The varieties of consumption of leadership – the relevance of followership in practice

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A central problem in conventional leadership research is an overemphasis on the leader and the impact of his/her traits, style, and/or behavior on the response of followers. The division between leader and follower is usually taken for granted, and the former is believed to be the key agent, while the latter is seen as a more or less passive receiver of influence (cf. Carsten et al., 2010). Followers are then mainly respondents or even responses to this influence. A lot of research assumes that by focusing on the manager (labeled a leader) or—in rare cases, the informal leader—you then study leadership. There are ideological overtones in this reasoning that stress managers as superior, uni-directionally acting on—rather than interacting with—subordinates, and that neglect that most managers are also subordinates. In general, people are inclined to ascribe strong impact to leaders, reflecting a want to see somebody as responsible for different outcomes, good or bad. This fits the self-image of many managers and reinforces their status and claims for high wages, prestige and authority in companies and society.

However, the so-called leader may not be the key driver of social relations and, in those cases, somebody being a central subject in leadership this is still very much a matter of relations and interactions and the broader set of institutional, ideological, and cultural ideas and arrangements regulating what people in managerial and authority positions do and how interactions take place. Although writers in leadership nowadays occasionally recognize that there are no leaders without followers the literature that specifically elaborates on followers and followership in practice is still scanty (but growing). The traditional view of the follower as that of a passive receiver of influence, occasionally moderated with a contingency element
such as complexity of task, maturity, is still very much dominating. There are of course some writings taking a more active view of followers and followership (e.g. Carsten et al., 2010) by explaining the significance of these for leadership process and organizational effectiveness. Following these there is a variety of conceptual types and roles of followers and some writings occupied with broadly explaining leadership processes as contingent upon followers need for meaning, clarification and safety. Some of these theories, i.e. romance of leadership, and social identity theory of leadership, look at how followers are productive in co-constructing leadership. There are also some poststructuralist informed texts of follower positioning in terms of conformist, resistant and dramaturgical selves as well as some recent focus upon how to conceptualize followership on the basis of its recognition in leadership literature. The focus on the follower in much of this literature arguably adds some to the understanding of followership and the emergence of leadership-followership relations.

However, the phenomenon of followership in practice is still less studied in depth in organizations. While recent ideas on leadership emphasize relationships (for example shared leadership) we know relatively little about how relations are formed, developed, and changed. A large amount of work looks at specific verbal interactions between managers and others in workplaces based on conversation and discourse analysis, but this tends to sidestep the richness of relational qualities that are only partly manifest in verbal interactions. Arguably, our relations are much more than the details of our conversations—history, memory, fantasies, meaning making, and feelings that people keep for themselves are key ingredients in relations. On the whole, there is not much work taking the relational aspects seriously in terms of using a more ambitious understanding based on intimate and in-depth understanding. We know less about how people—such as subordinates—look upon, understand, sense and possibly practice something akin to followership in relation to people constructed as leaders and related to that, how followers contribute to, maintain or perhaps resist and ignore leadership/followership processes in organizational settings. Arguably, such an approach is demanding empirically and amounts to investigate in depth how the relation between leader and follower emerges and forms in terms of the understanding of the follower.

One way of approaching this challenge is to try to investigate how people position themselves as followers in terms of consumption of leadership. Consumption can be seen as an open concept that we think lends itself to many different fields of investigation including to the investigation of the relation between followers and leaders. To some extent consume refers to use up, waste and exhaust, this being the negative associations of the word. This involves consumption that use up something as a commodity to the extent that it disappears. However, consumption also refers to pleasure, enjoyment and freedom (Gabriel & Lang, 1995). Consumption as a way of gaining happiness has replaced to old doctrine of the restrained self. Consumption marks style, taste and ultimately status. Consumers are often characterized as people who desire, buy and uses up a commodity but also one that actively choose and buys or refuses to buy. The consumer is seen as having moral and ethical reservations, as one who needs and demands, as one who is suspicious, explores and interprets in a variety of manners. The consumer is frustrated and picky and more or less
informed etc. And whether we look for identity, satisfaction, pleasure, identity or status there’s always a service or commodity that promises to provide just this.

Drawing on the concept of consumption in this paper thus means investigating how people more or less actively contribute to and take part of the interaction with a leader and how this interaction unfolds in practice. What is it that followers are looking for and to what extent is this provided (or not provided) in the interaction with presumed leaders (such as superiors). This approach means looking into the varieties of consumption and consumers, some are more active consumers looking for any possibility to consume while other are more restrained and cautious about their consumption of leadership. The ambition is thus to try to investigate the nature of interaction between the follower and the leader and its significance for the leadership processes. By drawing on the idea of consumption the ambition is to show how presumed followers partly create, shape and form as well as undermine, resist and neglect leadership processes. Based on the idea on consumption of leadership the paper presents several different followership positions, for example “the shopaholic” (massive consumption), “the eco-consumer” (moral consumption), “the connoisseur” (autonomous consumption), “the rebel” (averse consumption) etc.

The paper is based on in-depth empirical material collected from a variety of different organizations and industries. It is based on recurrent interviews with specific managers and subordinates as well as observations of interaction between presumed leaders and followers.

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