

Followership: A review of current and emerging research

Abstract

Purpose - Over time, the role of followers within leadership discourse has gained greater status, leading to followers being acknowledged as significant actors in the leadership process. This has led to the development of follower-centric leadership studies, as well as the more emergent research area of followership, with followership research having the specific intention to find out about followers from the perspective of followers. In this paper, we provide a review of role-based followership approaches, and implicit leadership and followership theories as a basis to build a case for follower implicit followership theories (FIFTs) as a focus area for future research.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted a review of seminal and current role-based followership literature, with a specific focus on FIFTs and followership studies conducted within the African context.

Findings – Implicit theories have been an area of leadership research that has added much value, and as such could do the same for development of followership research. FIFTs as a research area are nascent and, as such, should continue to be explored in order to expand our understanding of followership.

Originality/ value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is one of the first literature reviews to have a specific focus on FIFTs, as well as on followership research conducted within the African context.

Keywords: follower implicit followership theories, FIFTs, followership schema, followership

1. Introduction

Leadership attracts the interest and attention of different categories of organisations, be it private, public or non-profit (Nash, 2016, p.2). The recognition of leadership as an important factor in the success or failure of organisations (Lok & Crawford, 2004, p.24; Kumar & Kaptan, 2007 in Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016, p.190; Major, 2019, p.61) has led to various studies that explore the relationship between leadership (more specifically leadership styles) and organisational outcomes (Bushra *et al.*, 2011; Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016; Lok & Crawford,

2004; Lian & Tui, 2012; Tewari *et al.*, 2019). Historically, leadership research has had, as its primary focus, the leader; with followers and their behaviours studied only in the “context of leaders’ development rather than [that of] followers” (Kellerman, 2007, p.84). The assumption that tended to accompany this research was that followers are all the same (Ibid.), and are “an empty vessel waiting to be led, or even transformed by the leader” (Goffee & Jones, 2001 in Shamir, 2007, p.x). Whilst the insight into leaders is critical in expanding the understanding of leadership, it is important to note that leaders are not the only ones that play a significant role in the organisation or the leadership process; there is also the role of followers (Aghaei *et al.*, 2021, p.13). It then follows that the leadership discourse needs to include followership, and we should perhaps acknowledge that “leadership cannot be studied apart from followership” (Van Vugt *et al.*, 2008, p.193). Followership research is not concerned about “the activities of those occupying subordinate positions” (Lord *et al.*, 2020, p. 54) (i.e., followers) but rather their behaviours and traits in relation to leaders (Ibid.), and their perspectives regarding followership (Carsten *et al.*, 2010, p.543).

The study of followership encompasses followership role orientations, context, follower role enactment, follower styles, implicit followership theories and social constructions of followership (Carsten *et al.*, 2018; Carsten *et al.*, 2010; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014; Stegmann *et al.*, 2020; Aghaei *et al.*, 2021). Through the study of followership, we have an opportunity to add “descriptions of follower styles and followership behaviors” to expand our understanding of the leadership process (Carsten *et al.*, 2010, p.543). Followership has its roots planted in follower-centric leadership studies, wherein followers have been acknowledged as an important part of the leadership process, albeit as “recipients or moderators of the leader’s influence” (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014, p.83). However, followership research takes this a step further and recognises followers as causal agents of followership outcomes (Ibid., p.84) with the acknowledgement that they have an impact on the leadership process (Ibid., p.96).

Through their review of followership literature, Uhl-Bien *et al.* (2014, p.89) concluded that research with followership as a focus area has only recently emerged. Carsten *et al.*, (2016, p.95) also re-iterate a similar view by stating that “compared to leadership, research on followership is just beginning”. This demonstrates a field that is emergent, and thus provides opportunity to make a significant contribution to existing literature. A key contribution is that of follower implicit followership theories (FIFTs), an area of followership research that has so

far been scarcely researched, as implicit followership theory research has been primarily conducted from the leader's perspective (Sy, 2010; Goswami *et al.*, 2020; Gao & Wu, 2019).

This article builds on Uhl-Bien *et al.*'s (2014) review of followership research, focussing on role-based approaches and incorporating the more recent developments in research on implicit followership theories (IFTs); more specifically, the call to explore IFTs from the perspectives of followers. The approach taken for this paper is to present a narrative review of formative literature on followership, with a specific focus on role-based approaches in followership research, followed by a discussion on the development of IFTs and their expansion from being leader-focused to also being follower-focused. Narrative reviews are considered useful in providing a “non-systematic” (Gregory & Denniss, 2018, p.893) overview of the current state of the literature in a particular field (Rother, 2007, p.vi; Ferrari, 2015, p.230; Green *et al.*, 2006, p.102). Although this type of review is not conducted to answer a specific research question (Rother, 2007, p.vi), the “summarization and analysis of existing literature play major roles in research conducted in any social science discipline” (Rumrill & Fitzgerald, 2001, p.169). Thus, the authors are of the view that the selected approach is both appropriate and useful within the context of this review.

2. Followership research: the quest to understand followers

The importance of understanding the role of followers and following really received significant attention through the research of Kelley (1988; 1992). These two studies are part of the seminal works cited in recent research on followers and followership by various scholars (Carsten *et al.*, 2016; Malakyan, 2015; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014; Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Danielsson, 2013). The quest to understand followers as separate actors in the leadership process, as opposed to a by-product of leadership (Lapierre & Carsten, 2014, p.ix) has led to the emergence of followership research as a distinct field of study, with an acknowledgement that “followers differ in the way in which they define and enact the followership role” (Carsten *et al.*, 2018, p.731). Understanding the differences in follower behaviour and characteristics is of critical importance to leaders and organisations (Zawawi *et al.*, 2012, p.5), as followers are needed to fulfil organisational objectives. This has led to the research making enquiries into different aspects of followership, including social constructions of followership, follower

characteristics, implicit theories of followership, follower role identity, and follower behaviours.

The need for research on followership is underpinned by the assumption that it is not possible to gain a full understanding of leadership without examining the contribution of followers and followership to the leadership process (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014, p.89; Aghaei *et al.*, 2021, p.2). The examination is conducted from the point of view of the follower; where followership is the subject of enquiry and followers are those to whom the enquiry is being made (Danielsson, 2013; Oyetunji, 2013; Blanchard *et al.*, 2009). Within the current literature, as understood by us, there are two lenses applied in followership research: 1) role-based approaches, and 2) constructionist approaches. Role-based views identify followers based on organisational hierarchical structures (Carsten *et al.*, 2018, p.733), where followers are subordinates and leaders are managers. Research based on the constructionist approaches does not attach followership to a role, position or rank, but rather to the interplay of individuals' behaviours that result in leadership and followership (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018, p.208). Bastardo and Van Vugt (2019, p.82) also depart from the role-based approach by "viewing followership as a voluntary deference process" wherein individuals "have a flexible followership psychology that enables them to select and follow the right kind of leaders under the right conditions, determine an appropriate engagement level, and switch from being a follower to a leader whenever appropriate" (Ibid., p.82). Ultimately though, both approaches are concerned with addressing the key concern of followership studies: how followers view *their* role within the leadership process (Carsten *et al.*, 2010, p.543; Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012, p.210), as opposed to what they think about the leader's role, which tends to be the focus of follower-centric approaches.

Although contributions to the existing body of knowledge on followership have come from research applying both of these approaches, it is argued that these differing views are the source of confusion within followership discourse (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014, p.89) due to divergent views on use of language (Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018). As role-based views study followers in a hierarchical context, the thought is that they subordinate followership to leadership within the hierarchical structure, bringing forth the negative connotations of being a follower that have been prevalent in previous management literature (Baker, 2007, p.55). This results in scholars, such as Rost (2008), describing the use of the word *follower* as problematic, and thereby suggesting that followership is an outdated concept. Scholars positioned in the constructionist

views also advocate for the use of other terms such as “collaborators”, and “participants” (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014, p.90), as their research does not typically result in the use of words related to following. However, Uhl-Bien and Carsten (2018, p.210) suggest that it may be that, due to the negative meanings typically associated with the terms follower/following, participants might opt not to identify their behaviour as that of followership. They also make reference to Shamir’s position (in Hosking, Shamir, Ospina, & Uhl-Bien, 2012) that constructionist research that omits followers no longer falls within the realm of leadership studies, but alternative phenomena, such as “collaboration and teamwork” (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014, p.90).

3. Role-based approaches

Role-based approaches have been the lens for the earlier research that focused on follower typologies and styles (Zaleznik, 1965; Kelley, 1988; 1992; Chaleff, 2009) with the aim of finding out what makes for an ideal or effective follower as opposed to one who is not effective or ideal. Shamir’s (2007) call to reverse the lens has been considered as a catalyst for development of research in this area (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014, p.89; Uhl-Bien & Carsten, 2018, p.204), which has expanded to include role orientations (Carsten *et al.*, 2010) and co-production beliefs (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012), as well as how these inform how leaders enact their leadership (Oc & Bashshur, 2013). The following discussion on various role-based approaches considers research on typologies and role orientations.

3.1. Follower typologies

Typology research recognises that different followers affect leadership in different ways (Kean *et al.*, 2011, p.508); therefore, such differences need to be researched, just as the different types of leaders have been studied in earlier leadership research. The most notable typologies as identified in various followership studies (Kean *et al.*, 2011; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014; Kilburn, 2010; Crossman & Crossman, 2011; Lapierre & Carsten, 2014) include Zaleznik’s (1965) patterns of subordinacy; Kelley’s (1992) effective follower, Chaleff’s (2003) courageous follower, and Kellerman’s (2007) engagement continuum.

Zaleznik (1965) examined the dynamics of followers and following (referred to as subordinates and subordinacy) in organisations and came up with a model that categorises followers along two continuums, each on an axis. The first axis depicts the extremes of dominance to

submission, wherein dominance is an individual's "wishes to control and overpower authority figures", and submission is "wishes to be dominated and controlled by authority figures" (Zaleznik, 1965, p.120). The second axis is that of activity to passivity, where followers can either display active behaviours, such as being initiators of action; or be reactionary, where they wait for others to initiate action and they respond thereto (passive) (Zaleznik, 1965, p.126). This model resulted in the four typologies of impulsive, compulsive, masochistic and withdrawn.

Over 20 years after Zaleznik's study, Kelley (1992, p.143) argued that we, as humanity, are so engrossed in leadership and its importance that, despite the fact that followership dominates our lives and organisations, it fails to dominate our minds. As a result, we do not consider "the nature and the importance of the follower" (Kelley, 1988, p.143), whereas, effective followers are vital for the successful outcomes of leaders and organisations (Kelley, 1992). Kelley's model identified five different follower styles placed on two axes representing two behavioural dimensions (Figure 1): the vertical dimension is the degree to which followers exercise independent, critical thinking, and the horizontal dimension is the level of engagement; i.e., passive or active (Kelley, 1988, p.145). Based on the two dimensions, Kelley identified five follower types or followership styles. The labels for these styles were later amended in his 1992 and 2008 publications; however, the descriptions remained fundamentally the same. The five followership styles are alienated, sheep, yes-people, survivors and exemplary followers.

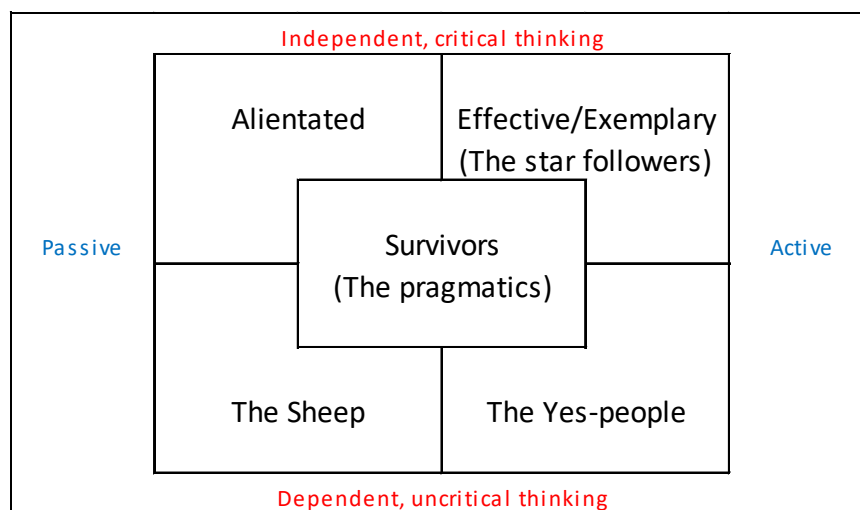


Figure 1: Kelley's follower typologies (adapted from Kelley, 1988, p.145)

Having positioned exemplary followers as the most effective, Kelley (1988, p.144) delved into the characteristics and behaviours that make them ideal followers, being the following:

- Ability to manage themselves;
- Commitment to the organisation and to a purpose, principle, or person outside of themselves;
- Holding themselves to high standards with respect to competence and skills; and
- Courageous, honest and credible.

The matter of courage is a central point for Chaleff (2009), as he positions what he terms as “courageous followers” to be vital in getting the best outcome from the leader-follower relationship. He argues that the assumption that the leader should dominate the leader-follower relationship is in fact dangerous for the advancement of organisational outcomes (Chaleff, 2003, p. 18). He describes the different dimensions of courage (Chaleff, 2009, p.20) and then applies a two-dimension matrix to determine different follower styles. The first dimension depicts the degree of support a follower gives a leader, from low to high, and the second dimension represents how willing a follower is to challenge leader behaviours or policies that are detrimental to the organisation (Chaleff, 2009, p.43).

The resulting typologies are partner, implementer, individualist and resource. The most courageous follower typologies are those that are willing to challenge the *status quo*; these being the partner and the individualist followers. However, the individualists are lacking on the support-giving, and can thus be less constructive than the partners.

In support of advancing followership research, Kellerman (2007, p.7) argued that not only is there a two-directional relationship between leaders and followers, wherein followers also have power and influence, but also that followers are not all the same. In developing her follower typologies, Kellerman designed a single metric model based on level of engagement. Although applying a different model, a consistent theme still emerges in that Kellerman (2007, p.7) asserts that active followers are preferable to those who do not act. More specifically, she states that “good followers will actively support a leader who is good and will actively oppose a leader who is bad” (Ibid.). The levels of engagement range from “feeling and doing absolutely nothing” to “being passionately committed and deeply involved” (Kellerman, 2007, p.3) (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Kellerman's engagement continuum (Kellerman, 2007)

Followers with a high level of engagement are more active, and act based on their commitment to a particular outcome. They are less likely to allow a leader to continue down what they believe is the wrong path, and thus, they are more useful to an organisation. The common thread in the four typologies that have been discussed is the requirement of followers to do more than just passively obey leaders. This is aligned to Townsend and Gebhardt's (1997, p.140) assertion that "being a good follower is not a passive role". We would venture to say that whether a follower is good or not is not just a matter of activity, but also depends on whether they assist the organisation in achieving its objectives or not. This also emerges from the typologies discussed, as a follower may be very active, but in the opposite direction to what the organisation requires; thus, being destructive. Therefore, in order for effective followership to emerge, the follower should prioritise the organisational goals above their own self-interests (Baker *et al.*, 2014, p.79).

3.2. Followership role orientations

The role-based approach continues to be used in more recent research including that of Carsten *et al.* (2010) wherein they conduct an exploratory investigation into the social constructions of followership. The focus of their study was on followership role orientations, which are beliefs about what the follower role means relative to the leader (Carsten *et al.*, 2018, p.734), and followership schema, being "generalized knowledge structures that develop over time through socialization and interaction with stimuli relative to leadership and followership" (Carsten *et al.*, 2010, p.546). The study was conducted using a qualitative methodology and sought to investigate how individuals "socially construct their roles as followers and examine the followership schema and contextual variables that are related to these constructions" (Carsten *et al.*, 2010, p.543). Such studies are important in expanding leadership literature if one acknowledges that followers "define and enact the followership role" differently (Carsten *et*

al., 2018), which would have some effect on the broader phenomenon of leadership. The findings revealed that individuals' social constructions of followership varied between passive, active and proactive, and that this is influenced by their inherent followership schemas, as well as the contextual variables of leadership style and organisational climate. Passive followers are susceptible to doing the bidding for bad or unethical leaders, as they primarily focus on carrying out leader instructions, even if they do not fully agree with their appropriateness (Lapierre, 2014, p.159). The low propensity to actively challenge the leader and obey instructions is consistent with the "yes people" and "implementers" as described in Kelley (1992) and Chaleff's (2009) models, respectively. The proactive follower aligns very closely with the "exemplary" and "partner" followers from the same studies. One can also align the proactive follower to Zaleznik's (1965) impulsive follower with self-control, and a highly engaged follower along Kellerman's (2007) continuum. The common thread that we draw through all five of these follower descriptions is the independent thought and the willingness to act thereon.

Followers with proactive followership constructions have high co-production beliefs (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012); they believe that their role is to help the leader in ensuring organisational outcomes. This type of follower is important for mounting constructive resistance (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2012) against leaders who are deviating from organisational purpose, as they not only choose who and when to follow, but also when to stop doing so (Townsend & Gebhardt, 1997, p.139). This can be a useful quality in curbing leader behaviour that is potentially harmful to the organisation, as such followers are able to challenge requests or directives to perpetuate the leader's behaviour (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013, p.53). How followers ultimately enact their followership is a combination of their followership schemas which determine their proclivity to either be passive and deferent followers, or to be proactive and challenging followers (or in-between), and the contextual variables their environment presents them with. The contextual variables emerging from the study were specifically those linked to leader behaviour, such as whether the leader is authoritarian or supportive, and those linked to organisational environments, such as a hierarchical structure versus a flat structure that allows more autonomy. Such studies as that of Carsten *et al.* (2010) demonstrate that just as it has been, and still is, important to explore the different types of leaders and leadership styles there are and which ones are most effective in different environments, it is also important to explore follower types and the contexts within which they prevail or thrive.

3.3. Summary

Zaleznik's (1965) perspective of trying to understand followers based on their characteristics and how those informed how they follow, led to future works which tried not only to understand followers and the act of following, but also what constitutes effective followership.

Kelley's (1988; 1992) later works examined follower behaviour and characteristics to identify what makes a follower effective, or exemplary. The matrix applied also included the level of engagement, but, instead of an individual's desire for dominance or submission (as per Zaleznik, 1965), rather analysed the exercise of independent thinking. Of the five typologies that emanated, the exemplary follower emerged as the effective follower; an individual whose willingness and ability to oppose the leader in favour of the organisation's objectives can assist in also limiting leader behaviour to that which is desirable for the organisation, since, if the leader deviates from the organisation objectives, she will not receive the support and obedience of the effective follower.

The effective follower corresponds well with Chaleff's (2009) courageous follower who keeps the organisational objectives in mind when she acts, and supports the leader in the attainment thereof. The courageous follower is also inclined to challenge the leader if the leader is deviating from the organisation's goals or displaying unethical behaviours or leadership (Aghaei *et al.*, 2021, p.2); thus, operating as a high challenge and high support partner to the leader.

Unlike Zaleznik, Kelley, and Chaleff, Kellerman (2007) and Carsten *et al.* (2010) applied single dimensions, or continuums, as opposed to matrices, in arriving at their typologies. From Kellerman's (2007) "level of engagement" continuum, it emerged that followers with the highest levels of commitment and involvement in the organisation were the most effective. Carsten *et al.* (2010) determined that followership enactment is ultimately influenced by a combination of followership schema and the environment.

Similar to schemas, implicit theories are also believed to "develop through socialisation experiences" (Thompson *et al.*, 2018, p.86), and research on implicit followership theories explores the beliefs individuals hold about the characteristics that followers possess and

behaviours they display. In reviewing IFT literature, we begin by discussing how the development of follower-centric approaches led to the introduction of research on implicit theories on leadership, which as the role of followers gained more prominence in leadership studies, led to implicit followership theories as an area of research that has received the interest of leadership scholars.

4. Implicit theories on leadership and followership

Implicit theories occupy a significant role in various areas of human life, including leadership and followership (Junker & van Dick, 2014, p.1154). Epitropaki *et al.*, (2013, p.859) explain implicit theories as “constructions by people (laypersons or scientists) that reside in the minds of these individuals”, juxtaposing them with explicit theories which they describe as “constructions of scientists that are based on data and scientific observation”. By extension, ILTs and IFTs are therefore the constructions that individuals have about leaders and followers, respectively.

4.1. Implicit theories on leadership

As part of follower-centric approaches, ILT research challenges the leader-centric views to leadership research by elevating the role of followers through the acceptance that follower characteristics shape the perception of leadership (Felfe & Schyns, 2006, p.709). Follower-centric approaches arose as a response to the dominant leader-centric approaches in leadership research (Bligh & Schyns, 2007, p.6) by bringing the long-outstanding attention to followers in leadership research, bringing to prominence the role of followers within the leadership process (Carsten *et al.*, 2010, p.544). Follower-centric approaches treat the follower as a more active participant in the leadership relationship and steer the leadership discourse towards assigning followers a more significant role of being social constructors of leadership. Such that it should be accepted that although an individual may possess an official title and occupy a certain hierarchical role within an organisation, whether or not that person is, viewed or considered a leader, or, seen to be effective in that role, is a matter significantly determined by followers’ beliefs and characteristics.

As opposed to leader-centric approaches that attempt to address the question of what a leader is or does by studying the leader, ILTs investigate what individuals, usually followers, believe

a leader is or does (Baker, 2007, p.54). Followers form an understanding of, and also react to, a leader's behaviours according to their ILT (Shondrick & Lord, 2010, p.1); that is, based on their perceptions of how a leader should behave. These perceptions that individuals hold are really their prototypes and stereotypes of how they think a leader should behave and the traits they should have (Yukl, 2013, p.233; Da'as & Zibenberg, 2021, p.196). Although first introduced by Eden and Leviatan in 1975, the significance of ILTs has been recognised through a considerable body of research since the 1980's (Veestraeten *et al.*, 2021, p.140), as it is an area of leadership that continues to receive attention from a number of scholars (Felfe & Petersen, 2007; Popper, 2015; Ehrhart, 2012; Alabdulhadi *et al.*, 2017; Junker & van Dick, 2014).

A key assumption of ILTs is that the preconceived ideas held by individuals on leader characteristics and behaviours determine whether they perceive someone as a leader (Hogan *et al.*, 1994, p.497). Oc & Bashshur (2013, p.920) state it as the view that "leadership exists in the minds of followers". At the most general level, a follower would differentiate between a leader and a non-leader (Offerman *et al.*, 1994, p.44). ILTs extend further than this distinction, though, to also encompass the basis upon which followers perceive or evaluate the effectiveness of leaders (Engle & Lord, 1997, p.992). That is, how a follower describes, evaluates, and experiences a leader is significantly influenced by their implicit leadership theory (Ling *et al.*, 2000, p.729). Described by Offerman & Coats (2018, p.513) as the "cognitive structures or schemas that specify what people expect from leaders in terms of leader traits and attributes", ILTs are then the lens through which individuals view leaders, and thereby, judge their effectiveness. The unconscious application of this lens can even lead to followers rating leaders based on their ILTs as opposed to actual leader behaviours (Hollander & Offerman, 1990, p.180). Bryman (1987) found that implicit theories inform leader perception to such an extent that there is little difference between an individual's reporting of a real leader and an imaginary leader whose actual behaviour is unknown. The result is that those leaders who meet these preconceived notions of how they should be are in an advantaged position, as opposed to those who do not (Junker & van Dick, 2014, p.1155).

Individuals do not only use ILTs as a foundation for interpreting the leader's behaviour, but also to inform their own behaviours (Engle & Lord, 1997, p.991). Consequently, the follower's behaviour will be determined by their perception of the leader's behaviours, making ILTs a critical part of how a follower constructs leadership (Da'as & Zibenberg, 2021, p.204).

Leadership is, thus, socially constructed by the actual observed characteristics and behaviours of the leader, as well as the observer's beliefs (van Gils *et al.*, 2010, p.340). This process of social construction can also occur in non-formal contexts, wherein an individual that boasts characteristics in line with the ILTs of others will be viewed as a leader and granted the opportunity to lead (Sy & McCoy, 2014, p.131).

4.2. Implicit theories on followership

Research by Sy (2010) inverted the ILT direction of research, and explored implicit followership theories (IFTs), with an aim to understanding “individuals’ personal assumptions about the traits and behaviours that characterise followers” (Sy, 2010, p.73). Research on IFTs explores the beliefs individuals hold about the characteristics that followers possess and the behaviours they display. Scholars opine that leader IFTs have an impact on how leaders perceive and behave towards followers, depending on whether or not those followers exhibit certain behaviours that are aligned with either positive or negative IFTs that the leaders hold (Sy, 2010; Junker & van Dick, 2014). The impact of IFTs can extend to leader ratings on perceived follower performance (Junker & van Dick, 2014; Epitropaki *et al.*, 2013), and even how much they are willing to invest in the relationship with the follower (Stegmann *et al.*, 2020, p.69).

Although followers are the topic of IFT research, the interest has been mostly on leaders’ IFTs rather than those of followers (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014, p.91), exploring the leader’s perspective of what are the traits or characteristics of good or bad followers (Sy, 2010; Gao & Wu, 2019; Shondrick & Lord, 2010; Kong *et al.*, 2019). This results in leader-centred discussions, such as which follower behaviours are more or less appreciated by leaders (Benson *et al.*, 2016, p.950). Ideas of ideal or typical followers (IFTs) are held by both leaders and followers (Stegmann *et al.*, 2020, p.68), and when investigated from a follower perspective, IFTs are follower self-schemas (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2018, p.127). Carsten *et al.* (2010) set the path for a study dedicated to follower IFTs, or followership schemas, in their study on the social constructions of followership. However, since then, IFT and schema research still primarily approaches IFTs as an “other schema” of leaders (Epitropaki *et al.*, 2018, p.127). As an example, Da’as and Zibenberg (2021, p.197) make reference to IFTs being about how “employees perceive, decide, behave and act with their followers” as opposed to their perception about themselves as followers. The observation that IFT research has so far mainly

focused on the implicit theories of leaders is also made by Yang *et al.* (2020, p.581), who make a contribution to research on FIFTs by exploring “the structure, implicit attitude and consequences of followers’ implicit followership theories in the Chinese cultural context”. In order to advance followership studies, IFTs need to be explored from the perspective of followers themselves; that is, explore what followers believe about the characteristics and behaviours of followers, thereby focusing on how followers perceive reality, in this case, being followership (Antonakis & Day, 2018, p.12).

It is encouraging to note that there is growth in the body of research that is investigating various dimensions of organisational leadership by considering both leaders’ and followers’ IFTs (Coyle & Foti, 2022; Aghaei *et al.*, 2021; Veestraeten *et al.*, 2021). Followers’ implicit theories on followership provide a useful framework for exploring followership constructions, as research on follower constructions of followership is nascent; thus, scholars need to move beyond the follower-centred perspectives of asking followers about leaders and ask followers about how they construct their experience of followership (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007, p.193).

5. Conclusion and future research

The journey of followership studies has come about through research employing various approaches in exploring the role of followers and following. The studies have evolved from only considering followers from the leader’s perspective to including followers’ views about followers and following, giving rise to followership studies as discussed in the literature reviewed. Studies on followership have gained traction through the recognition of the significant role that it plays within the broader understanding of leadership. This role is so significant that it has been said that when facing challenges, organisations should, in addition to the usual tendency to focus on leadership (Danielsson, 2013, p.708), also examine followership, especially given that followership can be linked to significant organisational outcomes (Blanchard *et al.*, 2009).

The findings in the reviewed studies identified that it is possible for followers to be the defenders of the organisation against unethical leaders by standing for the organisational purpose and challenging those who deviate therefrom. Perhaps this is what makes the IFT research important, as follower and leader IFTs may not be congruent; whereas congruence has been found to be an important factor in leader-follower relationships (Veestraeten *et al.*, 2021)

It is thus important for both leaders and followers to understand not only their own IFTs, but each other's as well so that they may adjust their behaviours accordingly to foster a better relationship between themselves (Guo, 2018, p.629). A follower who characterises effective followership through active or proactive behaviours could be perceived as insubordinate by a leader who believes that followers should only act on instruction from leaders and not take initiative (Benson *et al.*, 2016, p.950), as they may be deemed to be leading themselves. That may not be an entirely untrue conclusion by the leader, as the similarities between effective followers and effective leaders have not gone unnoticed (Blanchard *et al.*, 2009; Baker *et al.*, 2014), illustrating that, at times, the distinction between a leader and a follower can be a matter of organisational hierarchy.

Blair and Bligh (2018, p.130) highlight the point that Africa is one of the regions that is less represented in followership theory development, especially when compared to the three cultural regions of "English speaking, Catholic Europe, and Protestant Europe." They further posit that the social construction of both leadership and followership roles and behaviours can be influenced by national culture (Ibid., p.131). Guo (2018, p.627) shares a similar perspective, stating that clear differences exist between eastern and western countries in terms of how implicit followership is understood. This view aligns with Yang *et al.*'s (2020, p.582) statement that several studies have highlighted cultural differences as a contributing factor to differences in implicit theories on followership. This highlights the importance of research that is conducted in various global regions so as to include different cultures in the development of followership theory and understanding and, in fact, determine whether followership is different or similar across cultures (Thomas, 2014, p.134). In the GLOBE study, Brodbeck *et al.* (2007, p.1050) found that, "although there are commonalities across societies, culture influences [organisational] leadership in a number of ways". This is further motivation to include different regions (representative of different cultures) in studying followership. With South Africa being grouped under the Sub-Sahara Africa cluster in the GLOBE study, it was therefore important for the researchers to review literature on followership studies from the continent so as to reflect on the contributions that can be made through research from South Africa.

From our review, we identified five studies on followership in Africa. Two of the studies specifically explored followership constructions in Uganda (Ofumbi, 2007) and South Africa (Singh & Bodhanya, 2013) by applying qualitative approaches. Ofumbi (2007) concluded that a followership response occurs as either delegation, obedience, and deference; participation

alongside leaders; or intervention, especially when leaders are ineffective or malevolent. Through their research, Singh & Bodhanya (2013) developed a model representing the three systems affecting how followership is experienced and enacted in South Africa: being the individual themselves, and the organisational and environmental contexts. They assert that these systems are inter-related and influence each other, and thus, followership cannot be understood only by considering the individual follower without also considering the organisational and environmental contexts that contribute to “how they think, how they act, how they perceive themselves, how they perceive their roles and duties” (Ibid., p.507). They conclude by suggesting that more studies on followership in South Africa would be a good addition to the currently scarce African followership literature. A study by Thomas (2014) adopted a quantitative to compare followership styles (based on Kelley’s typologies) between Rwandans and Americans, finding that the American sample had a significantly larger number of people in the exemplary follower category than the Rwandan sample. In her study on the relationship between followership style and job performance, Oyetunji (2013) found that lecturers in private universities in Botswana, who identified as passive followers, had the highest job performance, whereas those who identified themselves as exemplary followers had very low job performance. Du Plessis and Boshoff (2018) explored followership behaviours as part of a broader study that investigated authentic leadership, psychological capital, and followership behaviour influences on work engagement of employees, applying a quantitative approach by way of questionnaires. The study found that followership is a significant influence on employee work engagement (Du Plessis & Boshoff, 2018, p.29).

The valuable contributions of these studies to the field of followership demonstrate that more geographically dispersed (i.e., research outside of the Western world) research is of great benefit in the quest to understand the phenomenon that is followership. Furthermore, an understanding of followership tells us “what sort of a follower we want to be and what sort of leaders we are willing to follow (and not)” (McKimm & Vogan, 2020, p.43). Riggio (2020, p.43) makes the following points regarding how followership research should be considered and expanded upon:

- To truly understand followership, we need to consider new methodological approaches, both quantitative and qualitative...
- At the theory level, we need to create new ways of looking at the process of leadership, not in the traditional sense, but in terms of a complex process that incorporates what

leaders and followers do, how they influence and respond to one another, and how the context plays a role in both stimulating leadership/followership, and how leaders and followers impact the situation.

Support for research in different cultural contexts is also found in Lord *et al.*'s (2020, p.67) review of ILT and IFT literature, wherein they not only mention the contributions that cross-cultural studies have made to ILT research, but also opine that similar research on IFTs could further enrich the literature. In concluding on their study of the role of followers' IFTs in ethical followership, Alghaei *et al.* (2021, p.13) proffer the view that research on IFTs specifically in organisational contexts is sparse; and advocate for such research to also be conducted in different cultures (Ibid., p.15).

We conclude that our review demonstrates that for the continued growth and increased richness of followership research, researchers need to keep expanding through different perspectives as well as diversity in contexts. It is our assertion that the development of FIFT research, and furthermore FIFT research conducted in different regions, is key for a more complete understanding of both followership, and more broadly, leadership.

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