

Followership

The Theoretical Foundation of a Contemporary Construct

Susan D. Baker
Morgan State University

This article presents the theoretical foundation of followership. The words *follower* and *followership* are increasingly used in discussions of leadership and organizations, and many think that the field of followership began in 1988 with Kelley's "In Praise of Followers." Followership research began in 1955, and literature in the social sciences discussed followers and followership for decades prior. By examining why leadership rather than followership is emphasized; discussing antecedents, early theory, and research about followership; and identifying common themes found in the literature, this article provides the foundation that has been missing in contemporary discussion of the followership construct.

Keywords: *followership; leadership; leader role; follower role; relational nature of leader-follower; organizational behavior; management; authentic leadership*

Almost 30 years ago, Kelley's article, "In Praise of Followers," was published in *Harvard Business Review* (1988). It received wide attention in both academic and popular presses for its seemingly novel proposal that followers had an active role to play in organizational success: Success was not solely dependent on dynamic leaders. The idea that followers could be more than passive subordinates was echoed in the next decade by Chaleff's (1995) work about courageous followers.

These two publications by Kelley (1988) and Chaleff (1995) became the primary works on which subsequent discussions of followership were based. A small but growing body of work about followership developed into a field of its own, asserting that leadership could no longer be studied in isolation or with only a small nod to followers. Citing Kelley and Chaleff, theorists proposed behaviors, styles, and characteristics of effective followers and posited interdependency in the leader-follower relationship.

As theorists and selected researchers moved forward in their discussion of followership, few looked back across the decades preceding Kelley's (1988) work. The purpose of this article is to provide a theoretical foundation for the field of followership and to examine the roots from which it developed in the United States in the 20th century management literature. By discussing why management theorists focused on leaders rather than followers, identifying the early

voices of followership theory, describing followership's antecedents, and identifying the common themes found in the literature, this article acknowledges the origins of followership theory and begins to set the foundation missing in contemporary discussions of the followership construct. It also acknowledges the limited followership-centric literature in the 21st century and identifies contemporary exploration of a common followership theme by leadership theorists. It concludes by proposing further areas for research in followership.

It is important to note that the body of followership literature, distinct from what is traditionally viewed as leadership literature, is small. A search of 26 electronic databases produced approximately 480 unique citations for the period 1928 through September 2004 (Baker, 2006); approximately 50 more have been added through December 2006. About half of the citations were relevant to the field of management, and the great majority of the citations were written by American authors and about American organizations. The citations included opinion pieces as well as articles published in popular and trade magazines and academic and scholarly journals. In general, followership theory developed in the latter half of the 20th century. With limited exception, the few dissertations and articles written about followership in the first few years of the 21st century have explored facets of followership theory posited in earlier decades.

The number of leadership citations in comparable publications dwarfs the body of followership literature. Why has there been so much emphasis on leadership and so little on followership? The next part of the article examines this question.

Why Is the Focus on Leaders Rather Than Followers?

From leadership theories as early as Great Man down to the 1970s, the common view of leadership was that leaders actively led and subordinates, later called followers, passively and obediently followed. As Follett (1996) observed in 1933, her contemporaries thought that one was “either a leader or nothing of much importance” (p. 170). Why were followers ignored as the spotlight shone so brightly on leaders?

In the early days of civilization, there were no leadership theories—only leaders and their followers. Early leaders were Great Men who functioned in a preindustrial and prebureaucratic period (Daft, 1999). The leadership talents and skills that set the Great Men apart from other humans were assumed to be inborn; natural abilities were thought to be inherited, not acquired (Galton, 1900). Those who did not inherit these abilities had no chance to acquire them. The Great Men had their followers, troops, or devotees who followed in their footsteps, obeyed their directives, and faithfully mimicked their actions.

Heroic Leaders

In a similar fashion, Burns (1978) saw leadership literature as dealing with historically heroic or demonic figures, where fame was equated with importance. The followers of the heroic leaders were the “drab powerless masses” (p. 3). This was the predominant idea about leaders and followers as the United States of America transformed from a rural, agricultural economy into an urban, industrial one in the latter part of the 19th century. The business enterprises that arose then followed the model of Great Man leadership. Follett (1960) described the business leader of that era as a “masterful man carrying all before him by the sheer force of his personality” (p. 310). She painted a stark picture of the leader–follower dynamic:

Can you not remember the picture . . . of the man in the swivel chair? A trembling subordinate enters, states his problem; snap goes the decision from the chair. This man disappears only for another to enter.

And so it goes. The massive brain in the swivel chair all day communicates to his followers his special knowledge. (p. 311)

That view continued into the 1970s when Hollander (1974) described the then-current view of followers as “nonleaders . . . an essentially passive residual category” (p. 23).

Idealized Leader Overshadows Followers

Hollander (1974) argued that the primary role filled by an organizational leader was that of executive or manager who directed the activities of others. Other leader roles such as change agent, adjudicator, and problem solver were overshadowed by the director’s role. He further observed that leaders were thought to “hold” a position of authority, which led to thinking of the position as a fixed, static role. The fixed leader role was idealized, and its idealization led to making a sharp and distinct difference between leader and followers. With this distinction in mind, the fixed position of leader was honored, and the role that it contained received less attention. Hollander suggested that were people to view the leader position as less fixed and more fluid, they would have a better understanding of the leader’s roles and would think more about leader–follower relations rather than only about leaders.

Vanderslice (1988) similarly saw a problem in operationalizing leadership “in individualistic, static, and exclusive positional roles” (p. 683). She observed that people thought of planning, decision making, and task responsibility as the province of those who filled the leader roles and wondered if these functions could be achieved without “invoking role-defined static power differentials” (p. 683). Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich (1985) believed that their culture held a view of a heroic, romanticized leader to whom was attributed all glory or all failure. Their concept of idealized leader overshadowed the follower.

Social Change Affects Followers

Social change in the United States and elsewhere also shaped people’s views of followers. Although in the early 1930s Follett discussed the interdependence of leaders and followers, the active role of followers, the situational authority of those closest to the task or problem at hand, and the win-win nature of constructive conflict, her views were lost in the milieu surrounding World War II. The world at that time embraced hierarchical, authoritarian structures that were built on a win-lose proposition that had but

one purpose: to conquer an enemy. Lived in epic proportions, leadership was embodied in Great Men such as Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin, and Hitler.

The organizations that prospered in America during and after World War II were mostly vertical organizational hierarchies (Useem, 1996). These postwar American corporations helped foster the “golden age” of prosperity within the United States (Smith & Dyer, 1996, p. 51), and the economy they led was admired and envied by “most of the rest of the world” (Kaysen, 1996, p. 3). As America achieved economic dominance in this era, corporations promised lifelong job security to employees in exchange for their loyalty, obedience, and hard work. Nothing more was asked of followers, and there was no need to examine the leader–follower relationship while economic conditions were stable. The leader’s actions, not those of the followers, were instrumental to the company’s success (Berg, 1998).

By the early 1980’s, American industry had experienced a crisis that transformed its stable nature. The advent of a global economy; advancing technology; changes in the American labor force; and the ongoing dynamic between business, labor, and government that introduced many contractual obligations into the employment relationship were several of the forces putting pressure on the status quo of the modern corporate system. Applied in an era of reduced resources, these pressures gave birth to the takeover and downsizing trends of the 1980s and 1990s.

As corporate organizational structures flattened, power and responsibility were delegated to a wider range of people, including the traditionally dependent followers. Leaders expected more initiative and risk taking from their followers (Lippitt, 1982). But as these business organizations struggled to reform themselves, leaders found that their followers were ill equipped to take initiative or to collaborate with their superiors (Berg, 1998). Followers saw the challenge but avoided the risk of new responsibilities for which they had no training or support (Lippitt, 1982). When the need arose for a more active follower, the model of the omniscient leader and obedient, passive follower or subordinate was too entrenched to allow those subordinates to embrace a new role of active followership. Instead, the focus was recentered on leadership: developing new leadership skills and even developing those leadership skills in followers. There was no focus on the leader–follower relationship or on the demands placed on each role (Berg, 1998).

The demise of the psychological contract and the organizational pressures resulting from the downsizing trends of the 1980s and 1990s were viewed by some

as an opportunity for employees to craft a new psychological contract by taking a partnership role with their leaders (Potter, Rosenbach, & Pittman, 1996). Nonetheless, the image of the “drab powerless masses” that Burns (1978, p. 3) described as followers in the historic leadership literature was slow to change. Berg (1998) reported that participants in his Leadership and Followership workshops conducted in the early 1990s used words like “sheep,” “passive,” “obedient,” “lemming,” and “serf” (p. 29) to describe followers, and he attributed these negative associations to the organizational and psychological demeaning of the follower role.

Moving to a View of Active Followers

Although management scholars in the first decades of the 20th century were slow to recognize and discuss followers, theorists in other behavioral science fields were not. In psychoanalysis and psychology, Freud in 1921 and Fromm in 1941 identified a psychological link between leader and followers; Erikson discussed a link between leader and followers in 1975 (Hollander, 1992b). In anthropology, Mead (1949) discussed the importance of examining the psychological relationships between leader, lieutenant, and follower; the effect those psychological relationships had in the lives of the individuals; and cultural and anthropological factors that affected the individuals and their roles.

In sociology, Sanford (1950) observed that “leadership is an intricate relation between leader and followers” (p. 183) and that leaders had to meet their followers’ needs to maintain a desirable relationship with them. Homans (1950) discussed the “human group” and posited a connection between a leader and a group by whose norms the leader must live (pp. 425–429). In 1961 Homans was among the early writers to describe a process of exchange between leader and group members in which both parties give and take resources (Bargal & Schmid, 1989). It gave recognition to the group member, or follower, as well as to the leader. Homans’s work laid the foundation for social exchange theory, which was antecedent to transactional leadership theory (Hollander & Offermann, 1990) and one of the forebears of active followership theory.

The Early Voices of Active Followership Theory

The theorists who began bridging the concepts of passive subordinates and active followers included those of social psychologist Hollander and his associates.

In 1955, Hollander and Webb (1955) argued that *leader and follower* was not an either/or proposition in which leaders and followers were found at opposite ends of a continuum. They proposed that the qualities associated with leadership and followership were interdependent. They conducted one of the earliest empirical studies about leaders and followers and concluded that non-leaders were not desirable as followers and that qualities of followership needed to be considered as a component of good leadership. Building on Homans's work about social exchange processes, Hollander and Julian (1969) reviewed then-recent studies and concluded that leadership encompassed a "two-way influence relationship" (p. 390) that contained an "implicit exchange relationship" (p. 395) between leaders and followers over time.

In 1974 Hollander advanced this line of thought when he authored "Processes of Leadership Emergence." In it he framed the central arguments about leaders and followers that arose from the traditional view of follower as subordinate:

It is commonly assumed that a cleavage exists between those who lead and those who follow, and that being a follower is not being a leader. . . . Only some members of a group have "leadership qualities" . . . and stand out as "leaders." . . . Followers are treated essentially as "nonleaders," which is a relatively passive residual category. (pp. 20-21)

In his work, Hollander (1974) raised questions and identified topics that became central themes and issues in active followership literature. These included the ideas that leader and follower were roles and processes that should not be confused with the people filling them; that at least some of the time and to some extent, leaders were also followers; and that the behaviors needed to fill a leader's role at a particular time were not limited to leaders alone and that followers could also have those behaviors. Other concepts identified by Hollander that reappeared later in active followership literature included drawing a distinction about the source of a leader's authority and its affect on followers, the two-way influence process between leader and follower, and the role of the situation in the leader-follower relationship.

Other early voices spoke and wrote about leaders and followers but did not affect active followership theory. In these works, the authors urged leaders to focus on followers as a way of improving managers' leadership skills; they did not study followers in and of themselves. Wortman (1982) called these works "leadership studies that incorporate data about followers" (p. 373).

A few researchers did follow in Hollander's footsteps by examining the leader-follower relational component of active followership. Herold (1977) used a laboratory study to demonstrate how each party could influence the other party's behavior in a leader-follower relationship or dyad. He contributed to the growing body of literature that supported the idea that leader effectiveness must look beyond analyzing the effects of leader behavior on subordinates; subordinate effects on leader behavior must also be considered.

Frew (1977) contributed to followership theory by focusing on the importance of followers to a leader's success and by developing the first instrument that measured followership. His contributions were only beginning steps, though, because he examined followers to determine what kinds of leadership styles they preferred in their supervisors. His conclusions focused on making leaders more effective and improving organizational effectiveness by reducing managerial error; followers were not the focus of his conclusions. Additionally, although he studied followers and followership, he did not define the terms.

Steger, Manners, and Zimmerer (1982) advanced followership theory by proposing the first followership model built on two dimensions: followers' desire for self-enhancement and followers' desire for self-protection. Nine followership styles resulted from the followers' high, medium, or low attraction to each of the dimensions. Although they noted that "we are all followers in some way" (p. 22), Steger et al. did not provide definitions of *follower* or *followership*, although they did state that a followership theory would offer a taxonomy of subordinates' behavioral reactions to leaders.

Steger et al. (1982) raised two important issues that resurfaced in later decades as key issues in active followership theory: organizational structure and the use of power. In their view, a hierarchical structure was a given, and the only question was how much freedom the organization gave a manager to reward or punish subordinates. Power was not shared with followers; it was a managerial tool. Depending on a follower's style, a manager used direct power, supportive and developmental power, or devious and manipulative power to motivate followers to support organizational change.

Although Steger et al. (1982) took beginning steps in discussing follower behaviors and attributes, they also focused on followers as a means of improving managerial performance. They asserted that as managers moved up through the organizational hierarchy they encountered different types of "followerships" (p. 51) and that management training was needed to

help a manager understand different follower styles and how to motivate the followers.

To reduce the complexity of leadership contingency theory, Zierdan (1980) proposed that the contingency model should focus on subordinates rather than a manager. In his model, a manager established performance and emotional objectives for his subordinates as well as ways to measure the objectives. The manager in this model needed to be aware of subordinates' attitudes and feelings and use that information to make informed decisions in the contingency framework. Tjosvold, Andrews, and Jones (1983) conducted an empirical study about causal links between leaders and subordinates, focusing on leaders' cooperative and competitive behaviors. The study suggested that to improve their own success, to improve subordinates' reactions to their leadership, to increase subordinates' satisfaction, and to build morale leaders should emphasize common goals held by leader and subordinates, help subordinates achieve their goals, encourage subordinate learning and development, exchange information and resources, and share the rewards of their combined efforts.

Theoretical Antecedents to Active Followership

The theorists and researchers described above were influenced by theorists in other disciplines. Recognition of followers and development of active followership literature had its roots in social exchange, attribution, and small group theories that grew out of the disciplines of sociology and psychology. The theories and observations found therein were eventually woven into the fabric of organizational behavior and followership literature.

Social exchange theories. Exchange theories posited that social interaction was a form of exchange in which a group member contributed to the group at a cost to himself or herself and received benefits from the group at a cost to the group. The exchange continued as long as members found it mutually beneficial (Bass, 1990). Homans's (1950, 1974) work was among the foundation blocks of the theory. His work was followed by that of Hollander (1974) and Hollander and Julian (1969), who noted that "an entire interpersonal system" (Hollander & Julian, 1969, p. 393) must be included in the evaluation of a leader's effectiveness. They developed theories about the implicit nature of the social exchange processes and applied them to leaders and followers. In their view of the leader-follower transaction, leaders provided benefits such as direction, and followers responded with increased

esteem for and responsiveness to the leader. Recognition of this transaction led to transactional theories of leadership, which generally focused on a follower's perceptions and expectations of a leader.

Transactional leadership was named and popularized by historian Burns (1978). In this leadership theory, he recognized a "leadership act" (p. 20) in which one initiated an exchange with another. Their interaction was short-term and nonbinding. Burns contrasted this to another point on his leadership continuum, a point that he called "transforming leadership" (p. 20). In that leadership act, leader and follower interacted to transform each other and raise each other to higher moral levels. In Burns's theory, followers were recognized as important players in the leadership act.

The Leader-Member Exchange Model (LMX) was a social exchange theory that arose in the 1970s and provided another way to view followers. Developed by Graen, Scandura, Uhl-Bien, and others, it focused on the leader-follower dyad and examined how exchange processes affected the dyadic relationship over time (Schriesheim, Castro, Zhou, & Yammarino, 2001). As the dyadic relationship developed over time, informal exchanges between leader and follower replaced the formal exchanges required by the organization. The leader relied less on power and influence to negotiate with a follower for whom he or she had increasing trust. The leader began to share power and influence with the follower, empowering the follower to exercise more influence over the leader. LMX theory and its focus on the leader-follower dyad paralleled the discussion of the relational nature of the leader-follower role in the psychology literature: Both drew attention to the follower. Citing Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) classification of leadership theories into the three domains of leader, follower, and relationship, Howell and Shamir (2005) asserted that "while LMX theory emphasizes the importance of all three domains, its main contribution has been to shift the focus from the leadership domain to the relationship domain" (p. 98).

Attribution and small group theories. Arising in the 1970s, attribution theories presented a different framework through which to view the leader-follower relationship. These theories posited the importance of recognizing leaders' and followers' perceptions about leadership rather than focusing solely on a leader's traits or how he or she acted. Each leader and follower was thought to have his or her own implicit leadership theory about what a leader does and how he or she behaves. Either personal internal traits or external constraints were thought to cause the behaviors (Bass, 1990). Over time the focus of implicit leadership

theories shifted from leaders' perceptions to followers' perceptions.

Meindl et al.'s (1985) research advanced attribution theory by proposing that leadership was a romantic and heroic concept thoroughly "entrenched" (p. 78) in the social fabric. Society's emphasis on leadership grew as business systems became large, complex, and difficult to understand. Observers, unable to understand the intricacies of a complex system of multilevel networks, attributed organizational success or failure to something more easily understandable—a person, in particular a leader, to whom was attributed control and responsibility. Further, Meindl et al. found that not only organizational outcomes but also the performance of entire industries were attributed to leaders' actions. The authors suggested that people's "infatuation" (p. 100) with the romantic, heroic, mystical view of leadership might be necessary to sustain followership and to motivate individuals to respond to the organization's needs and goals. Attribution theory did move in that direction, as Hollander and Offermann (1990) observed in 1990 that the focus was on "follower attributions of leaders that make followers respond" (p. 84) positively or negatively to the leader. Although attribution theory started with psychological research about the area of cognition, it began to integrate organizational research about leader–follower relations (p. 85).

Social scientists studied the behavior of members of small groups in the hopes of discerning patterns and principles that could be applied to larger groups. The small group was seen as a microcosm of society at large; its small size made detailed study possible (Homans, 1974). The study of relationships between group leader and small group members provided insight into leaders and subordinates in business settings on a larger scale.

While other fields were exploring social interactions in groups and cognitive approaches to leaders and followers, the field of management looked at interaction between supervisors—also called *bosses*—and their subordinates. With few exceptions, not until the 1980s did management literature adopt the term *follower*. Graham (1988) observed that in the emerging discussion of transformational leadership a distinction was drawn between *leader* or *manager* and *supervisor*. She drew a similar distinction between *follower* and *subordinate*, basing her argument on Hunt's (1984) application of French and Raven's (1959) classification of the bases of social power. Hunt proposed that leadership derived from the personal-power bases of expert and referent power but supervision derived from the position-power bases of reward, coercion, and legitimacy.

Similarly Graham separated followers from subordinates by the degree of free choice that they exercised. She called subordinates those who followed orders because they feared punishment, had been promised rewards, or wanted to fulfill a contractual obligation.

Active Followership Gains Acceptance

Writing at the same time as Graham, Kelley published "In Praise of Followers" in 1988 and proposed that followers deserved praise and deserved to be studied. He reframed the arguments introduced in earlier generations and, by promoting a positive concept of followers and active followership, he recast management literature's traditionally negative image of the passive subordinate. He also linked follower effectiveness with organizational success. Kelley's article moved the heretofore theoretical and academic discussion of effective followers into the popular press. Similarly, Chaleff's (1995) book, *The Courageous Follower*, gained widespread popular acceptance. Chaleff recognized the danger that could derive from hierarchically bestowed leader power. He proposed a new model of leader–follower relations that was built on a leader's courage to be less than dominant and a follower's courage to be more dominant. In his model, the courageous follower had to be willing to assume responsibility, to serve, to challenge the leader, to participate in change processes when needed, and even to oppose leaders whose acts harmed the organization.

Themes in Followership Literature

Scholars writing about followership over the years sounded a similar note: There was a dearth of work about followership when compared to leadership. As early as 1978, Burns observed that one of the "most serious failures" (p. 3) in the study of leadership was the separation of leadership and followership literatures. In 1982 Heller and Van Til called it a "novelty" to link the concepts, noting that not only were leadership and followership rarely discussed as "co-equal concepts" but that discussion of followership by itself was rare (pp. 405-406). Gilbert (1985) saw little management literature on how to be a good follower but volumes on leadership and motivation. Gilbert and Hyde (1988) observed that obsession with the "romance of leadership" and "dependence on the 'ability to motivate'" (p. 962) were two major reasons for lack of research about followership. Lundin and Lancaster (1990) wrote that thousands of pages had been written about leadership but very few written about followership. Brown

and Thornborrow (1996) observed that literature about followers and followership was “not extensive” (p. 5) and was written mostly by American authors who wrote from an American perspective. Berg (1998) saw an “overwhelming emphasis” (p. 28) in corporations and schools on leadership and development of leadership skills while followership received little attention. Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson, and Morris (2006) saw followership as an “understudied discipline” (p. 304), and Goffee and Jones (2006) observed that “the analysis of followership has barely begun” (p. 23).

In the work of those who did study followership, several themes were apparent. They included the idea that followers and leaders were roles, that followers were active rather than passive, and that leaders and followers shared a common purpose. A fourth theme, the relational nature of follower and leader, received great attention in the followership literature. This theme is receiving renewed attention in the leadership literature.

Followers and Leaders Are Roles, Not People With Inherent Characteristics

In proposing guidelines for studies about mental health and leadership that were to be conducted in the early 1950s, Mead (1949) identified the relationship between leaders, lieutenants, and followers as an important area of the studies. She questioned the psychological relationships and the roles that each individual played.

Hollander (1974) defined a *role* as “a set of behaviors which are appropriate for a position which an individual fills” (p. 19). He believed that a leader’s characteristics should fill the demands of the role and that followers were not permanently confined to their follower roles. Heller and Van Til (1982) asserted that “leadership and followership are best seen as roles in relation” (p. 406). Kelley (1991) stated that followership and leadership were roles, not people, and that most managers played the roles of both follower and leader (Kelley, 1988). Berg (1998) described participants in his workshops as managers who also filled the role of followers in their organizations.

Followers Are Active, Not Passive

In the early 20th century, followers in America were viewed as passive, obedient, and having nothing to contribute but manual labor. In the post–World War II era, followers were seen as obedient, dependent, and loyal to a leader or company—but still with only labor to contribute. In neither case were followers held in high regard. The values of obedience and loyalty

were further tarnished by the aberrant behavior and actions of the Nazi followers of Adolph Hitler during World War II.

Contrary to that traditional view of followers as passively obedient people, other theorists in the 20th century held a different view: They widely agreed that followers were an active party in the leader–follower relationship. Going against the grain of her time, Follett (1996) proposed that followers had an active role in keeping the leader “in control of a situation” (p. 170). They did this by offering suggestions, by sharing their difficulties with work as well as their successes at work, by not being a “yes, yes” subordinate, and by not being passively obedient (pp. 170–172). Heifetz (1999) echoed Follett by observing that the “best leadership . . . generates people who are willing to take responsibility” (p. 20).

Barnard (1987) theorized that the subordinate held the power to a leader’s authority: Without a subordinate’s cooperation and assent, the leader had no authority. Extending Barnard’s idea, Litzinger and Schaefer (1982) theorized that because followers could withhold or grant their obedience to a leader, the leader was constrained to act in ways that the follower found consistent with organizational goals. They argued that the leader must therefore be a follower—of the organizational goals as understood by his or her own followers—and further that being a good follower helped to prepare one to be a good leader. Although they believed that a “personal history of good followership” (p. 81) was critical to good leadership, it alone was not sufficient to determine a leader’s success.

Also citing Barnard (1987), Hansen (1987) was one of the first to write about the active follower in his study of first-line supervisor effectiveness. Hansen linked supervisor effectiveness to subordinates’ willingness to follow the wishes of the supervisor. He described “active followership” (p. 44) as subordinates’ granting legitimacy to their supervisor’s orders and directions. More broadly, Hollander and Offermann (1990) described both leadership and followership as active roles. Hollander (1992a, 1992b) reiterated that point and added that followers could initiate activity and had the potential to make major contributions to successful leadership.

Burns (1978) drew distinctions among passive followers, who offered “undiscriminating support” in exchange for favors; participatory followers, who wanted to belong to the leadership group and selectively bargained to exchange their support for favors; and close followers of leaders who were in reality subleaders but still dependent on the leader (p. 68). Kelley

(1988) separated the effective from the ineffective follower. Distinctive characteristics of Kelley's effective follower included enthusiasm, intelligence, and self-reliant participation. Additionally, effective followers saw their role as one that was "legitimate, inherently valuable, even virtuous" (p. 143).

Followers and Leaders Share a Common Purpose

In an interdependent relationship, follower and leader should hold some things in common. Follett (1996) argued that followers and leaders must follow a common purpose on which their work is focused. Burns (1978) wrote that leaders and followers had "inseparable functions" (p. 20) but different roles. Gilbert (1985) coined the term *psychological commitment* (p. 452), akin to the organizational psychological contract, that described an implicit contract between boss and subordinate on very effective work teams. In such a commitment, both boss and subordinate exhibit a commitment to the organization's goals as well as to the success of each other. Hollander (1992a) theorized that a leader must engage followers in "mutually satisfying and productive enterprises" (p. 74). Vecchio (1997) observed that followers and leaders are interconnected and share responsibility for meeting goals.

The Relational Nature of Followers and Leaders

From the early writings of Follett (1960) and the early studies of Mead (1949) to contemporary authors, followership theorists recognized the interconnection between follower and leader and advocated the importance of examining the relationship between them. The relationship was described as interdependent rather than either/or (Hollander & Webb, 1955), a two-way influence process (Hollander & Julian, 1969), and reciprocal and complex (Burns, 1978). Herold (1977) saw the relationship as one in which dyadic partners influenced each other's behaviors and attitudes, and Frew (1977) observed that much of a supervisor's success was dependent on his or her acceptance by the staff. Heller and Van Til (1982) discussed a participative leadership-followership model and said that leaders and followers should be studied in relation to one another, not separately. Gilbert (1990) saw the relationship as one of partners. Hollander restated his contention that the leader-follower relationship was interdependent (1992a) and reciprocal (1992b), involving two-way support and influence (1997). He further believed that the "usual expectation" (1997, p. 13) that

the follower role was passive with little power did not fit with the concept of active followers.

Berg (1998) promoted the idea of a collaborative follower-leader relationship. Potter et al. (1996) promoted the idea of a partnership relationship between leaders and followers in which follower initiatives were as important as leader initiatives, and Pittman, Rosenbach, and Potter (1998) described the best leader-follower relationship as a partnership. Kelley (1991) also promoted the idea of follower-leader partnership. In his version of partnership, both follower and leader were individually and collectively responsible for the actions of the organization, and both roles had equal weight.

As followership theorists discussed the relational nature of leader and follower, positing the interdependency of leader and follower and the idea of leader-follower partnerships, leadership theorists also discussed leader-follower relations but from a leader-centric perspective. Contingency theories posited a link between a follower's actions and a leader's behavior, and situational theories of leadership focused on a leader's ability to motivate workers or followers through situational control and design (Baker 2006). Substitutes for leadership theory questioned the importance of leaders in all situations (Gronn, 2003). LMX theory was one of the few leadership theories to recognize the follower's role in "the leadership processes" (Howell & Shamir, 2005, p. 98) and to posit that both leader and follower shared responsibility for the success of their relationship (Howell & Shamir, 2005).

Recently, leadership scholars Howell and Shamir (2005) echoed the decades-long call of followership theorists to examine the relational nature of leaders and followers. In their analysis of the role of followers in the charismatic leadership process, Howell and Shamir noted that "beyond paying lip service to the importance of followers, few scholars have attempted to theoretically specify and empirically assess the role of followers in the leadership process" (p. 96). They called for study of effective followers and concluded that "understanding followers is as important as understanding leaders" (p. 110).

Authentic leadership is a new construct that is being promoted by scholars to create positive leadership that can combat the post-9/11 "increase in societal challenges" as well as the concurrent "decrease in ethical leadership" (Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005, p. 476). Citing Howell and Shamir's (2005) call for inclusion of followers in leadership models, Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005) developed a model of "authentic leadership and

followership.” Part of their model emphasized the importance of self-identity in authentic followers. Lord and Brown (2001) and Collinson (2006) also discussed follower self-concept as a factor in the leader–follower relationship. Gardner et al. and Lord and Brown used a more leader-centric lens for their views and Collinson used a more follower-centric lens.

Other issues traditionally found in leadership literature and applied to leaders have recently been applied to followers. Vecchio (2002) noted that although gender advantage had been explored in leadership theory it had not been explored in followership theory. Eagly (2005) emphasized followers in her discussion of gender impact on leaders’ building of relational authenticity with their followers.

The dark side of leaders is another issue addressed in leadership literature. Demonstrating another aspect of the relational nature of leaders and followers, authors have recently raised the question of the mutual accountability of both followers and leaders for bad leadership (Kellerman, 2004) and toxic leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Howell and Shamir (2005) discussed followers’ responsibility for negative aspects displayed by leaders in personalized charismatic relationships.

Summary

This article has identified and presented the theoretical foundation of the construct of followership. Leadership scholars can look back across a century of theory and research works to identify origins, name founding fathers, trace movements and eras, discuss practical applications of older studies, and propose new avenues for future research in the field of leadership. Until now, those studying followership could not accomplish the same tasks because there have been no uniform acknowledgement and treatment of the body of literature that formed followership’s roots. This article establishes that foundation for followership by examining why emphasis was placed on leaders almost to the exclusion of followers, identifying the antecedents from which followership theory developed, naming early followership theorists and researchers and discussing their work, and identifying the common themes in their work.

This presentation discusses the transition from the traditional view of a passive, unthinkingly obedient subordinate who was led by a Great Man to a contemporary image of an active, participative, effective follower who must be studied in relation to his or her leader. The theorists constructing the image of active follower shared four basic tenets of active followership

theory: (a) that followers and leaders are roles, not people with inherent characteristics; (b) that followers are active, not passive; (c) that followers and leaders share a common purpose; and (d) that followers and leaders must be studied in the context of their relationship. This fourth theme has recently been re-emphasized in the leadership literature.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The field of followership has a rich and complex body of literature spanning the previous century. This article has identified foundation works in the literature and established a context for the field. Yet there is even more to be established from within the literature and from the field of practice. Followers are an integral part of organizations, and the leader–follower relationship is an important factor in organizational success. Understanding the context of followership theory is as important as understanding the context of leadership theory as researchers study effective organizations. The recent works by Howell and Shamir (2005), Gardner et al. (2005), and Collinson (2006) are perhaps the beginning of a merging of follower-centric and leader-centric works. However, the exploration of the relational nature of leaders and followers is but one of many facets of followership that needs further examination.

Other areas of followership literature that have yet to be explored include identification of the major questions and issues raised in followership theory, categorization of characteristics held by effective followers, and identification of followership models and styles. Additionally there is an opportunity for investigation and analysis of followership research. Baker (2006) identified six followership survey instruments that have been used in approximately 20 published empirical research studies and in numerous doctoral dissertation studies. The instruments and studies need to be assessed for their validity and contributions to the field of followership. The findings from that assessment could provide a common base of understanding that could inform future research.

As aspects of the existing followership literature are identified and examined through the lens of today’s milieu, additional avenues of research should open and lead to further insights into the leader–follower partnership. Such insights can only add to continued learning about organizational behavior, dependent and independent behavior, and the interdependency of leader and follower for the effective performance of organizations and social systems.

References

- Baker, S. D. (2006). The effect of leader-follower agreement on team effectiveness. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 6 (03), A. (UMI No. 3209933)
- Bargal, D., & Schmid, H. (1989). Recent themes in theory and research on leadership and their implications for management of human services. *Administration in Social Work*, 13, 37-54.
- Barnard, C. (1987). The theory of authority. In L. E. Boone & D. D. Bowen (Eds.), *The great writings in management and organizational behavior* (2nd ed., pp. 92-104). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Bass, B. M. (1990). *Bass & Stogdill's handbook of leadership* (3rd ed.). New York: Free Press.
- Berg, D. N. (1998). Resurrecting the muse: Followership in organizations. In E. B. Klein, F. Gabelnick, & P. Herr (Eds.), *The psychodynamics of leadership* (pp. 27-52). Madison, CT: Psychosocial Press.
- Bjugstad, K., Thach, E. C., Thompson, K. J., & Morris, A. (2006). A fresh look at followership: A model for matching followership and leadership styles. *Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management*, 7, 304-319.
- Brown, A. D., & Thornborrow, W. T. (1996). Do organizations get the followers they deserve? *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 17, 5-11.
- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Chaleff, I. (1995). *The courageous follower: Standing up to and for our leaders*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Collinson, D. (2006). Rethinking followership: A post-structuralist analysis of follower identities. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17, 179-189.
- Cooper, D. C., Scandura, T., & Schriesheim, C. A. (2005). Looking forward but learning from our past: Potential challenges to developing authentic leadership theory and authentic leaders. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16, 475-493.
- Daft, R. L. (1999). *Leadership theory and practice*. Fort Worth, TX: Dryden.
- Eagly, A. H. (2005). Achieving relational authenticity in leadership: Does gender matter? *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16, 459-474.
- Follett, M. P. (1960). Management as a profession. In H. F. Merrill (Ed.), *Classics in management* (pp. 309-322). New York: American Management Association.
- Follett, M. P. (1996). The essentials of leadership. In P. Graham (Ed.), *Mary Parker Follett: Prophet of management* (pp. 163-177). Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.
- French, J. R. P., & Raven, B. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in social power* (pp. 150-167). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Institute of Social Research.
- Frew, D. R. (1977). Leadership and followership. *Personnel Journal*, 56, 90-97.
- Galton, F. (1900). *Hereditary genius: An inquiry into its laws and consequences* (2nd American ed.). New York: D. Appleton.
- Gardner, W. L., Avolio, B., Luthans, F., May, D. R., & Walumbwa, F. (2005). Can you see the real me? A self-based model of authentic leader and follower development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16, 342-372.
- Gilbert, G. R. (1985). Building highly productive work teams through positive leadership. *Public Personnel Management*, 14, 449-454.
- Gilbert, G. R. (1990, June). Effective leaders must be good followers, too. *Government Executive*, 22, 58.
- Gilbert, G. R., & Hyde, A. C. (1988). Followership and the federal worker. *Public Administration Review*, 48, 962-968.
- Goffee, R., & Jones, G. (2006). The art of followership. *European Business Forum*, 25, 22-26.
- Graen, G. B., & Uhl-Bien, M. 1995. Relationship-based approach to leadership: Development of leader-member exchange (LMX theory) over 25 years: Applying a multi-level multi-domain perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 6, 219-247.
- Graham, J. W. (1988). Chapter 3 commentary: Transformational leadership: Fostering follower autonomy, not automatic followership. In J. G. Hunt, B. R. Baliga, H. P. Dachler, & C. A. Schriesheim (Eds.), *Emerging leadership vistas* (pp. 73-79). Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Gronn, P. (2003). Leadership: Who needs it? *School Leadership and Management*, 23, 267-290.
- Hansen, T. L., Jr. (1987). Management's impact on first-line supervisor effectiveness. *SAM Advanced Management Journal*, 52, 41-45.
- Heifetz, R. A. (1999). Leadership vs. authority. *Across the Board*, 36, 19-20.
- Heller, T., & Van Til, J. (1982). Leadership and followership: Some summary propositions. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences*, 18, 405-414.
- Herold, D. M. (1977). Two-way influence processes in leader-follower dyads. *Academy of Management Journal*, 20, 224-237.
- Hollander, E. P. (1974). Processes of leadership emergence. *Journal of Contemporary Business*, 3, 19-33.
- Hollander, E. P. (1992a). The essential interdependence of leadership and followership. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 1, 71-74.
- Hollander, E. P. (1992b). Leadership, followership, self, and others. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 3, 43-54.
- Hollander, E. P. (1997). How and why active followers matter in leadership. In B. Adams & S. Webster (Eds.), *Kellogg leadership studies project working papers: The balance of leadership and followership* (pp. 11-30). College Park, MD: Academy of Leadership Press.
- Hollander, E. P., & Julian, J. W. (1969). Contemporary trends in the analysis of leadership processes. *Psychological Bulletin*, 71, 387-397.
- Hollander, E. P., & Offermann, L. R. (1990). Relational features of organizational leadership and followership. In K. E. Clark & M. B. Clark (Eds.), *Measures of leadership* (pp. 83-97). West Orange, NJ: Leadership Library of America.
- Hollander, E. P., & Webb, W. B. (1955). Leadership, followership, and friendship: An analysis of peer nominations. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 50, 163-167.
- Homans, G. C. (1950). *The human group*. New York: Harcourt Brace & World.
- Homans, G. C. (1974). *Social behavior* (Revised ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Howell, J. M., & Shamir, B. (2005). The role of followers in the charismatic leadership process: Relationships and their consequences. *Academy of Management Review*, 30, 96-112.
- Hunt, J. G. (1984). *Leadership and managerial behavior*. (Modules in Management.) Chicago: Research Science Associates.
- Kaysen, C. (Ed.). (1996). *The American corporation today*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kellerman, B. (2004). *Bad leadership: What it is, how it happens, why it matters*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.

- Kelley, R. E. (1988). In praise of followers. *Harvard Business Review*, 66, 142-148.
- Kelley, R. E. (1991). Combining followership and leadership into partnership. In R. H. Kilmann, I. Kilmann, & Associates (Eds.), *Making organizations competitive: Enhancing networks and relationships across traditional boundaries* (pp. 195-220). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lipman-Blumen, J. (2005). *The allure of toxic leaders: Why we follow destructive bosses and corrupt politicians—and how we can survive them*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Lippitt, R. (1982). The changing leader-follower relationships of the 1980s. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences*, 18, 395-403.
- Litzinger, W., & Schaefer, T. (1982). Leadership through followership. *Business Horizons*, 25, 78-81.
- Lord, R. G., & Brown, D. J. (2001). Leadership, values, and subordinate self-concepts. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 12, 133-152.
- Lundin, S. C., & Lancaster, L. C. (1990). Beyond leadership . . . The importance of followership. *The Futurist*, 24(3), 18-22.
- Mead, M. (1949). Problems of leadership and mental health. *World Federation for Mental Health Bulletin (1949-1952)*, 1(6), 7-12.
- Meindl, J. R., Ehrlich, S. B., & Dukerich, J. M. (1985). The romance of leadership. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 30, 78-102.
- Pittman, T. S., Rosenbach, W. E., & Potter, E. H., III. (1998). Followers as partners: Taking the initiative for action. In W. E. Rosenbach & R. L. Taylor (Eds.), *Contemporary issues in leadership* (pp. 107-120). Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Potter, E. H., III, Rosenbach, W. E., & Pittman, T. S. (1996). Leading the new professional. In R. L. Taylor & W. E. Rosenbach (Eds.), *Military leadership: In pursuit of excellence* (3rd ed., pp. 145-152). Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Sanford, F. H. (1950). *Authoritarianism and leadership*. Philadelphia: Institute for Research in Human Relations.
- Schriesheim, C. A., Castro, S. L., Zhou, X. T., & Yammarino, F. J. (2001). The folly of theorizing "a" but testing "b": A selective level-of-analysis review of the field and a detailed leader-member exchange illustration. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 12, 515-551.
- Smith, G. D., & Dyer, D. (1996). The rise and transformation of the American corporation. In C. Kaysen (Ed.), *The American corporation today* (pp. 28-73). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Steger, J. A., Manners, G. E., Jr., & Zimmerer, T. W. (1982). Following the leader: How to link management style to subordinate personalities. *Management Review*, 71, 22-28, 49-51.
- Tjosvold, D., Andrews, R., & Jones, H. (1983). Cooperative and competitive relationships between leaders and subordinates. *Human Relations*, 36, 1111-1124.
- Useem, M. (1996). Corporate education and training. In C. Kaysen (Ed.), *The American corporation today* (pp. 292-326). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Vanderslice, V. J. (1988). Separating leadership from leaders: An assessment of the effect of leader and follower roles in organizations. *Human Relations*, 41, 677-696.
- Vecchio, R. P. (1997). Effective followership: Leadership turned upside down. In R. P. Vecchio (Ed.), *Leadership: Understanding the dynamics of power and influence in organizations* (pp. 114-123). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Vecchio, R. P. (2002). Leadership and gender advantage. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 13, 643-671.
- Wortman, M. S., Jr. (1982). Strategic management and changing leader-follower roles. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences*, 18, 371-383.
- Zierdan, W. E. (1980). Leading through the follower's point of view. *Organizational Dynamics*, 8, 27-46.

Susan D. Baker is an assistant professor of management in the Graves School of Business and Management at Morgan State University, Baltimore, Maryland. She earned her PhD in Organizational Behavior and Development from The George Washington University in 2006. Before beginning her doctoral studies, she worked as a production manager in the communications industry and as assistant dean for administration and finance at a business school. Those positions led to her research interests in followership, leadership, team effectiveness, and business ethics. She may be contacted at sbaker@jewel.morgan.edu.