Followership theory: A review and research agenda ☆

Mary Uhl-Bien [a],*, Ronald E. Riggio [b], Kevin B. Lowe [c], Melissa K. Carsten [d]

[a] Department of Management, College of Business Administration, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68588-0491, USA
[b] Kravis Leadership Institute, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA 91711, USA
[c] Graduate School of Management, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, New Zealand
[d] Department of Management, College of Business Administration, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC 29733, USA

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ABSTRACT

While theory and research on leaders and leadership abound, followers and followership theory have been given short shrift. It is accepted wisdom that there is no leadership without followers, yet followers are very often left out of the leadership research equation. Fortunately this problem is being addressed in recent research, with more attention being paid to the role of followership in the leadership process. The purpose of this article is to provide a systematic review of the followership literature, and from this review, introduce a broad theory of followership into leadership research. Based on our review, we identify two theoretical frameworks for the study of followership, one from a role-based approach ("reversing the lens") and one from a constructionist approach ("the leadership process"). These frameworks are used to outline directions for future research. We conclude with a discussion of conceptual and methodological issues in the study of followership theory.

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1. Introduction

We have long known that followers and followership are essential to leadership. However, despite the abundance of investigations into leadership in organizational studies (Yukl, 2012), until recently little attention has been paid to followership in leadership research (Baker, 2007; Bligh, 2011; Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Kelley, 2008; Sy, 2010). When followers have been considered, they have been considered as recipients or moderators of the leader's influence (i.e., leader-centric views, Bass, 2008) or as "constructors" of leaders and leadership (i.e., follower-centric views, Meindl, 1990; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). The study of followers as key components of the leadership process through their enactment of followership has been largely missed in the leadership literature.

We suggest that this oversight is due in large part to confusion and misunderstanding about what followership constructs are and how they relate to leadership. This confusion happens because we have not understood leadership as a process that is co-created in social and relational interactions between people (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). In this process, leadership can only occur if there is followership—without followers and following behaviors there is no leadership. This means that following behaviors are a crucial component of the leadership process. Following behaviors represent a willingness to defer to another in some way. DeRue and Ashford (2010) describe this as granting a leader identity to another and claiming a follower identity for oneself. Uhl-Bien and Pillai (2007) refer to it as some form of deference to a leader: "if leadership involves actively influencing others, then followership involves allowing oneself to be influenced" (p. 196). Shamir (2007) argues that following is so

important to leadership that it negates the construct of shared leadership altogether: "leadership exists only when an individual (sometimes a pair or a small group) exerts disproportionate non-coercive influence on others" (p. xviii).

The significance of following for leadership means that our understanding of leadership is incomplete without an understanding of followership. For research in followership to advance, however, we need to identify followership constructs and place them in the context of followership theory. We address this by identifying followership theory as the study of the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process. It investigates followership from the perspective of a) formal hierarchical roles (e.g., followers as "subordinates") and b) followership in the context of the leadership process (e.g., following as a behavior that helps co-construct leadership). The former focuses on studying followership behaviors from a subordinate position. The latter focuses on studying following behaviors as they combine with leading behaviors to co-construct leadership and its outcomes.

We begin with a systematic review of the leadership literature from the standpoint of followers and followership. An overview of this review is presented in Table 1. In this table the headings represent views of followers and followership from a historical standpoint. The arrow figures beneath the headings show the treatment of followers according to each view. The rows show the leadership theories/approaches and which view they represent (as indicated by a check mark under the heading). Leader-centric, follower-centric, and relational views all discuss followers but not necessarily followership. Two newly emerging followership views are represented in the right-hand columns. These views represent a role-based and a constructionist approach. Role-based approaches see followership in formal hierarchical roles (e.g., subordinate). They "reverse the lens" (Shamir, 2007) to see followers as causal agents and leaders (i.e., managers) as recipients or moderators of followership outcomes. Constructionist approaches see leadership as constructed in relational interactions among people that produce leadership and outcomes (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). They consider followers to be active participants with leaders in co-constructing leadership, followership, and outcomes.

Following the review we identify a broad theory of followership. We offer conceptual definitions of followership and its constructs, define theoretical boundaries for the study of followership, and outline two general causal models and directions for future research. We conclude with a discussion of conceptual and methodological issues that should be considered as followership research moves forward.

2. Historical treatment of followers in leadership research

2.1. Leader-centric

The vast majority of leadership research has focused on leaders. This leader-centric approach (Hollander, 1993; Meindl et al., 1985) has contributed to a view of leaders as power-wielding actors who affect group and organizational outcomes (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). Stereotypes of leaders, as suggested by many definitions of "leadership," conceive of leaders as the motivating entity that moves or directs followers to action, ultimately ending in the achievement of goals (Bass, 1985). Stereotypes of followers, on the other hand, view followers as recipients or moderators of leaders' influence (Shamir, 2007) who dutifully carry out the orders, directives, and whims of the leader, without resistance or initiative (Kelley, 1988). Not surprisingly, the resultant focus has been nearly exclusively on leaders, and the vast history of research on leadership can be viewed as the study of leaders and "subordinates."

2.1.1. Taylor
We see origins of this perspective in Frederick Winslow Taylor's foundational view that managers are superior and employees are inferior (i.e., "subordinates") (Taylor, 1911, 1934). According to Taylor, because followers require direction and control, leaders must dictate the behaviors required to obtain desired outcomes (Taylor, 1947). Although Taylor acknowledges that his approach might seem tough at times, he rationalized that it is necessary and not unkind because "mentally sluggish" followers need managers who are directive (Taylor, 1947).

2.1.2. Trait approaches
Among psychologists, the earliest focus in leadership research was also exclusively leader-centric, with a search for the traits necessary for leaders to attain leadership positions (i.e., leader emergence) and to effectively move followers toward the attainment of goals (i.e., leader effectiveness) (Dinh & Lord, 2012; Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994; Stogdill, 1948). A number of traits were singled out as critical for leader emergence, including sociability–extraversion, dominance–assertiveness, and energy level (Bass, 2008; Hollander, 1985). Although the trait approach to leadership fell out of favor in the mid-20th century (Stogdill, 1948), the last two decades have seen a resurgence of interest in leader traits (e.g., Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Despite this, much less attention has been paid to empirical investigation of the traits of followers or to the interaction of leader and follower traits.

2.1.3. Behavior approaches
Post World War II, studies of leadership focused on the behaviors of leaders in moving followers toward goals. Studies at Ohio State and the University of Michigan (Fleishman, 1953; Stogdill, 1950) focused on two categories of leader behavior: those that focused on the task and initiated structure into the work situation (e.g., directive and goal-oriented behaviors) and those that focused on the relationship between leaders and followers (e.g., relationship-oriented behaviors) (Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004;