Where have all the followers gone?
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In Search of Followers

Abstract

In this short article we explore and problematise the axiomatic assumption of follower in the field of leadership studies – notably the leader-follower axiom as the essential foundation of much leadership theorising. We do so, firstly by drawing on our experiences of exploring followership conceptually and, secondly, by reviewing conversations with Executive MBA students. From these sources we argue that the absence of identifications with followership offers a challenge to leadership assumptions around the socio-materiality of followers and their relations with leaders within organisational contexts. This leads us to questions like: what if follower identifications do not typically exist or are rejected in everyday organisational working contexts – despite discursive labelling of individuals as followers or following practices? Would or should leadership research and its examination of leader-follower dynamics fundamentally change and in what ways? We explore these questions and suggest very different orientations that might appear with regards to notions of the leadership relationship, leading and following dynamics, practice-based attention to leadership, and perhaps very different approaches to leadership development. Such a (re)appraisal of the leadership lexicon may move notions of follower identification out of social constructions of organisational leadership and towards social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) – where the phenomenon of being a follower is ever present, but is redefined as a phenomenon of vicarious fantasy associated with interest, curiosity and entertainment.

In Search of Followers

The Leading Question that this paper explores is where have all the [organisational] followers gone? To address this question, we explore our argument (connecting with others' theoretical arguments; see for example Ford and Harding 2018; Schedlitzki, Edwards and Kempster, 2018) centred on a deep problematisation of socio-material assumptions of followers and follower identifications, particularly in the organisational context. Using our experiences of exploring this issue conceptually and conversationally with Executive MBA students, we reveal an absence of follower identifications in their everyday working lives. This, we argue creates a fundamental challenge to leadership assumptions centred on interactions and assumed relationships with individuals labelled as followers within organisational contexts – particularly the necessity of the leader-follower axiom upon which much leadership theory is centred. If follower identification in the present is most untypical what might this suggest to mainstream leadership research and the burgeoning literature around followership? Indeed, critical leadership research is likewise often caught in the paradox of assuming this axiom in order to problematise the manifestation of the relationship (Learmonth and Morrell, 2017). What if we assumed follower identifications do not typically exist (in organisational contexts) or are rejected? What importance does this carry for relationships, practices and power dynamics at work between individuals labelled as leaders and followers? Do following and leading practices still happen? If the labels of follower are rejected, what should we speak about – subordinates, direct reports, employees, or stakeholders – and why would this be of importance? How would this alternative sense of identification change the discourse

about the phenomenon of leadership and dynamic relationships associated with it? Perhaps the use of 'leadership relationship' might become heavily questioned and discourses (re)orientated towards line-manager and direct report relationship, or the employer and employee relationship. Would leadership research fundamentally change and in what ways? Perhaps letting go of the notion of follower may allow us to let go of 'leader' and allow emphasis and attention to the dynamic practices of leading and following within the line-manager-direct report relationship (building on Kempster and Parry, 2019). As a consequence, approaches to leadership development are likely to be very different. We argue that this orientation would give emphasis to a contextual, processual and outcomes orientation of leading and following, and less to identity-based conceptions of leadership. This flow of argument has much connection to practice-based orientations, as well as various views on collective and plural leadership (Denis et al., 2012; Ospina et al., 2020). Such a (re)appraisal of the leadership lexicon may move notions of follower identification out of leadership and towards social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) – where follower is perhaps more about fantasy, interest, curiosity and entertainment.

Below, we start our thinking piece by connecting existing critical voices and contributions on the notion of follower. In particular we explore the apparent 'naturalised' relationship of follower with leader within the leadership process to form the basis of our argument. We then move on to reflect on our experiences in the classroom with a student cohort and their struggles with the follower identification. Finally, we end on a provocative note, suggesting we move the notion of follower identification out of the organisational space and into the social media space.

Where have all the Followers Gone?

Critical considerations of the leadership lexicon and ontological assumptions concerning the leader-follower relationship underpinning and driving much leadership research are not new. Critical scholars have, for some time, problematized the taken-for-granted assumption of the ontological reality of leaders (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Kelly, 2014) and followers (Ford and Harding, 2018; Schedlitzki et al., 2018), highlighting the difficulty that research participants experience when being asked to locate and distil the activities and persona involved in leadership. The rather vague and illusive nature of leadership has been helpfully captured by Kelly (2014) as an 'empty signifier' where leadership does not carry a specific or fixed meaning; rather leadership is a placeholder for the possibility of 'many competing and complementary definitions, meanings and interpretations' (Kelly, 2014:906).

The follower identification, we argue, is a particularly slippery character. Whilst scholars have questioned its desirability and existence (Harding, 2015; Schedlitzki et al., 2018), it has for a long time served as the silent foundation of most leadership conceptualisations centred on the axiomatic assumption of the leader-follower relationship. Ford and Harding (2018) get to the crux of the issue in their critical review of the extant followership literature:

> 'The issue of whether or not a follower-less leader can actually be a leader, because by definition, someone cannot lead without having someone who follows. Leader is a term that infers a relationship, much like mother or daughter in contrast to words like woman or girl, which can stand independently (Rioch, 1971). So, in the same way that there is an implicit assumption of a parent when the word son is used, so too does the word leader only make sense with the word follower implied within it' (2018: 13).

Critical contributions have started to offer as an explanation the hegemony that underlies this leader-follower discourse (Ford and Harding, 2018). The work of Schedlitzki et al. (2018), for example, explored the hegemony of organisational leadership discourses

centred on 'the image of the powerful, masculinised leader and the subservient, feminised follower bound together as one cannot be without the other' (2018: 487). Here, the follower is presented as a fantasy within leader identifications, serving the sole but essential purpose of being the validating other. They discuss the subject-authority relations encapsulated in this discourse:

> 'reflected in organisational structure and practice where the subject labelled as leader is formally given positional power, elevating the subject to a superior social and legal status, and simultaneously – yet often implicitly – discursively categorising others as followers' (2018: 487).

Such discursive dynamics lead managers to desire leader identifications as they find themselves bound by this hegemonic discourse: I must be a leader because my direct reports are followers in the leader-follower relationship. Yet, Schedlitzki et al also show that these leader identifications remain illusory in the absence of follower identifications amongst their direct reports. We ask here: what are the implications of the absence of follower identifications for leadership theory and organisational practices? Can we, as researchers, label practices as leading or following and label our research subjects as leaders or followers if they themselves reject those identifications?

Ford and Harding (2018) note the significant development of follower/ship theory over the last two decades and review the attempts of this body of work to define, categorise and promote follower/ship in organisational life. Whilst this emergent field of research seeks to fill the previous void of follower/ship understanding within leadership research, Ford and Harding (2018) lament that this has been done so far in a largely unitarist fashion. Indeed, they warn that efforts to theorise followership fundamentally assume that followers exist, despite the lack of empirical evidence that employees identify themselves as followers of leaders (Harding, 2015; Schedlitzki et al., 2018). This elusiveness of followers in

organisational life should be no surprise; if it is difficult to find leaders why would finding followers be easier? Yet if the follower identity is absent in the organisational context, that is, if direct reports do not identify themselves as followers what is followership theory speaking about? An initial reframe might suggest a processual dynamic of leading and following within organisational relational expectations of manager and direct report(s), and not identities of leader and follower. Although on reading elaborations of followership there are plentiful mentions of followers and leaders, and how followers can be developed to be better followers. But what are the implications of this for the all-important axiomatic assumption of a relationship between a leader and follower?

Within leadership studies there is much fuelling the follower fire with a burgeoning industry extolling the notion of 'followership'. For example, a stream of follower-centric research has emerged (see for example Howell and Mendez, 2008; Riggio, Chaleff and Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, and McGregor, 2010; Bligh, 2011; Carsten, Uhl-Bien, and Huang, 2018) that is centred on promoting – and advocating – the development of a follower identity associated with supporting, aiding and challenging leader decisions in a close-coupled relationship (Ford and Harding, 2018). Connecting with other critical contributions in the field (Collinson, 2006, 2011; Ford et al, 2008; Harding, 2015; Uhl-Bien and Pillai, 2007), Ford and Harding (2018) promote a so far missing critical perspective on such followership theory. Based on a reading of key texts on authentic transformational leadership, servant leadership and distributed leadership, they argue that the previously noted a-symmetric power relationship between leader and follower (Gordon, 2011) is such an essential feature of leadership theory. They go on to suggest that it renders the primary purpose of leaders always, implicitly as in 'the pursuit of control of a potentially dangerous mass through the use of power' (Ford and Harding, 2018: 18). Those who we

entitle 'leader' are governed by this power of leadership theory in the sense that it normalises the subject position of the leader and particularly as superior to the follower (Harding, 2015).

The continued, largely unquestioned notion of the leader and follower reflects a deep-seated romanticised notion (Collinson et al, 2018: 2) of leadership and leader/follower identities. Meindl et al.'s (1985) original contribution on the romance of leadership has fuelled subsequent critiques and influenced post-heroic notions of leaders, but Collinson et al. (2018) suggest that this has often neglected the core critique around the heroic fixation on leaders. Their critical review of the romanticism of contemporary leadership theories emphasizes the problematic presentation of leadership as a positive, natural phenomenon and as such beyond any critical examination. Reconnecting with and extending Meindl et al.'s (1985) work, they explore this romanticised view of leaders shaping the manifestation of 'expressive harmonious collectives' (Collinson et al, 2018, pp 6) along with a similar tendency in research to romanticise follower agency and resistance.

Ford and Harding further note that leadership theory – and arguably followership theory – has become so divorced from the socio-material practice in the workplace that it cannot advise leaders on how to govern their followers but 'provide empty promises about the leader's ability to fill up the follower with their own charisma, authenticity, goodness or abilities' (2018: 21). They are joined in their call to be wary of follower/ship constructions affirmed through the power of leadership theory by Learmonth and Morrell (2017) who warn of the dangers of using the categories of follower and leader without further critical reflection in research. They argue that the rising popularity of the unitarist language of leader and follower presumes a harmonious working relationship that eradicates the possibility for conflict and resistance embedded in the previously dominant language of managerialism. In a critical response to Learmonth and Morrell's (2017) article, Collinson (2017) warns of the dichotomising nature of Learmonth and Morrell's assertion and argues for a space for critical

leadership studies that explores dialectical asymmetries, situated interrelations and intersecting practices of leaders, followers, workers and managers. This, he posits, allows for nuanced understandings of power and identity dynamics as situated and ambiguous, paradoxical and contradictory. Whilst this helps to highlight the complex nature of identifications and overlap between notions such as leader, manager and follower in organisational contexts, we explore further below arguments for taking a critical stance towards the leader-follower axiom.

In accord with Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), Harding (2015), Ford and Harding (2018), Kelly (2014) and Schedlitzki et al. (2018), they also question the socio-materiality of the leader and follower in organisational life. What remains to be disentangled and explored further within these critical contributions is the connection between the absence of identifications and situated work relationships and practices.

Before we explore what leadership studies might look like without the follower (and leader) identity, we reflect on our experiences as leadership educators of trying to engage managers in discussions of the notion and potential identification with 'follower.' Please note that we are not offering here a research-based study but rather as our observations from conversations and activities on our management education programmes. Such conversations have led us to offer some conjectures about the notion of followership and we offer these in the spirit of opening up further streams of inquiry.

Managers are not Followers

Managers are managers; they hope and expect to be leaders. However they are not followers. This was the striking – self-proclaimed – message that emerged through discussions with a cohort of 31 middle managers on an Executive MBA programme. They were all line managers and were also direct reports to other colleagues – 'senior managers.'

In this way all were technically – and in social structural terms – capable of being a follower. Indeed, the conversations we had with this cohort showed that they had been – and see themselves as having been – followers in the past.

We first asked the cohort of 31 managers to define what they thought follower was. The resulting definitions showed that 'following' was assumed to be more than an obligation to do as instructed (i.e. line management), and to be a follower meant to go with a nominated or emergent person leading. This points towards a relational process entailing both a relationship and practice. There was further agreement amongst the cohort towards a sense of follower identification as being associated within a relationship with others, and also in relation to an idea or a valued purpose. Building on this initial definition, the cohort was then asked to engage in a reflective timeline activity (Mackay 2012). Individually they were asked to draw a timeline from their earliest memories of being in a leadership relationship to the present. We were thus asking participants to reflexively look back on their careers to try and make sense of their experiences (Cunliffe, 2003) and relationships and to 'gaze back into [their] own multi-storied life space' (Boje, Luhman and Baack, 1999: 349).

The gazing back revealed relationships in which they could see themselves as a follower. Overwhelmingly this was in parent-child, or primary and secondary teacher-pupil, or sports coach-trainee; and for a few lecturer-student constellations in higher education. Far less mention was made of being a follower within leadership relationships in an organisational context. Of the few mentions in organisational contexts, the associations within the narratives focused on aspects of care, advice and support. These were all at early moments of their careers and at a time of feeling vulnerable, insecure and unconfident; where being a follower seemed to be associated with a sense of seeking a form of 'parental' guidance. The leadership relationships in the present were strikingly void of any constellation in which they were a follower at work. There were 2 managers who did speak of themselves

as being a follower in the present; but this was not as follower of someone but in both cases a follower of the organisational purpose.

If these conversations from the managers on our programmes were to be supported in empirical research what might this suggest about identities, relationships and practices? First and foremost, that for these managers the notion of follower identity within an organisational context is probably not as prevalent as we axiomatically assume. This might speak to organisations as very different sites for leadership dynamics. Perhaps in organisations the notion of subordinate would have produced a greater sense of recognition of their role in a leadership relationship. Second, a handful of the narratives from the managers give voice to the association of follower with purpose. The argument of leadership as purpose (Kempster, Jackson and Conroy, 2011) connects to such reconsideration of the notion of follower not to a person but rather to a narrative (Parry and Hansen, 2007) that guides commitment, direction and action (Drath et al 2008). So perhaps the term follower has on-going value when we are examining the salience of purpose in organisations. Would future research be better placed to explore such organisational purpose-related identifications and following practices? Third, the predominant mention of follower was during childhood with associations with parents, teachers, sports coaches and notable others in religious contexts. Follower identification in the organisational context appears to be far less common than expected. If the axiomatic assumption of the leader-follower relationship – entailing leader/follower identifications – underpins much leadership theorising, then the predominant attention on organisational context within leadership studies may be misplaced. As Kelly (2014) argued, leadership in an organisational context may be better observed as a politically convenient placeholder word and not a phenomenon to be examined and theories to be built upon.

Follower: moving from absence to helpful placeholder?

Simon Kelly (2014) nudged many of us to question the axiomatic assertions that we draw with the injudicious use of the term leader – and for us, similarly applied to follower. As noted earlier, he advocated that we view the notion of leader as an empty signifier – a placeholder term that we can interpret and utilise for our own devices. Schedlitzki et al. (2018) then invited us to note the absence of follower identifications from organisational discourses that are governed by the masculinised leader hegemony where the independent follower self is non-existent because it is discursively tied to, and bound up within, the desired yet illusory leader identity. They argued that leader-follower relations are illusory phenomena centred around the desire to stabilise workplace identities. In this frame, the empty signifier of the leader serves as a future-based, ideological image that helps individuals to imagine and fantasise about a stable workplace self that is brought into being by the presence of the heroic leader. This identification remains illusory as the leader identification continuously fails; and such failure is due to the absence of follower identification, which negate the possibility of an ontological reality of the leader. Yet, the desire for becoming a leader is often so strong in organisational contexts that a desire for followers continues by those who seek confirmation of themselves as leaders; the essence is captured in the assumed axiom that 'I cannot be a leader unless there are followers.' What we then observe is an ensuing dynamic of searching endlessly for followers and trying to connect the term follower with the hierarchically defined role of subordinates or line reports.

The convenience and universality of the word follower that we can all throw around is most understandable as an explanation of persistence. However convenient such practices are, is it appropriate for us as a scholarly community to base the central leadership axiom upon the empty signifiers of leaders and followers? For example, would it be OK to use the word balance in a balance sheet if the balance sheet is shown not to balance? Indeed at the time of this writing there is growing debate in some quarters of the accounting community –

both practitioners, academics and policy makers – about the notion of balance as they explore valuation of intangible assets (Hesketh, 2019). Or is it OK to attribute the labels of leader and follower when we observe practices of leading and following amongst individuals who themselves reject such identifications? Ashford and Sitkin (2019) amongst others certainly suggest that a leader can exist in the social construction of others even if that person does not identify as a leader. But does this form a lasting, meaningful relationship as often suggested in leadership theorising? And in reflection on our managers' work-based experiences, what importance and space does this one-way attribution of leader identity to somebody else take in the workplace?

Leadership without followers

Our argument (linked to Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Ford and Harding, 2018; Kelly, 2014; Schedlitzki et al., 2018) could be wrong and misplaced. Follower identifications could be most abundant in organisations. Our 31 managers might be atypical in that their follower identifications were, for the most part, in the extended familial context. If this was the case, where is the research that affirms the axiom of leader-follower identifications in organisational contexts in the present? And if we cannot point to such research, why have we overlooked a foundational assumption? Indeed, could other areas of management research be as content with such a foundational assumption as leadership studies appears to be?

So for the purposes of our argument, and if these conversations were to be supported in empirical research, then it would suggest that follower identifications are rare in the organisational context. Hence we therefore ask what would be the foci of leadership studies in the absence of the hegemonic leader-follower relationship in the organisational context? In part a number of theories already point to an answer. For example: servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977); distributed leadership (Gronn, 2009) and collective leadership (Fairhurst,

Jackson, Foldy and Ospina, 2020); theories of leadership as a process (Parry, 1998); leadership as process and outcomes (Draft et al, 2008); and leadership as a narrative (Parry and Hansen, 2007). The common thread that connects all of these together is a flow between people leading and following – rather than designated, materialised leaders permanently leading and followers following (Ashford and Sitkin, 2019). Although the authors of the above theories appear to assume such a flow of leading and following between different actors, the terms leader and follower are still prominent. We illustrate this point through the work of Maak and Pless with regard to responsible leadership (2006). The explicit focus in responsible leadership is to move away from leader-follower axis and towards leader-stakeholders (Maak and Pless, 2006). When Maak and Pless speak of leader they are giving emphasis to those in positions of leadership – roles that have influence and power – and seek to frame the roles to give attention realising beneficial outcomes for a range of stakeholders (Maak, and Pless, 2019). Yet in their 2006 article they comment as follows:

> 'social-relational phenomenon (Smircich and Morgan, 1982; Berger and Luckmann, 1966) that occurs in interaction with different groups of followers. As a consequence, the focus of the leader–follower relationship is broadened: instead of focusing solely on the leader–subordinate relationship in the organization we consider a wider range of relevant stakeholders as followers, inside and outside the organization (i.e., peers, clients and NGOs).

Perhaps follower was just a convenient placeholder word. But examining the above creates a disconnect to the central argument. Why would a stakeholder wish to become a follower? Why make such an assumption? We suggest it is the pervading axiomatic 'truth' that if leaders exist so do followers and a theory of leadership must have followers. One theory of leadership that has been offered overtly resists the term follower – and similarly seeks to avoid the word leader. The arguments that shape the developing theory of leadership-as

-practice seek to move attention to the actors, the context, the practices and the outcomes that emerge through this interaction (Raelin et al, 2019: 2): 'we see leadership not as residing in the traits and behaviors of individuals (such as leaders and followers) but as an agency emanating from an emerging collection of practices.'

In essence our point is that all the theories above (LAP, responsible leadership, servant leadership, distributed leadership, shared leadership) work well with the word follower removed. Indeed they all seem to have much greater conceptual coherence when addressing leading and following as a flow of interaction. It is the theories of followership, authentic leadership, and transformational leadership that might have much concern with followers disappearing. However even these theories may still have conceptual coherence if the empty signifiers of leaders and followers were replaced with clearer signifiers of line-manager and direct reports. In essence our argument is thus: If *follower-less-ness* was allowed to flourish in leadership studies we would suggest there would be greater critical attention to the dynamics of leading and following and the flow of interaction within contexts. Critical attention would be on the power asymmetry and hegemony within the relationship of managers and direct reports. Indeed much of the theorising from critical leadership studies would be just as relevant (more so perhaps) through the use of clearer and les ambiguous signifiers.

By removing follower (and leader) we might go back to appreciate a deeper sense of processes of leadership (Hosking, 1988; Knights and Willmott, 1992; Parry, 1998; Sutherland, Land, and Böhm, 2014; Wood, 2005) through investigating the 'flow' of leadership over time. Such an approach would orientate consideration of process theories (e.g. Whitehead, 1967). Here we suggest exploring leadership as continually 'becoming' (e.g. Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) and investigated through the milieu of 'events' (Deleuze, 1993, 1994) or 'moments' (Wood and Ladkin, 2008).

Followers reborn

In the world of social media – Facebook, Twitter, ResearchGate, Instagram, and many others – followers as a category of activity and follower identifications exist in abundance. Unlike our cohort of 31 middle-managers, millions of people are declaring themselves as followers. The social media followers are not in a leader-follower relationship. Rather, a social media follower has a voyeuristic relationship with other virtual beings based on interest, entertainment and fantasy. Anyone can select who to follow and declare themselves a follower, and just as easily un-declare themselves. Notions of follower being associated with identity may still be relevant, but such forms of identification are fluid, temporary and fashionable. In many ways, this virtual attachment to others, to ideas, and to fashions is the closest we may get to glimpse a representation of the unconscious, complex and illusory processes of identification in individuals' endless quest for discovering their 'true' selves.

The phenomenon of social media has arguably reframed the meaning of being a follower (Gilani et al., 2020). It is now ever present in people's lives. Perhaps followers on social media platforms are developing a very new form of followership. As a consequence the millions of declared followers necessitates the need for leadership studies to take a refreshed look at whether the assumption of followers being manifest in organisational life as part of everyday relational concerns is relevant. Perhaps we should let social media followers define and own what it is to be a follower in the twenty first century?

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