions (such as demographics, years of experience, or time spent as a follower) and retained the data of participants who answered questions designed to provide an understanding of their construction of followership and its significance, even if they answered only one or two questions. For these reasons, there are varying sizes of total responses for each question.

Authorship and Re-presentation

Jeffers and Fournillier (2020) discuss re-presentation (their deliberate spelling) and authorship to "trouble the notion" (p. 3) that anonymity is the most ethical way to analyze and share research findings.

"A question often unaddressed within our current mode of inquiry is whether or not it is ethical to deny participants the right to be identified in research." (p. 4). The researcher is both

present in the research and re-presenting the knowledge and experiences of others, and they

contend that this "Eurocentric concept that should be challenged" (p. 4).

As Jeffers and Fournillier intended, I was troubled that I may be claiming authorship of

another's knowledge by ensuring anonymity that the participants may not desire. My solution

was to simply ask participants if they wanted to claim their responses and be identified by name.

Of the 37 participants, 10 chose to do so. Their first names will appear in the findings and

discussions where appropriate.

Participants

As noted earlier, 37 participants completed enough of the survey to provide useable data.

Demographic and closed-ended questions supplied information about the study participants and

while they represent a range of years of experience, amount of time in a follower role, and

education level, the participants were predominantly female, white, and had high levels of

education. Due to the virtual nature of the study, participant location is not known; I have

assumed all are from the United States. Table 3 provides an overview of the participants'

demographics, roles, and experience levels.

Table 3

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Age		Race	
18-24	3	White	32
25-32	20	Black or African American	1
33-40	11	Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	1
Not provided	3	Not provided	3

Gender		Education Level	
Female	26	High school or equivalent	1
Male	6	Associates degree	1
Nonbinary	1	Bachelor's degree	22
Nonconforming	1	Master's degree	10

Not provided	3		Not provided	3
Years of Experience			**Time Spent Following**	
1-3 years	4		Almost all	11
4-6 years	8		Most	16
6-15 years	16		Half	8
16 years or more	9		Mostly leader	2

To protect anonymity to those who chose it, I removed the potentially identifying IP address, date, and time taken from the survey responses. Kyndra, Lily, Maddie, Rachel, Erin, David, Tara, Emily 1, and Emily 2 are the real first names of the participants who chose to keep their names associated with their results. In the findings and discussion, I combined those who said they spend "almost all" and "most of the time" following into the category "mostly follow" or "followers" (N=27); I also combined "half of the time leading" and "most of the time leading" into the category "mostly lead" or "leaders" (N=10).

Analysis

I analyzed closed-ended survey results using Excel and descriptive statistics. For the closed-ended questions that asked participants to select from a list of variables, I used the COUNTA function to determine the frequency with which participants selected variables. I then divided by the number of responses for that variable to arrive at a percentage. I then assumed that percentage indicated the amount of agreement with that statement and/or its variable answer(s).

One of the survey's closed-ended questions prompted participants to choose the behaviors they felt best described "good followership" from a list. In my analysis, I categorized the behaviors as active, neutral, or passive, based on followership typologies and theories discussed in the literature review. Table 4 presents the behaviors I assigned to each category.

Table 4

FOLLOWER BEHAVIOR CATEGORIES

Active behaviors	Neutral behaviors	Passive Behaviors
• Collaborates with others to get the job done	• Is conscientious and thorough	• Yields authority to leader or others
• Tells the leader if things are going wrong	• Acts in the best interest of the organization	• Waits for direction before acting
• Gives input on decisions	• Effectively manages own emotions or ego	• Keeps problems or concerns away from the leader
• Is creative and innovative		
• Shares their ideas and opinions	• Does what is expected of them	
• Works on their own to complete tasks	• Supports the leader's decisions	
• Actively follows orders	• Is loyal to the leader, team, or organization	
• Makes decisions on their own		

Other closed-ended questions asked participants to indicate their level of agreement with statements reflecting various followership role constructions on a Likert scale. These statements were also based on followership constructions found in the literature. Open-ended questions after each set of closed-ended questions provided ample opportunities for participants to further explain or describe their followership constructions.

To analyze these questions, I used both COUNTA and division by response numbers to find the percentage of participants at each agreement level. I also used the central tendency of the results and standard deviation to check the distribution or concentration of the results. In the finding section, I occasionally combined Likert scale values 1 (completely agree) and 2

(somewhat agree) to present an aggregate number of respondents who "agree" with that statement.

I used the demographic and participant category questions to compare the results from several questions. Demographic questions included age, gender, race, and education level. Participant category questions include years of experience and time spent in a follower or leader role. An example of this analysis is comparing what variables people with less than six years of experience chose with the variables chosen by people with more than six years of experience. Another example is how participants who spend almost all their time in a follower role answered the Likert scale questions compared to those who spend half or more of their time in a leadership rule. This comparative analysis yielded the most interesting results from the closed-ended questions.

I uploaded open-ended responses to the coding software Dedoose in two data sets, one that included the participants' names (if they chose), and one that was anonymous. I reviewed each line of text, coding it as themes and key concepts emerged. I then conducted "cycles of iterative analysis" and used inductive reasoning to adjust, reduce, and add to the emergent themes and concepts. (O'Leary, 2017, p. 331).

Because there were two sources of open-ended responses and codes, I then used the Dedoose analysis tools of "Code Application" to count the frequency of codes across the two data sets and "Code Co-occurrence" to analyze the frequency with which responses share codes (for example, the most common co-occurrence of codes is "initiative" and "active"). Open-ended responses were then resorted by code and theme and reviewed for potential insight and findings, with special attention paid to responses that share codes. The findings discussed below emerged from this analysis.

Validity

I used the strategies of triangulation, peer review, and reflexivity to improve the validity of this study's findings and mitigate my biases as much as possible (Creswell, 2016).

I triangulated the data by using both qualitative (such as theme coding) and quantitative (such as descriptive statistics) analysis of my data sets and comparing my results to similar studies in the research (Creswell, 2016). I also compared the data of participant categories against each other; for example, those in leadership roles most of the time versus those in followership most of the time.

I practiced peer debriefing by discussing the findings with my research advisor at two different phases of the analysis (Creswell, 2016).

As shared earlier, my identities as a white, cisgender, straight, upper-middle-class American woman and my roles as both a leader and a follower are present in this research. I reflect and impact the framing, method, and outcome of this study. Declaring my positionality within this study is another way to improve its validity. (Creswell, 2016).

Findings

Analysis of the closed- and open-ended responses to the survey revealed several themes that illustrate how followers understand and construct their own experience working or acting in a follower role and their reflections on its significance.

The themes fell into three categories, including *perceptions of followership*, *constructions of "good followership"* and *contradictions in followership perception*. Perceptions of followership subthemes include *the value of followership* and *follower attitudes* toward the followership role and its place and impact within organizations. Subthemes within the category of followership construction include *active constructions of followership*, *follower assessment*

practices, *follower disagreement practices*, and the *different constructions of followership* by

followers who are also leaders. The final category discusses subthemes that reflect *contradiction*

or paradox in both follower and follower-leaders in perceptions of and attitudes about

followership.

Follower Perceptions of Followership

This study sought to understand follower perceptions and attitudes toward followership,

as most of the literature regards followership from the leader's perspective. This category of

findings indicates widespread agreement on the importance of followership, and several

interesting and varied themes related to followers' attitudes toward followership.

Value of Followership

Participants believe that followers are important contributors to organizations. This is true

across most categories (gender, age, years of experience, and education level), however, those

who spend most of or all their time in follower roles had lower levels of agreement.

Among all participants, 78% indicated that the follower role is "an important contributor"

and there was significant agreement with the statement "Followership is as important to

organizational success as leadership." Those who mostly lead accorded even more importance to

followers (90%) and had higher levels of agreement with the statement that followers are as

important as leaders.

It is important to recall that of all participants, 11 reported serving mostly in leadership

roles, while 26 reported serving mostly in follower roles. This is meaningful because it tends to

weigh the overall answers of "mostly followers" more heavily in the aggregated results.

Separating the participant category results yields more interesting information. For

example, 90% of those who mostly lead say that followers are important contributors while

fewer followers (74%) agree. And while there was no disagreement from either group with the statement "followers are as important to organizational success as leaders," there is variation in the level of agreement. Leaders are more likely to completely agree, and there's a greater percentage of "somewhat" agree by those who mostly follow. See Table 5 for a comparison.

Table 5

VALUE OF FOLLOWERSHIP

	Followers are important contributors	Followers are as important to organizational success as leaders	
	Agree	Completely Agree	Somewhat Agree
All participants	78% (N=38)	78% (N=36)	22% (N=36)
Mostly leading	90% (N=10)	90% (N=10)	10% (N=10)
Mostly following	74% (N=26)	73% (N=26)	27% (N=36)

In the open-ended responses, many participants described followership as vital to organizational success. One participant wrote, "for an organization to succeed, both 'leaders' and 'followers' are necessary." Rachel's assessment of the value of followership echoed the sentiments of nearly all followership scholars: "There are only a few leaders and many followers. Of course, the followers are most important. If they're unhappy, unheard, and leave, there is no one to lead." Another participant noted that individuals at all levels of an organization should practice followership: "I believe that no matter what your level in an organization, you should always 'follow' in some capacity. Even CEOs should follow the needs of their community, customers, and employees."

Those who did not believe that followers are important contributors cited negative perceptions of followers and organizational structures as devaluing followership. One stated, "I

think the perception of followers tends to be that they are passive, don't take initiative, etc.

[There are] lots of negative connotations." Another noted the structural and systemic context:

> I think it's largely dependent on the type of organization for how they treat and recognize
>
> their staff. I think most organizations are structured to limit the influence and
>
> compensation of 'follower' staff, so regardless of the attempts they make to be anti-
>
> hierarchical, it's kind of set in stone.

Participants in this study are all followers themselves, at least some of the time, and their

reflections on the value of followership affirm those found in the literature.

Attitudes Toward Followership

Followers say that there is *satisfaction in following*, they can learn *followership skills*,

and doing so will be *beneficial to them and their careers*. However, participants also indicated

that *negative perceptions* of followership persist, and most participants say they would *prefer*

leading or a *mix of leading or following roles*. Table 6 provides the frequency with which

respondents agreed (or not) with several closed-ended questions reflecting follower attitudes and

the sections below discuss the findings in greater detail.

Table 6

ATTITUDES TOWARD FOLLOWERSHIP

All Participants	Completely Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Completely Disagree	N
People have a negative connotation to the term "follower"	38%	59%	3%	0%	34
People don't think about or talk about the followers in an organization, only the leaders	64%	31%	3%	0%	36

All Participants	Completely Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Completely Disagree	N
If given a choice, I would choose a follower role	4%	38%	46%	12%	26
If given a choice, I would choose the leader role	15%	73%	12%	0%	26
If given a choice, I would choose some following and some leading	77%	19%	3%	0%	31
There are following skills that can be learned and improved	63%	34%	3%	0%	35
Developing and using followership skills will help my career	67%	30%	3%	0%	33
Developing and using followership skills will help my personal development	63%	37%	0%	0%	35
In some ways, following well can be considered leadership	67%	31%	3%	0%	36

Followership Can Be Satisfying. While 42% of all respondents agreed completely or somewhat that they would choose a follower-only role, 96% said they would choose a role with some following and some leading. In open-ended responses, participants noted the benefits to followership, including reducing the level of responsibility and "emotional weight" of a leadership role. One participant put it simply "I personally find a lot of value in a 'follower' role; it's also where I feel most comfortable and effective." Another writes:

Sometimes choosing to follow means you don't have to feel the emotional weight of

decision making and ultimately avoid responsibility and accountability. I think there are

also those who just don't feel the need to be in control, don't feel the need to be

recognized. [They] have other priorities in life that give them positive reinforcement and

a sense of personal value.

Followership Skills are Beneficial. Several closed-ended questions sought to understand

how (or if) followers perceive benefits to followership, believe that they can learn followership

skills, or believe that working to develop followership skills would benefit them personally and

professionally.

All but 3% of the participants agreed that "developing and using followership skills will

help my career" and all (100%) agreed that "developing and using followership skills will help

my personal development" though open-ended responses indicated some concern or assessment

of risk, such as lowering motivation and feeling stuck in the follower role. One participant

described such a risk as "overcompensating toward followership":

Some followership skills can be honed . . . However, overcompensating toward

followership could cause lower motivation, feelings of powerlessness, and [a] lower

likelihood to speak up and express thoughts.

Another participant described their experience of being "stuck" in their follower role:

I think that developing and using followership skills can help a person's career and

personal development. However, for me personally, I feel I've been stuck in that role for

years and so it no longer benefits me because now I am only seen as a follower, nothing

else, and am not given new opportunities as a result.

Negative Perceptions Persist. In open-ended responses, some participants noted

negative perceptions of followers or described followership as undervalued in organizations, and

in the closed-ended responses, 97% agreed that "people have a negative connotation of the term

follower" (although the predominant choice was "somewhat agree"). One participant explains

the impact of these negative connotations: "I think the perception of followers tends to be that

they are passive, don't take initiative, etc. [There are] lots of negative connotations. That is

frustrating because not everyone can be a leader (nor does everyone want to be)."

Ninety-five percent of participants agreed that "people don't even think about or talk

about the followers in an organization, only the leaders," and of that, 64% said they "completely

agree." An anonymous participant described this experience this way: "I think followership is

vital to organizational success. Unfortunately, a lot of organizations don't always realize that and

take advantage of their employees and then only reward leadership/management." Another

reflected:

> It can be easy to feel undervalued as a follower and possibly as a leader as well, but I
>
> have less experience with that. The experience that I do have, I have not felt as
>
> undervalued in my leadership roles.

Preference for Leadership, or Some of Both. In another set of Likert-scale questions,

participants were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with hypothetical statements

around their preference for leading, following, or doing some of both. If given a choice, most

participants (58%) said they would not choose a follower role. The strongest preference (96%)

was to both follow and lead, followed by holding a leadership role only (88%).

Open-ended responses included the desire to learn from leaders, not wanting too much

responsibility, and having some level of autonomy for why some following and some leading

seemed like the best choice. One anonymous participant explained their preference this way:

> I don't like having the MOST responsibility because failure is scary, but I like having
>
> SOME responsibility because I think I have good ideas to contribute and can help
>
> improve things with my unique perspective.

Another participant noted the developmental benefits of following a leader while seeking

leadership opportunities for themselves:

> I don't think being labeled a "follower" is a bad thing. I believe I have a lot to learn in my
>
> industry/chosen career path. I enjoy having a leader as an example to mirror. That being
>
> said, as I have moved along my career path, I have enjoyed taking on leadership roles and
>
> sharing my knowledge.

Another participant indicated that context could play a role in how they feel about following and

leading:

> "Follower" and "leader" positions each have perks and drawbacks. I would like more
>
> autonomy than I have currently, especially when I am at odds with my supervisor, but I
>
> would not, at this point, like to be responsible for large stakes.

One participant described spending time both leading and following as the "ideal state," with

some important conditions:

> My ideal situation is to have a clearly defined domain where I am a leader and a clearly
>
> defined domain where I am not – coupled with being a follower to a leader who values
>
> creativity and new ideas.

Followers in this study gave varied reasons for their preferences for choosing both leading and

following, and though the follower role was not a preference for most, they did not elaborate

about why. This is an opportunity for further explanation.

Constructing "Good" Followership

As discussed in the literature review, very little followership scholarship is interested in how the person in the role, the follower, defines and reflects on their experience. The findings in this section center on followers' definition or constructions of good followership and their understanding of its impact. The data is rich and expansive, generating significant opportunities to build understanding and knowledge of active, intentional followership.

Followers Choose Active Constructions

Overall, respondents appear to construct good followership in active ways, demonstrated in both descriptive statistics and the participants' own words. Participants overwhelmingly chose active characteristics or behaviors and mostly rejected passive ones when answering closed-ended questions about the definition or construction of "good followership". At least 76% or more of the participants chose the active behaviors or characteristics of *collaborates with others to get the job done*, *tells the leader if things are going wrong*, *gives input on decisions*, *is creative and innovative, shares their ideas and opinions*, and *works on their own to complete tasks* to define "good followership." Additional characteristics frequently (at least 76%) chosen included *is conscientious and thorough, acts in the best interest of the organization,* and *effectively manages own emotions or ego.* Although these are positive, this study considers these characteristics to be more neutral.

Participants chose the more passive characteristics of *yields authority to leader or others*, *waits for direction before acting,* and *keeps problems or concerns away from the leader* much less often. These sentiments also appeared less frequently in open-ended comments. Table 7 provides the frequency of selection of all behaviors or characteristics in the closed-ended results,

with the right-hand column indicating the percent of respondents that selected the characteristic

listed in the left-hand column.

Table 7

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD FOLLOWERSHIP

Active followership behaviors

Collaborates with others to get the job done	95%
Tells the leader if things are going wrong	86%
Gives input on decisions	81%
Is creative and innovative	78%
Shares their ideas and opinions	76%
Works on their own to complete tasks	76%
Actively follows orders	51%
Makes decisions on their own	49%

Neutral followership behaviors

Is conscientious and thorough	86%
Acts in the best interest of the organization	78%
Effectively manages own emotions or ego	76%
Does what is expected of them	68%
Supports the leader's decisions	54%
Is loyal to the leader, team, or organization	51%

Passive followership behaviors

Yields authority to leader or others	30%
Waits for direction before acting	19%
Keeps problems or concerns away from the leader	5%
	N=37

Open-ended responses demonstrated active ways participants practiced followership, including a strong theme of *assessment* and examples of *active disagreement with leaders,* both leading to follower action.

The open-ended responses included many stories and experiences that demonstrate their active constructions of "good followership." Kyndra shared a story that reflects creativity, collaborating with others, giving input on decisions, and sharing her ideas and opinions:

> My supervisor explained a tough situation regarding a client we served and what we as a team should watch out for if we were to engage with the client. I asked some follow-up questions and then proposed some ideas to address the situation. I helped the team brainstorm some ideas on how we could better support the client by changing the environment and how we addressed the client to help them feel more comfortable. We were able to formulate a plan that the team used, and it resulted in a better relationship between the staff and client.

Lily described taking the initiative to start and complete a new project, even working beyond her scheduled hours to complete the project. She worked and made decisions on her own.

> I was a receptionist at a local veterinary hospital. I helped them revamp their payment plan system and forms to make them clearer to clients and staff members. This was a special project that I did on my own time because I knew it would be a huge improvement but that I couldn't work on it during my scheduled working hours.

Maddie identified a problem and told their supervisor about it. They shared their ideas and opinions and collaborated with others, eventually leading the committee created by their actions.

> At my first job, I saw a huge gap in the way our team was showing its support of the LGBTQ community. I had an issue where no one would put their pronouns in their email

signatures, or that they had a huge misunderstanding of LGBTQ needs and rights. So, I

brought this up to my supervisor and we created a DEI committee where I led the task

force to work towards inclusivity for queer people.

An anonymous participant described using creativity and innovation and working on their own to

operationalize strategies that had been set by the leader. They shared their ideas and opinions in

ways that supported the leader's direction.

In recent years, I reported to a supervisor that had lots of big ideas and strategies. I was

able to listen to these ideas, and then go find the data she needed to support her ideas and

their implementation. I also took the ideas and operationalized them, creating systems

and processes for tracking progress to goals. In this situation, I was not the one creating

the vision or direction, but I was able to ensure that we had the information we need to

support the work and achieve our goals.

Followers Practice Assessment

Assessing context, ethics, tasks, and leader behavior emerged as a strong concept in

follower constructions of followership. Many open-ended comments, regardless of the question

prompt, reflected some form of assessment of these factors, which in turn influenced the

participants' decision-making. This supports an active construction of followership.

Contextual Assessment. In the open-ended responses, participants used phrases like

"depends on," "I determined", "I could tell that", "when it seems like", and "I had to make a

choice" that indicated they were assessing the task or situation in the context of the organization,

the other involved parties, the leader (and their potential responses), urgency or importance, and

ethical considerations before acting. An anonymous participant described a two-part assessment

process:

Depending on the situation, I feel I have a few choices. I can speak up and voice my

disagreement to try to influence the outcome, can just follow the direction given, or

disregard the direction without speaking up. Most often I do one of the first two

depending on the level of importance. [emphasis added]

Emily 1 described her assessment process in ethical terms: "It really *depends on the situation.* If

I'm asked to do something I don't necessarily think is productive but there aren't any ethical

implications, then I usually just do it. *If ethics are involved, then I push back*" [emphasis added].

Task-focused Assessment. A slightly different form of follower assessment centers on

the situation, project, or task. After an assessment, the individual decides what contribution they

will make, such as in this example by an anonymous participant:

I was a follower involved in a diversity, equity & inclusion staff committee. *I could tell*

that the group was finding it challenging to maintain institutional memory. Every

meeting, it felt like we were forgetting anything we'd ever talked about or decided. I

approached the leader and asked if it would be helpful if I created some organizational/

filing systems to support the committee's institutional memory. [emphasis added]

Decisions Follow Assessment. In the open-ended responses, assessment is followed by

the act of making a choice. In some cases, the participants chose an active response; in others,

they chose a more passive response. An example from an anonymous participant illustrates this

process:

I often disagree with directions that I am given regarding strategic communications.

When it seems like the leader is open to new ideas [emphasis added]**,** I try to make

suggestions and pair them with an article or source supporting my idea. Any time that I

anticipate negative outcomes from the stated course of action, I like to make that

suggestion via email so that I have a paper trail of my disagreement.

Another anonymous participant explained it this way:

Generally, when I disagree with the leader or directions, I may voice that *(depends on*

who is giving the instruction). Some leaders I am comfortable voicing objections with,

others not so much, but then do as I am told because it is ultimately not up to me.

[emphasis added]

The theme of contextual assessment emerged from the open-ended responses and no

question prompted participants to describe the processes they took to decide what to do. This

makes the prevalence and consistency of reports of assessment behaviors particularly interesting.

Followers Practice Active Disagreement

Disagreement with leaders or directions given can also reveal active constructions of

good followership, especially when values and ethics are involved. Several participants shared

stories about when they disagreed with directions or their leader, and what they did about it.

Values-Based Disagreement. Lily describes sharing her concerns with leaders and

sharing her ideas and opinions. She's also loyal to the organization and team and cares about

their best interest.

Since the onset of 2020, we've been required to allow for any last-minute project from

clients because leadership is worried about retention. I've voiced my concerns about

burnout many times, but have still always ensured my work gets done, even when it is

above and beyond what I should be doing. I continue to voice my concerns but so far it

hasn't come to anything. Employee retention is going to become a problem.

Lily's example shows that active followership does not always mean the follower's view prevails, however she was able to act on her values. Emily 2 shared a similar experience. She unsuccessfully advocated for an organizational statement about Black Lives Matter (sharing her ideas and opinions) and ultimately learned from her supervisor and the experience as she wrestled with her beliefs and values.

> Last summer, when many organizations made public statements condemning the murder of George Floyd, calling for accountability in policing, and committing to antiracism, I wanted my organization to issue a statement as well. My boss, who is Black, said that we as a predominantly white organization lacked the credibility to speak on this issue and that a statement from us could do harm to communities of color. He felt it was performative. I understood his reasons, but still personally felt that silence could too easily be interpreted as disinterest. I also felt that we were missing an opportunity to model a response to injustice to the organizations that look to us for cues. I shared my thoughts, listened to his perspective, and accepted that the decision is his. Over time, I came to better understand his points and respect his decision.

Active Disagreement Despite Risks. Active followership behaviors caused by disagreement do not always have positive results. David's story is interesting in that he exhibited the active followership behavior of *making decisions on his own* that achieved high sales results but resulted in negative consequences:

> I was told by my director to focus my efforts on data collection rather than obtaining new sales business. I disagreed with this approach and explained my frustration to my regional manager and director. I was told to continue with heavy data collection, but my partner

and I stayed focused on business development. We ended the year as the top sales office

and faced consequences for our lack of CRM data.

An anonymous participant also faced significant negative consequences for her active

followership behaviors of *telling the leader if things were going wrong*:

I was constantly at odds with a former director, because she was great at talking a big

game, but didn't understand the mechanics needed to make things work. We disagreed a

lot and it was difficult to get decisions from her. I tried everything I could to help her

understand – breaking down various steps, documenting, holding meetings, and even

asking for her help, but in the end, I was set up as the bad guy who was too much of a

challenger and wasn't a "partner" and they fired me.

This story shows that active constructions of followership do not necessarily ensure positive

outcomes. Nonetheless, there was nothing passive about this participant's behavior.

Leaders Construct Followership Differently

An interesting and variation emerges when the data is analyzed by the participants'

predominant role. Those who spend at least half of their time in leader roles chose different

characteristics of "good followership" than those who spent most or all their time in following

roles; however, the general preference for primarily active characteristics remains. Table 8

compares the behaviors chosen most frequently by those who mostly follow with those chosen

by those who mostly lead. The data is listed from the largest to smallest differences, with the

most significant differences highlighted in gray.

Table 8

LEADER VS. FOLLOWER CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD FOLLOWERSHIP

Followership Behaviors	Mostly follow	Mostly lead	Difference
Makes decisions on their own	41%	70%	29%

Supports the leader's decisions	48%	70%	22%
Does what is expected of them	63%	80%	17%
Acts in the best interest of the organization	74%	90%	16%
Yields authority to leader or others	26%	40%	14%
Is loyal to the leader, team, or organization	48%	60%	12%
Effectively manages own emotions or ego	74%	80%	6%
Tells the leader if things are going wrong	85%	90%	5%
Is creative and innovative	78%	80%	2%
Gives input on decisions	81%	80%	-1%
Actively follows orders	52%	50%	-2%
Collaborates with others to get the job done	96%	90%	-6%
Keeps problems or concerns away from the leader	7%	0%	-7%
Shares their ideas and opinions	78%	70%	-8%
Works on their own to complete tasks	78%	70%	-8%
Is conscientious and thorough	89%	80%	-9%
Waits for direction before acting	22%	10%	-12%
	N=27	N=10	

The most striking difference is that 70% of leaders define "makes decisions on their own" as a good followership behavior, while only 41% of those who mostly follow agree. There's also a large gap in how much followers and leaders agree that "supports the leader's decisions" describes good followership. It may be less surprising that more leaders than followers say they would like followers to yield to their authority, do what's best for the organization and what's expected of them, and are loyal to their leader, the team, and the organization.

It is clear from the closed-ended data that experience with the roles of follower and leader affects the participants' definitions of "good followership". An anonymous participant who is in a leadership role at least half the time shared this thoughtful reflection on the changing

definitions of "good followership" over time and when considered from both the leader and follower role perspectives.

> When I was newer in my career and I disagreed with a leader, I usually just went along with it, feeling like a didn't have the authority to voice my opinions. As I have gained more experience and been a leader of others more often, I have grown to appreciate that there is a place for questioning and disagreement. As a result, now when my leader makes a decision I do not agree with, I start to ask questions. I find that when I ask questions, I am able to learn more about the rationale behind the decision. I still may not agree with it, but at least I have a better understanding of why the choice was made.

Paradox of Followership

Despite the wide agreement in the data that followership is important, valuable, and can be constructed as active, intentional, and positive, an apparent paradox in respondents' perception of followership emerged. However, this paradox held only when all participant data were considered together; once disaggregated, a different picture emerged.

Contradictions in Perception

Among all respondents, there was significant agreement with this statement "I can choose to practice followership intentionally." However, there was also agreement, though less strongly, with the statement "Follower is a role or identity placed on me by the organization." In addition, an almost equal number of respondents agreed that followers do have influence (41%) and do not have influence (43%).

In the open-ended responses, the most frequent codes include positive sentiments, such as *active, initiative, assessment, added value, contributor, influence*, and *followership as*

leadership, yet in the closed-ended responses, only 54% of participants said followership was rewarding.

Some open-ended responses appeared to convey what could be considered negative sentiments, such as *anger*, *frustration*, or *withdrawal*, but there were much fewer such statements. Still, 65% of the closed-ended responses noted that followership is frustrating. Table 9 summarizes this apparent paradox.

Table 9

PERCEPTION PARADOX

All Participants	Agreement	N
I can choose to practice followership intentionally	97%	35
Follower is a role or identity placed on me by the organization	47%	28
Followers have influence in the organization	43%	37
Followers do not have influence in the organization	41%	37
Followership is rewarding	54%	37
Followership is frustrating	65%	37

So, which is it? A choice or a role assigned to you? Active or passive? Influential or not? Rewarding or frustrating? The answer seems to be "it depends." Here's how one anonymous participant put it:

> I think there is some choice involved but some of it is put on you by your organization and how upper management defines your role. I like the idea of intentional followership, improving followership skills, etc., but I don't feel that those things are valued at my organization, so it's hard to agree fully.

Or, put more simply by another: "I think here and in previous questions, many times [the] opposing answers can both be true/selected."

Participant Rachel reveals a clear example of how followership constructions depend on the situation. In one open-ended response, she relayed a story that could be considered *active* and *rewarding*, in which she certainly *influenced her organization* and co-workers:

> I helped my clinic roll out a controlled-medication refill program. This took a lot of legwork on my part to do tedious behind-the-scenes work. I was committed to its success, so willing to do some of the drudgery so my peers wouldn't have to and would be more likely to feel favorable towards the new program.

At the same time, Rachel also experienced *frustration* with a *role defined by her organization*, to the point that she transferred to another position:

> I was working as a floor nurse and was instructed to start ending every patient interaction by asking "what else can I do to make your stay exceptional?" I'm a nurse, not a waitress. Up until that point, I complied with patient-satisfaction-type initiatives like bedside reporting, hourly rounding, etc. Unfortunately, these just aren't always compatible with a nurse's workload. Scripted interactions, including bedside reports, were the first things I sacrificed when I needed to cut corners to make ends meet. The priority is to keep patients safe, not happy. I kept my patients safe. I transferred to another unit where patient outcomes, not satisfaction, was the prevailing metric.

Impact of Leadership Experience

Those in leadership roles are also followers, and those who are in leadership roles at least half to most of the time demonstrate less-contradictory perceptions of followership.

All leaders in this study believe that people can choose to practice followership (100%). Nearly all followers (89%) believe that it is a role placed on them by their organization.

The level of agreement that followership is *rewarding or frustrating* or *has influence or does not have influence* also changes when considering follower and leader results separately. Sixty percent of leaders say that following is rewarding and 52% of followers agree. While 70% of followers say following is frustrating, only half of the leaders agree.

The biggest change occurs when considering influence; 70% of leaders and 30% of followers agreed that followers have influence in the organization. Table 10 shows the same questions, but with responses broken out by leaders and followers.

Table 10

IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE ON PERCEPTION PARADOX

	Leader Agreement	N	Follower Agreement	N
I can choose to practice followership intentionally	100%	10	96%	25
Follower is a role or identity placed on me by the organization	56%	9	89%	19
Followers have influence in the organization	70%	10	33%	27
Followers do not have influence in the organization	30%	10	44%	27
Followership is rewarding	60%	10	52%	27
Followership is frustrating	50%	10	70%	27

Followers' perception of followership as influential or frustrating appears to depend a great deal on both the situation and their level of experience with leadership or time in leadership roles. This apparent paradox, which lessens to disappears when analyzing the data from mostly followers and mostly leaders separately, is one of the more compelling findings in this study.

Summary of Findings

Followers believe they are important contributors to organizations, that following can be rewarding, and that followership skills are beneficial to have and to develop. They defined and constructed "good followership" in primarily active ways, including contextual assessment, decision-making, and active disagreement, even when there is a risk of consequences.

Despite the generally active, positive constructions of followership described by participants in this study, negative perceptions of followers and followership persist. If given a choice, most followers would choose to lead, or a combination of leadership and followership, over serving solely in a follower role.

The findings identified a "perception paradox", wherein participants described as both an "active choice" and a "role I am assigned"; "influential" and "not influential"; and "rewarding" and "frustrating" in nearly equal measures. The paradox disappears and results become more distributed if the data is disaggregated into "mostly lead" and "mostly follow" categories; followers' perceptions of followership appear to depend a great deal on the follower's level of experience with leadership roles.

Discussion

This study is one of the few to explore followership as defined and perceived by those in follower roles and its findings affirm and expand on existing literature and theories around followership as a constructed role within organizations. The follower lens provided insight into the ways that followers practice active followership through assessment, decision-making, and disagreement and uncovered differences in how followers who also lead define followership.

In this section, I describe how this study's findings affirm Howell and Mendez's (2008) role orientation theory and Carsten, Uhl-Bien, and West's (2010) theory of active and proactive

followership and expand the discussion of follower assessment beyond the current scholarship. I will also more fully examine the unexpected contradictions within followership construction.

Interactive and Shifting Followership

Howell and Mendez's (2008) role orientation theory is concerned with how *followers themselves construct* or understand their duties and position within an organization and assumes that *followership is an active role*. They posit three follower role orientations: interactive, independent, and shifting. These findings affirmed interactive and shifting role orientations.

Interactive Followership

Effective interactive followership is positive and beneficial to both followers and their organizations, even "equivalent to leadership in importance for achieving group and organizational goals" (Howell and Mendez, 2008, p. 27). The active behaviors or characteristics of *collaborates with others to get the job done*, *tells the leader if things are going wrong*, *gives input on decisions*, *is creative and innovative, shares their ideas and opinions*, and *works on their own to complete tasks,* chosen by a significant majority of the participants, are similar to the characteristics of effective interactive followership that Howell and Mendez (2008) proffer, including *collaborative and supportive relationships with coworkers and leaders*, *exerting influence to help the leader avoid mistakes*, and *concern for performance*.

Interactive followership can also be ineffective. Although there were fewer examples of ineffective interactive followership in this study, it was present in David's story about deciding to continue to focus on sales and the anonymous participant's story of getting fired after repeatedly sharing her opinions and guidance on how things should be done. These choices echo the ineffective interactive role behaviors of *having calculated motives*, *withholding information the leader may not like*, or *"political gamesman" behaviors* (Howell & Mendez, 2008, p. 28).

Many of the followership behaviors I defined as an "active followership" construction in the findings are reflected in what Howell and Mendez (2008) call interactive role orientation. These describe behaviors and a view or construction of follower role and suggest a list of characteristics of "effective followership" that could form the basis of followership practice.

Shifting Followership

The shifting role orientation recognizes that individuals spend time as both followers and leaders, shifting between the two depending on the context (Howell and Mendez, 2008). The shifting role orientation behaviors of *monitoring the environment to identify needed change*s; *taking responsibility for achieving goals*, *maintaining a critical perspective,* and *being a role model* were present in this study in significant ways, especially in the rich examples of follower assessment, decision-making, and action.

Kyndra's story about learning of a challenging client and brainstorming solutions with her team exemplified these behaviors, shifting between follower and leader roles effectively:

> My supervisor explained a tough situation regarding a client we served and what we as a team should watch out for if we were to engage with the client. *I asked some follow-up questions* and then *proposed some ideas to address the situation. I helped the team brainstorm* some ideas on how we could better support the client by *changing the environment* and [changing] how we addressed the client to help them feel more comfortable. We were able to formulate a plan that the team used, and it resulted in a better relationship between the staff and client. [emphasis added]

Notice how Kyndra's leadership role elevated her followership behaviors. She demonstrated shifting role behaviors of critical perspective by asking follow-up questions; she took responsibility for achieving goals by proposing ideas to address the situation; monitored the

environment and suggested changes to it; and acted as a role model by helping the client feel

more comfortable.

Experience with both leader and follower roles shifts participants' orientation to and

construction of the follower role. An anonymous participant who is in a leadership role at least

half the time shared this thoughtful reflection on this shift, included in full in the findings:

> When I was newer in my career and I disagreed with a leader, I usually just went along
>
> with it, feeling like a didn't have the authority to voice my opinions. As I have gained
>
> more experience and been a leader of others more often, I have grown to appreciate that
>
> there is a place for questioning and disagreement.

All leaders also spend time in a follower role (more on that later). The elevated followership

behaviors in Kyndra's example and the shifting construction of "good followership" offered by

the above example suggest that to build their followership skills, followers should try their hand

at leadership, too.

Proactive Followership

In their study of followers, Carsten et al. (2010) put forth two theories of followership.

One is that followership follows either passive, active, or proactive constructions. The other was

that proactive followership can also be leadership.

Passive followers believe that it is important to do things the "leader's way" (p. 556) and

to be obedient and deferent; active followers want opportunities to give input on decisions but

would do so only when asked; and proactive followers reported a desire for ownership and

accountability and valued opportunities to provide constructive challenges to leaders and to raise

their concerns. (Carsten, et al, 2010).

Most of this study's findings affirm and exemplify the proactive followership construction. The behaviors and characteristics of *gives input on decisions*, *shares ideas and opinions*, and *works on their own to complete tasks* selected by participants to define good followership align with proactive followers' desire for ownership and accountability as well as constructive challenges and feedback.

Many open-ended stories and examples reflected proactive followership constructions as well. Maddie's example of improving their organization's support for LGBTQ staff needs and rights is especially resonant.

> At my first job, I saw a huge gap in the way our team was showing its support of the LGBTQ community . . . *So, I brought this up to my* supervisor and *we created a DEI committee where I led the task force* to work towards inclusivity for queer people.
>
> [emphasis added]

In this example, Maddie demonstrated the proactive followership behaviors of constructive challenges and feedback by bringing the issue up to their supervisor. They also took ownership and accountability by leading the resulting task force.

Follower Assessment

There is a further dimension to Carsten et al's (2010) theory of proactive followership that appears over and over in these findings: the importance of context. Leadership styles and the organizational climate must match the followers' proactive followership desires for them to feel effective.

The frequency of assessment behaviors in the follower stories and examples show them testing out and evaluating the leadership and organizational climate for a match before choosing their next action. Phrases like "*when it seems like the leader is open to new ideas*" and *"depends*

on who is giving the instruction" indicate an assessment of the leader and leadership style and

"*depending on the situation*" used frequently in various forms, indicates assessment of the

climate.

My study's findings, however, indicate layered assessment occurring at multiple levels.

Followers in the study assessed their situations in their entirety – the leader and climate,

certainly, but also their values and ethics, the task or assignment at hand, and the potential

consequences of their actions. They are fully embedded in their environments, constantly

assessing their shifts and contours, and adjusting their behaviors to match their constructions of

effective, good followership in that situation. The importance of contextual variables in

understanding the construction of followership cannot be overstated.

In Carsten et al's (2010) frame, what I termed *active followership* would be considered

proactive followership. I accept and agree with this term for the followership constructions and

behaviors found in this study and suggest that proactive followership theories expand to include

assessment behaviors and the importance of context.

Leaders Follow, Followers Lead

Carsten, Uhl-Bien, and West (2010) make a bold claim that *proactive followership* is,

well, leadership. At the same time, nearly all leaders are also followers, at least some of the time.

This is not the only paradox that emerged from this study, but it is the most critical one.

Followers and leaders perceive and construct followership differently.

Leaders are more likely to believe that followership is a choice and followers are more

likely to believe that it is a role they are placed in by their organization. Leaders are much more

likely to believe that followers have influence than followers do. Followers are more likely to

describe following as frustrating; most leaders think it is rewarding.

Leaders think the most important characteristics of "good followership" are *acts in the best interest of the organization*, *tells the leaders if things are going wrong*, and *collaborates with others to get the job done*, in that order. Followers think the most important characteristics are *collaborates with others to get the job done*, *is contentious and thorough*, and *tells the leader if something is going wrong*. While followers and leaders share two of the top three most important characteristics, there are important and instructive gaps in the next set. For example, 70% of leaders think *makes decisions on their own* is a characteristic of good followership. Only 41% of followers think the same. A similar gap appears for *supports the leader's decisions* (70% vs. 41%) and *does what's expected of them* (80% vs. 63%). It is clear that leadership experience changes the definition of "good followership."

Howell and Mendez (2008) briefly acknowledge that leadership experience impacts follower role orientation, and for the better. Carsten, Uhl-Bien, and West's (2010) proactive followership theory claims that followership can be leadership. This study's findings that time spent in a leadership role affected nearly every part of followers' perceptions and constructions of followership indicate a direction for further study.

Implications and Recommendations

This research topic is relevant and urgent (see for example Baker, 2007; Kelley, 1988; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007). As I stated early on in this paper, I am a life-long learner who loves to contemplate ideas and a practitioner with a bias for action. I have been a leader for many years, and I have built up a large toolbox of skills. Yet my toolbox (and I would argue any leader's toolbox) is not complete without understanding the theory and practice of followership.

In this section, I will share three recommendations inspired by my research, findings, and analysis. That followership should continue to be studied almost goes without saying. That

followership training and development significantly lags that of leadership and is needed for effective organizational outcomes is obvious. Nonetheless, those are important implications of this research.

I am most curious and excited about the implications that contextual variables have on followership. This finding appeared again and again, no matter the question, topic, or theme at hand. It appears to be under-considered in the literature but has the potential to support a deeper and more effective understanding of followership. The situational leadership model may provide a useful framework.

Study Followership More

Followership is woefully understudied, and significant opportunities for further research remain. Further research should focus on the follower experience and the way they construct followership through multi-layered assessment, decision-making, and action. Deep qualitative research through interviews, focus groups, and perhaps even a longitudinal study would begin to fill some of the gaps in the understanding of how followers construct "good followership" and ultimately, what skills, experiences, training, and structures optimize their success. Research into potential interventions for negative perceptions and constructions of followership would help organizations improve the experience and morale of followers.

Followership should also be studied in different cultural contexts. Blair and Bligh (2018) point out that most theories of followership have been developed within just three "cultural regions" – English speaking, Catholic Europe, and Protestant Europe. (p. 130). Therefore, "current culturally-bounded theories may fail to include potential cultural differences," (p. 131) putting a fuller understanding of followership at risk. Since followership is socially constructed

and dependent upon context, culture of all kinds plays a significant role in its theory and practice. What would we learn and apply from other cultures' constructions of followership?

Followership theory should address the impact of power differentials and dynamics within the leader-follower relationship and in the context of organizations. This was a gap in both the literature review and in my study's design and outcomes.

Lastly, one of the most interesting findings of this study was the impact of time spent leading on follower constructions of followership. This could be a line of inquiry all its own, with significant implications for follower skill and career development.

Train and Develop Followership Skills

Participants in this study generally regarded followership as rewarding and believe that learning followership skills will be beneficial to them and their careers. The question is, where would they do that?

Just as followership is understudied, followership practice is under-taught, under-trained, and under-developed. Followership research and theory should influence the development of followership skills training, career development, and formal and informal recognition. Organizations can include followership questions in interviews and rank employees' followership effectiveness in annual reviews. This master's program, among others, should offer at least one course on followership.

Organizations should create opportunities for followers to have leadership experience, if not leadership roles. This study found that even some leading experience changes the follower's construction of followership in positive ways.

Organizations, trainers, consultants, and educational institutions should invest in developing proactive, intentional followership practices that both followers and leaders can use.

This investment has significant potential for positive impact, even if they used just a fraction of what is spent annually to develop leadership skills.

It's long been time to consider followership training alongside leadership opportunities. As Parker Follet said nearly 100 years ago, it has been "far too little considered" (in Bjugstad et al., 2006, p. 304).

Reverse the Lens of Situational Leadership

In 2003, Dvir and Shamir coined the term "reverse the lens" in their exploration of follower characteristics. Instead of studying leader impact on followers, they thought, what if they "reversed the lens" and looked at follower impact on leaders? (Shamir, 2007). This phrase is now aphoristic in followership research. Anytime we consider followers in similar ways or use similar theories or models as typically applied to leaders, we are "reversing the lens."

I believe an important implication of this study, wide-ranging as it is, is that we can reverse the lens of the situational leadership model and apply it to followership.

The most important, interesting, and enduring finding in this study is that perceptions and constructions of followership – and the way both affect follower actions – depend significantly upon context. Carsten, Uhl-Bien, and West (2010) noted this too: "Social constructions of followership, and the ability to act in alignment with followership schema [construction], may be dependent on the context that is created by the leader and the organization." (p. 557). Howell and Mendez (2008) do as well, suggesting that their role orientations could be a foundation for considerations of "person-job and person-organization fit," (p. 26) echoing Carsten et al's (2010) ideas around "matching" or alignment.

The central tenets of situational leadership reflect a similar emphasis on context, alignment, and matching. Situational leadership posits that there is no "one best way to influence

people." Rather, the leadership style used "depends on the readiness level of the people the leader is attempting to influence." (Hersey, Blanchard & Johnson, 1996, p. 190).

Hersey and coauthors plot leadership and followership behaviors on a four-quadrant matrix of leader task behaviors (guidance) and leader relationship behaviors (support). Follower readiness levels are situated on a continuum of readiness that assesses knowledge, ability, and skills on one axis and willingness and confidence on another, resulting in a determination of readiness level. The leader's task is to "match" their leadership style to the follower's readiness level.

The situational leadership model requires the leader to adjust their leadership style and vary their tools or techniques for each situation. It assumes that leaders can perform different types of leadership or adopt different styles as the situation warrants. In the case of this study's participants, it is also true that different constructions of followership or follower styles and behaviors can occur in the same person. The followers in this study assessed and adjusted to either fulfill their moral duty or in pursuit of successful outcomes.

What if that lens of this model was reversed? What if followers could be taught to assess leaders' readiness for followership behaviors and match their followership style to the leader's level? What if this assessment changed, depending on the situation at hand, whether it be a task assignment, a decision, an ethical or moral judgment, and so on, and followers had a set of skills, behaviors, and characteristics they could draw on to be most effective in that particular moment? How would this change the perception of the value and impact of followers?

Followers actively construct their followership role and experience, and that this act of construction is highly situational; it is different depending on the person, setting, and other variables. This suggests that "reversing the lens" of situational leadership theory to create a

"situational followership theory" might provide a beneficial way to translate followership theory into effective practice.

Limitations

Although this study had layered and interesting findings that may help further our understanding of followership, it is limited in some important ways. The sample size is small. Nearly all participants are white and the majority hold bachelor's degrees or above. The location of the participants is assumed to be the United States, and all are working or volunteering in organizations that most likely conform to the United States dominant culture norms for work, power, and privilege. Therefore, this sample represents a small slice of the experience of mostly white, educated followers in United States dominant-culture organizational settings.

Since followership is guided by cultural norms (Blair & Bligh, 2018), additional research should actively study (and compare) the experiences of followers from minoritized cultures, those with lower educational levels, and in different organizational structures. Moreover, followership study in collectivist cultures can reasonably be expected to yield an entirely new set of knowledge. The impact of power dynamics in follower's experiences and how it impacts their followership should also be addressed.

The study is also limited by time constraints. The comparison of closed-ended results by category and the significant open-ended responses yielded themes and insights that could inform future studies with followers; with more time, additional knowledge could be gained through interviews or focus groups with followers to seek deeper reflection on the themes that emerged from this study.

Conclusion

With this research, I wanted to begin a new discussion about how followers use their skills and follower practices to create outcomes for their organizations and opportunities for themselves. I also think it is past time to share the leadership spotlight with followership.

I hoped to add to the knowledge of the necessary but understudied phenomenon of followership. I also sought to learn and apply new knowledge in practical, tangible ways.

The followers in this study clearly understand the value of followership as important to organizations' success. There is a high level of agreement that followership can be practiced intentionally, that followership skills can be learned, and that doing so would be beneficial. Yet there is an acknowledgment that negative perceptions of followers persist and that it can be a frustrating, limiting role.

Characteristics of good (or effective) followership are defined in active, intentional ways that affirm and expand the theories of proactive followership and shifting followership. The importance of context in constructing followership cannot be overstated. Followers who also lead perceive and construct followership differently, and in some ways at higher levels of effectiveness. Understanding the differences in the ways that followers and leaders construct followership is critical to improving organizational effectiveness.

It's not enough for leaders to learn various ways to inspire, direct, motivate, or control their followers; if the followers refuse to participate, no amount of leader knowledge will help. Leaders need to learn about followership and find ways to help their followers value their followership skills and want to build and use them.

Scholars need to study followership more, and practical ways to apply that knowledge should be created and practiced. There should be training programs, courses, and books about followership. It should be recognized and rewarded in organizations.

There can be no leadership or organizational outcomes without followers, and we are all followers at times. The myopic focus on leadership in our organizations and the broader culture is limiting our curiosity about followership to our detriment. Can you hear the sound of one hand clapping?

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Appendix

<u>Survey Introduction & Consent to Participate</u>

You are invited to participate in a study of followership by completing this survey. The purpose of this study is to learn more about experiences people ages 18-40 have had when they are acting in follower roles in organizational settings. The data collected will be used to increase the knowledge and understanding of followership theory.

The study is conducted by Jen Thorson, a St. Catherine University Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership student, Dr. Sharon Radd, a St. Catherine University faculty member, and Eskender Yousuf, a St. Catherine University adjunct faculty member.

In this study, "followership" is defined as the behaviors, influences, and interactions by those who are assigned or who take a follower role in a professional or organizational setting (e.g., an internship, board, or community organization).

By responding to items on this survey you are giving the researchers your consent to use your responses for research and educational purposes. Your participation is voluntary and your decision whether to participate will not affect your relationships with the researchers. This survey will take approximately 10-20 minutes to complete, depending on how many questions you choose to answer, and at what length you desire to answer them. If you decide to stop at any time, you may do so. With the exception of this consent and other qualifying questions, may also skip any question you do not want to answer.

Your responses to this survey will be anonymous and results will be presented in a way that no one will be identifiable. However, the nature of this study is to understand people's personal experiences and beliefs and you will be given the option to include your name or other

identifiers to maintain ownership over your story and data. If this is a choice you make, your first name may be included in the results discussion where appropriate.

In addition, at the end of the survey, there is an optional question to include your name and contact information if you are interested and willing to participate in a follow-up interview. There is no obligation to do so.

Confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by this survey technology, Qualtrics. No guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties.

If you select "Yes" below, you are indicating that you have read the description of the study, are over the age of 18, and that you agree to the terms as described above.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Jen Thorson, researcher, at jthorson616@stkate.edu or the Institutional Reviewer Board Chair John Schmitt, PT, Ph.D., 651-690-7739; jsschmitt@stkate.edu. Thank you in advance for your participation!

Jen Thorson

MAOL Student

St. Catherine University

<u>Consent Acknowledgement</u>

I agree to participate in the research study. I understand the purpose and nature of this study and

I am participating voluntarily. I understand that I can stop taking this survey and withdraw from

the study at any time, without any penalty or consequences.

By answering yes, I am also indicating that I am between the ages of 18-40, the range this study

is exploring.

- Yes
- No

Your responses to this survey can be anonymous and results presented in a way that is not

identifiable. However, the nature of this study is to understand people's personal experiences and

beliefs and your story belongs to you. If you'd like to claim your story and be recognized by

name, please indicate that below. If you choose that, your first name may be included in the

results discussion where appropriate.

- I'd like to remain anonymous
- I'd like my name associated with my results and content

<u>Survey Questions</u>

How many years of experience do you have working in an organization (such as in a job, as an ongoing volunteer, in an internship, or other organizational role)?

- Less than a year
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 6-15 years
- 16 years or more

In those experiences, have you been in a follower role – such as a team or staff member, committee member, or volunteer position that was not recognized formally as the leader?

- Yes
- No

In those experiences, have you been in a formally recognized leadership role at times? (For example, many people hold both leadership and follower roles at the same time; managers or team leads are leaders of their teams, but followers to their superiors or other parts of an organization)

- Yes
- No

Thinking back to your entire professional or organizational history, about how much of your time have you spent in a follower-type role?

- Most of the time
- Almost all the time
- About half and half – I've been both a follower and leader in equal amounts
- Mostly I lead, but sometimes I am a follower
- I'm not ever a follower

From the list below, choose all the words or phrases that you think best describe the follower

role. (Multiple selections allowed)

- Defined by the job/position
- A role I can choose to take
- Perceived as less important or "less than"
- An important contributor
- Passive
- Active
- Complex
- Simple
- Has influence in the organization
- Does not have influence in the organization
- Rewarding
- Frustrating

If you feel something is missing from the list above, please add it here in your own words:

_____

From the list below, choose all the behaviors or activities you think make someone a "good

follower" (Multiple selections allowed)

- Acts in the best interests of the organization
- Yields authority to the leader or others
- Collaborates with others to get the job done
- Effectively manages own emotions or ego
- Supports the leader's decisions
- Is loyal to the leader, team, or organization
- Shares their ideas and opinions
- Works on their own to complete tasks
- Makes decisions on their own
- Waits for direction before acting
- Does what is expected of them
- Is creative and innovative
- Is conscientious and thorough
- Actively follows orders
- Tells the leader if things are going wrong
- Keeps problems or concerns away from the leader
- Gives input on decisions

If you feel something is missing from the list of behaviors or activities that make someone a

"good follower," please add it here in your own words:

_____

_____

Please think about a time when you were in a follower role, and your actions really helped the

organization achieve its goals. What was the situation and what did you do?

_____

_____

Please think about a time when you were in a follower role, and you disagreed with the leader or the directions you were given. What was the situation and what did you do?

_____

_____

Thinking in general in your whole professional/organizational life, please indicate the level of agreement you have with the following statements:

	Completely Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Disagree Somewhat	Totally Disagree
People have a negative connotation to the term "follower"	○	○	○	○	○
People don't even think about or talk about the followers in an organization, only the leaders	○	○	○	○	○
Follower is a role or identity placed on me by the organization	○	○	○	○	○
If given a choice, I would choose a follower role	○	○	○	○	○
If given a choice, I would choose the leader role	○	○	○	○	○
If given a choice, I would choose some following and some leading	○	○	○	○	○

Optional: Please use this space to explain why you answered any of the above questions as you did, or to add more information you think is important.

_____

_____

Thinking in general in your whole professional/organizational life, please indicate the level of agreement you have with the following statements:

	Completely Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Disagree Somewhat	Totally Disagree
I can choose to be a "good follower"	○	○	○	○	○
I can choose not to follow	○	○	○	○	○
People who are good followers are considered good employees (or volunteers, community members, etc.)	○	○	○	○	○
There are following skills that that can be learned and improved	○	○	○	○	○
I can choose to practice "followership" intentionally	○	○	○	○	○

Optional: Please use this space to explain why you answered any of the above questions as you did, or to add more information you think is important.

_____

_____

Thinking in general in your whole professional/organizational life, please indicate the level of

agreement you have with the following statements:

	Completely Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Disagree Somewhat	Totally Disagree
Followership is as important to organizational success as leadership	○	○	○	○	○
In some ways, following well can be considered leadership	○	○	○	○	○
Developing and using followership skills will help my career	○	○	○	○	○
Developing and using followership skills will help my personal development	○	○	○	○	○

Optional: Please use this space to explain why you answered any of the above questions as you

did, or to add more information you think is important.

_____

_____

This study includes interviews to understand experiences in greater depth. If you are willing to

be interviewed (a 30-minute, virtual interview via Zoom), please indicate that here.

- Yes
- No

Thank you for being willing to be interviewed! Please share your name, preferred email, and

preferred phone number here. _____

Optional Demographic Questions

What is your age?

- 18-24
- 25-32
- 33-40

What is your gender? _____

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin? (ethnicity)

- Yes
- No

How would you describe yourself? (Choose all that apply)

- Native or Indigenous American or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- White
- Other _____

What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed? If you're currently

enrolled in school or a program, please indicate the highest degree or level you have completed.

- Less than a high school diploma
- High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- Some college or post-high school education
- Associates degree (e.g., AA, AS)
- Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS)
- Master's degree (e.g., MA, MS, MBA)
- Professional degree (e.g., JD, MD, DDS, DVM)
- Doctorate (e.g., PhD, EdD)
- Other not listed here _____