

Depersonalizing Leadership and Followership:

The Process of *Leadship* and *Followship*

Petros G. Malakyan^{1*}

¹ Department of Leadership Studies, Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion, Indiana

* Petros G. Malakyan, E-mail: petros.malakyan@indwes.edu

Abstract

This article addresses the traditional view of leader (ship) and follower (ship) as separate persons and processes in leadership research. Attempts have been made to depersonalize leadership and followership by taking leaders out of leadership and followers out of followership, which is to say that leaders and followers are myth and do not exist as separate identities. The traditional views of leaders and followers as static persons and functions as well as leadership and followership as separate processes have been challenged by the depersonalized or person-less concepts of leadship and followship. A shift of focus in research seems necessary from the leader or follower to the dynamic inter-relational functions of leading or following as well as from leader- or follower-centric leadership or followership to role-focused and interchangeable process of leadship and followship in organizations.

Keywords

leadership, followership, leadship, followship, role, function, static, process

1. Introduction

Leadership as a multi-contextual academic enterprise (e.g., leadership in business, education, public affairs, politics, military, etc.) and integrative interdisciplinary studies (history and leadership, anthropology and leadership, psychology and leadership, sociology and leadership, etc.), that seeks to understand the behavioral and functional dimensions of leadership, remains “one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth” (Burns, 1978, p. 2). Stogdill (1974), after conducting more than four thousand studies on leadership, has concluded: “The endless accumulation of empirical data has not produced an integrated understanding of leadership” (Bass, 1981, p. vii). Thus, the original challenge posed by Stogdill (1948, 1974), Burn (1978), Bass (1981, 1990), and Bennis and Nanus (1985) and others remain unanswered, what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders. Is it really necessary to distinguish leaders from non-leaders? Do self-perception, self-esteem, personal strengths and preferences, social perception, situational factors, self-categorization within the group, chosen or

given social identities in intergroup relations (Burke, 2003; Stets & Burke, 2014a)¹ or organizational roles provide rationale for human separation between leaders and followers? Why stratify people into identities based on their ever-changing behavioral functions or roles they occupy in society? Stogdill's (1948) findings seems to challenge this very initiative of separation that leadership research has undertaken for decades, "the evidence suggests that leadership is a relation that exists between persons in a social situation, and that persons who are leaders in one situation may not be leaders in another situation" (p. 64).

This article offers a new approach to leadership and followership research by presenting new terminologies and conceptual presuppositions for the depersonalization of leadership and followership.² The aim is to acknowledge the non-existence or the mythological nature of *leaders* and *followers* as nouns or separate identities. Depersonalization also means to focus on the functions of *leading* and *following* rather than on the person. To ascribe an identity (e.g., *leader* or *follower*) to someone based on his or her organizational functions or roles, seems implausible, because there are no static roles people play in every situation. Thus, the depersonalization of leadership and followership advocates for a dynamic and interwoven relational process of leading and following in different situations.

It is important here not to associate depersonalization of leadership and followership with the group prototypicality through self-categorization (Hogg, 2001). Rather, while recognizing the contributions of situational leaders and followers to the group process with their uniqueness, personal preferences, strengths, and personalities (Parmer, Green, Duncan, & Zarate, 2013), the aim of the depersonalization in this article is to emphasize the relational process between those who lead and those who follow (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010). There seems to be a danger in the depersonalization in reference to group prototypicality, because the prototypical in-group members may exercise "possible abuse of power" against the out-groups (Hogg, 2001, pp. 196-197).

¹ An identity is an "internal positional designation" that represents meanings actors use to define themselves as unique individuals (person identities), role occupants (role identities), or group members (social identities).

² Depersonalization of leadership and followership is defined as a process of taking leaders out of leadership and followers out of followership in order to view leadership as *leadship* (process of leading) and followership as *followership* (process of following). The depersonalization process may result in a new outlook into four areas of current leadership scholarship: (1) role-focused *leadship* and *followership* vs. person-focused leadership and followership; (2) dynamic relationships of *leadship* and *followership* vs. the static concept of leadership and followership; (3) group processes of *leadship* and *followership* vs. social identities of leadership and followership; and (4) integrative scholarship of *leadship* and *followership* vs. two separate scientific inquiries of leadership and followership. In this article, the first two areas will be considered.

1.1 Problems

The problems to be addressed in this article are the traditional views of *leader (ship)* and *follower (ship)* as separate persons or identities and separate processes in leadership research.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this article is to offer an alternative paradigm to view leadership and followership as functions or roles persons play everyday consciously or unconsciously, regardless of their formal positions in organizations. People perform multiple functions and play multiple roles in social and organizational contexts, including *leading* and *following*, which are dynamically intertwined, interchangeable, and interdependent. In the proceeding pages I will submit that while individuals may differentiate themselves from others with their personal and role identities in organizations, leading or following functional behaviors do not make them static leaders or followers and separate identities. To provide rationale for depersonalization, the traditional static views of leadership, where leaders and followers are perceived as separate individuals and leadership and followership as separate processes, will be questioned.

1.3 Anticipated Outcome

It is expected that the static paradigm of leadership and followership be challenged, leaders doing only leadership and followers doing only followership, in order to consider *leadship* and *followship* process as vibrant and switchable social interactions between persons who situationally lead and follow in organizational contexts. By depersonalizing leadership and followership and introducing the person-less process of leadship and followship, which is a shift in focus from the person to human functions, one may create healthier and more ethical relationships between those who lead and those who follow in a given situation for the benefit of the members of the group toward the reduction of the abuse of positional power and identity stereotyping in organizations (Hollander, 1995; Van Dick, Hirst, Grojean, & Wieseke, 2007).

2. Method

This conceptual paper addresses two features of leadership research: etymological and theoretical understanding of leadership and followership. Languages, that have been widely used in the leadership literature, such as *leader*, *leadership*, *follower*, and *followership*, will be re-examined in order to address the existing identity issues within the use of the above terms. Second, due to the further advancement of leadership theories from trait to contingency, and most recently, to leadership as a complex socializing process, where dynamic relationships between leaders and followers in context are considered, this article proposes new ways of thinking and conceptualizing (1) *leading* and *following* as non-static human functions or roles, and (2) *leadership* and *followership* as a relationship process that takes place in modern organizational life. In other words, instead of stereotyping some people as leaders and others as followers, and anticipating that leaders do leadership and followers do followership, this article intends first, to depersonalize the *leader* and the *follower* as different identities

and second, to advocate for the reciprocal relational process of *leadership* and *followership*, where one may lead in one and follow in another situation.

2.1 An Etymological Review of Terms “Leader” and “Leadership”

The word *leader* comes from Old English *lædere*, meaning “one who leads”, or agent noun from the word *lædan*, which correspond to the Old Saxon *ledian* and Old High German *leiten*, meaning “take with one”, “conduct”, or the one who “carries on with life” (Hoad, 1988, p. 261). The term *ledere* referred to a person who showed others the path and guided them along the way (Kets de Vries & Florent-Treacy, 1999, p. 5). The word *leader* was also understood as *chief*, from Old French *chief* “leader, ruler, head” of something, “capital city”, from Vulgar Latin **capum*, from Latin *caput*, meaning “head”, also “leader, chief person” in the fourteenth century.³ It appeared in the English language during the era of Scholasticism in the thirteenth century (Gill, 2012, p. 8). Thus, the etymological meaning of the word *leader* had been closely associated with a *function* of leading by an agent or a chief.

The suffix *-ship*, meaning “quality, condition; act, power, skill” comes from *-schipe* (Middle English) and *-sciepe* (Old English). In Anglian *-scip* means “state, condition of being”. In Proto-Germanic “**-skapaz*” or in “**scap*” (Old Norse *-skapr*, Danish *-skab*, Old Frisian *-skip*, Dutch *-schap*, German *-schaft*) means “to create, ordain, appoint”.⁴ The words *leadership* had a positional meaning, “position of a leader”, from leader + *-ship* in 1821. Later, it extended to “characteristics necessary to be a leader” by late nineteenth century. *Leadership* also meant *hegemony* (n.) in 1560s, “preponderance, dominance, leadership”; from Greek *hegemonia* “leadership, a leading the way, a going first”; also “the authority or sovereignty of one city-state over a number of others”, as Athens in Attica, Thebes in Boeotia; from *hegemon* “leader, an authority, commander, sovereign”, from *hegeisthai* “to lead”.⁵ The term *leadership* was introduced to the English language only in the beginning of the nineteenth century (Gill, 2012, p. 8). So, etymologically, *leadership* had to do with a movement, position, and appointment. Dillard sees it as “achieving the state or condition of being capable as a leader, and then, by the appointment of others, showing them the path to take and guiding them safely along the journey” (Dillard, 2013, p. 2). From the definition, it is evident that *leadership* seems a *process* by which one with an appointed authority and position leads or guides others to the desired destination.

³ Retrieved from *Online Etymology Dictionary* on September 16, 2015

http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=leader&searchmode=none

⁴ Retrieved from *Online Etymology Dictionary* on September 16, 2015

http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=-ship&searchmode=none

⁵ Retrieved from *Online Etymology Dictionary* on September 16, 2015

http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=leadership&searchmode=none

2.2 A Theoretical Review of Leadership Research

Historically, the leadership research has gone through a significant development and changes beginning the *great man theory*. It started from the leader-focused paradigm, such as *trait theory* (Kirkpartick & Locke, 1991; Zaccaro, Kemp, & Bader, 2004; Zaccaro, 2007) and *skills approach* (Katz, 1974; Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000; Yammarino, 2000; Lord & Hall, 2005), where the leader's attributes and skills were explored. The *behavioral approaches* focused on number of variables such as *styles* (Stogdill, 1974; Blake & Mouton, 1964, 1985), *situations* (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988; Vecchio, 1987), *goal-oriented behaviors*, and *motivational factors* (Evans, 1970; House, 1971; House & Dessler, 1974). The *contingency theories* acknowledged the more complex nature of leader-member relations, task structure, positional power, and leadership style (Fiedler, 1964, 1967; Fiedler & Chemers, 1974; Fiedler & Garcia, 1987), while maintaining the leader-focused "romance of leadership" (Meindl et al., 1985).

As the leadership research progressed during the second half of the twentieth century from the leader (*trait, skill, style*) to consideration of the follower and context (*situational leadership, contingency and path-goal theories*), the *leader-member exchange (LMX) theory* (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) took another step toward the conceptualization of leadership as a *process* in leader-follower interactions and dyadic relationships (Northouse, 2013, p. 161), despite the fact that the in-group and out-group concepts were still leader-focused (Malakyan, 2014). *Team, shared, collective, and distributed leadership* furthered the understanding of group and leader-follower exchange in the leadership processes (Fisher, 1985; Hackman, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009).

The *value-based leadership theories* such as *transformational* (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1990; Bryman, 1992), *charismatic* (Freud, 1938; House, 1976; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Zaleznik, 2009), *servant* (Greenleaf, 1970; Greenleaf & Spears, 2002; Bennis, 2002; Blanchard & Hodges, 2003), *authentic* (Eagly, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005), and *ethical leadership* (Rest, 1986; Ciulla, 2002; Price, 2006, 2008), assert the importance of the leader-follower reciprocal relationships bound together with shared values in complex social and virtual systems of interactions (Cogliser & Schriesheim, 2000, Yukl, 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Malhotra et al., 2007; Plowman & Duchon, 2008; Kahai & Avolio, 2008). Furthermore, the *self-leadership* fosters the members of the organization to practice autonomy and self-efficacy to engage in self-directive behaviors toward self-management and self-leadership (Bandura, 1991; Markham & Markham, 1995; Gardner & Pierce, 1998; Neck, 2006).

As seen above, leadership research moved from single to multiple variables, from leader to leader-follower cooperative relationships, and from simple to more complex systems of integrative study of individual and group behaviors in social, organizational, and intercultural contexts (Berry, Segall, & Kagitcibasi, 1997; Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2007). Similar observations can be made for the emerging theories of followership, where the research moved from the observations of

follower's types, styles, and characteristics (Kelley, 1988, 1992, 2008; Chaleff, 2008, 2009; Kellerman, 2008; Riggio, Chaleff, & Lipman-Blumen, 2008) to more complex studies of followership in relation to leadership with multiple contextual and social variables (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Carsten, Uhl-Bien, & Jaywickrema, 2013; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Kellerman, 2012; Kean & Haycock-Stuart, 2011; Carsten et al., 2010; Howell & Mendez, 2008; Shamir, 2007; Collinson, 2006; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Currently, significant number leadership scholars recognize leadership and followership to be *relational process* (Hollander, 1958, 1971, 1986; Lord & Brown, 2004; Shamir, 2007, 2012; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013).

3. Result

Our short etymological and theoretical reviews of terms *leader* and *leadership* seem to reveal some important distinctions between the conceptual semantics of *leader* and *leadership* and their modern use in the leadership research. For instance, according to the etymological definitions, the *leaders* are the ones who are distinguished from others by their functions of leading, where the personality traits of the leader are not the part of the definition. On the other hand, the earliest leadership theories began focusing on the qualities and characteristics of the person who is the *leader* as opposed to the leading *function* of the person. Moreover, *leadership* means *a process* by which a person, who is appointed to lead, shows the way or guides others along the way, according to the etymological definitions above. However, in most theories of leadership, we seem to continue operating from a leader-centric paradigm, where the research attention has been on the leader and his or her characteristics or behavior (e.g. transformational, charismatic, authentic, ethical, others) as opposed to the *relational process* of leadership in possible transformational, authentic, and ethical social contexts. As a result of the leader-focused approach, as opposed to the functional approach, the "cult of leadership" emerged (Kelley, 1992, p. 14) since the Modernity, the roots of which go back to the antiquities. Let us consider psychological, historical, and sociological consequences of the "cult of leadership" reinforced by the leader-centric leadership research.

3.1 Psychological Consequences

Unlike followership, leadership seems to have emotional and psychological attraction due to its mythological significance (Gabriel, 1997). Leaders have become our modern-day iconic figures to be elevated above ordinary humans. Societies throughout centuries have created idols out of their leaders such as Pharaohs, Chinese or Roman Emperors (Kellerman, 2010, 2012), the implications of which, from the perspective of social identity theory of leadership, is clear: "self-categorization transforms our [followers'] perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors" toward prototypical leaders whose "popularity becomes leader worship, and status differentiation becomes absolute hierarchy" (Hogg, 2008, pp. 269-273).

Psychologists inform us that people have intrinsic inclinations to identify some in their midst as their leaders and see them or her the embodiment or symbols of their lofty expectations (Tead, 1935; Freud,

1938, 1921/1985; Messick, 2005; Lipman-Blumen, 2005, 2008; Gabriel, 2011). Ironically, it is the followers who mystify few among them as *leaders*. LeBon describes this human tendency as a “thirst for obedience”. It occurs in-group settings when individuals “place themselves instinctively under the authority of the chief” to satisfy their instinct desire to submit and obey (Freud, 1921, p. 81). Presidents of the United States, for instance, have been elevated to a mystified pedestal as symbols of conflict resolutions and problem solving not only for the American society, but also for the world. These and other attributions given to individuals who are in the position of leadership in society have become anchors of hope and aspiration for people in their quest for life meaning, safety, and identities (Campbell, 1968; Campbell & Myers, 1988; Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Hogg, 2008).

Let us briefly consider psychological experiments conducted by two social psychologists, Milgram and Zimbardo, the obedience experiment in 1960 and the prison experiment in 1971, to consider the relationship between the “cult of leadership” and the “thirst for obedience”. The findings of Milgram and Zimbardo shocked the world then and continue to impact us today. Milgram found that more than sixty percent of ordinary people are inclined to obey authorities and go against their moral conscience by unintentionally inflicting pain to strangers (Milgram, 1974). Zimbardo, on the other hand, who was interested in observing the conformity behaviors of ordinary people under extraordinary circumstances, discovered that the “guards” became obsessed by the control and power to emasculate “prisoners”, while the latter were utterly conformed to the existing evil “reality” around them (Haney & Zimbardo, 1973). The most recent findings of social psychologists and social-identity theorists, who have re-examined the original findings and added more knowledge to Milgram and Zimbardo’s groundbreaking discoveries, seem more alarming. First, unlike the Milgram’s assumption that ordinary people may inflict harm to others unintentionally, Burger (2009), Reicher et al. (2012), Haslam et al. (2014) argue that followers often follow authorities not blindly, but willingly as partners in a shared enterprise. Haslam and Reicher (2012) define this phenomenon as “engaged followership”. Lagouranis (2007) insists, “It is time to reject the comforts of the obedience alibi. It is time instead, to engage with a uncomfortable truth that, when people inflict harm to others, they often do so wittingly and willingly” (p. 231).⁶ Second, the conformity nature of human beings, according to which individuals are inclined to follow authorities, is contingent upon the identification with the authority and “the associated belief that the authority is right” (Haslam & Reicher, 2012, p. 1).⁷ Leaders, the subject of worship, on one hand, are vulnerable to becoming abusers of power and position in organizations, followers, the leader worshipers, on the other hand, are in danger to exhibit sado-masochistic behaviors, as argued by Freud and associates, which may lead to self-deception and destruction. So, what should be done to protect

⁶ The term “obedience alibi” comes from Mandel (1998, pp. 74-94).

⁷ Haslam and Reicher (2012) argue that people internalize social roles assigned to them and make them an aspect of their social identity, which is to say that adopted behavior is the result of the internalization process, rather than the role itself, argued by Zimbardo.

the sixty percent obedient population from personal and organizational abuse? Other than following one's instincts to obey authorities and follow unethical leaders out of fear and perhaps for other existential reasons, there seem to be no significant supporting mechanisms in society to help majority people, how to disobey authorities with their unethical demands or un-follow toxic leaders. Since the focus of the leadership research has been on the leader for so long, people in leadership positions have more resources to demand obedience from their followers through psychological manipulations and the use of coercive power, than followers, who may easily be trapped into their own psychic of "thirst for obedience".

3.2 Historical Consequences

Historically, a strict organizational separation between leader and follower roles seems a modern phenomenon, as I have observed in the etymology section. Before the Industrial Revolution, people's societal roles had not been as strictly separated as during the industrial era. For instance, Socrates (470-399 B.C.E.) used *elenchus* (a series of leading questions), known as *Socratic method*, in instructor-student interactions and collaboration nearly two thousand four hundred years ago. He helped his young Athenian student-followers, including Aristophanes, Plato and Xenophon, to discover truth through informal discourses (Tucker, 2007). During those debates, Socrates presented himself not as a master of knowledge but as a fellow learner working alongside of his students to share and gain insights from their perspectives. Both the instructor as a leader and the students as followers were challenged by the situation and empowered by the reciprocal relationships. This method of mutual learning had been passed down from Plato (427-347 B.C.E.) to Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) to Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 C.E.). So, the leadership philosophy of Socrates allowed him to change his role from the instructor-leader to the instructor-follower. By doing so, he was able to elevate his student-followers to play the role of the instructor-leader through active engagement and participation in-group processes.

Aristotle's philosophy of *leading* and *following* is similar to that of Socrates. Although, commanding and obeying were two different things for him, Aristotle believed that the good citizen should be capable of both, knowing how to govern like a freeman and obey like a freeman, since "he who has never learned to obey cannot be a good commander" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./1999, p. 57). Although Aquinas supported Aristotle's concept of obedience out of free will and social responsibilities, in matters of human nature, he believed that "by nature all men are equal in liberty" and that one is not obliged to obey someone (Aquinas, C.E. 1265-1274/1988, p. 75). It seems that both Aristotle and Aquinas advocate human free choice of self-governance and that individuals should know how to lead and follow for the good of themselves and others. By embracing Platonic-Aristotelian logic, Aquinas saw cardinal virtues to be the basis for all other virtues in human relationships (prudence, justice, courage, and temperance), which seem no different from that of leadership and followership moral values and ethics advocated by modern leadership and followership scholars.

Interestingly, terms such as *leader* or *follower* as different identities have hardly been used in the

tradition of the first century Christianity. For instance, the word *follow* and *follow me* as role-identities or as forms of speech-act (Austin, 1962; Searle & Austin, 1975) had been used more than thirty times, while the word *follower* not even once in any of the Four Gospels (RSV). The word *leader* was used once in association with the person “who serves” (Luke, pp. 22-26, RSV). Words *lead* or *leading* had been used ten times in the Gospels. Moreover, Christ considered his disciples his friends, not followers, although he called them to follow him as their role model (role-identity). Nor did he called or aspired himself to be a leader or a follower (social-identity). Nevertheless, the trait approach as opposed to functional approach to leadership, trespasses the Common Era and goes back to the times of Homer’ Odysseus (B.C.E. 800-700), Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (B.C.E. 470-322) and further down to modern times. Thus, word *leader* had long been associated with individuals who stood out in society with their exceptional talents as guardians, artisans, realists, and idealists, or people with character, virtues and ethics, while *leadership* had been generally understood as positions of power and influence by rulers, warriors, governors, and the like (Papacostas, 2015).⁸ Aquinas (C.E. 1227-1274), much like Aristotle, argued against tyrant leaders and advocated for ethical leadership exemplified by individual rulers, kings, or monarchs through their character and virtues (Aquinas, 1988, pp. 14-29). Therefore, it can be said that the *great man* paradigm in leadership has been with humanity since the ancient times. Thus, despite the fact that humanity has experienced extremely negative segregations, such as international oppressions, slavery, and colonialism, and as a result people were forced to belong to certain social groups (e.g., slaves, masters, freeman, freewoman), the segregation of people between leaders and followers can be observed during and after the Industrial Revolution.

During the post-Industrial era, Bass (1981), Bennis and Nanus (1985), and Smith and Peterson (1988), after analyzing a vast amount of data, realized their attempts to define leadership and to understand “what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders” (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, p. 4) were unsuccessful. Stogdill (1948, 1974), in turn, concluded that no consistent set of traits differentiated leaders from non-leaders across various contexts or situations. Stogdill’s findings have not been challenged ever since, nor do we find any scientific justification in the leadership research to continue viewing *leaders* and *followers* as separate identities. In other words, there seem no empirical data to assume that some genetic or trait distinctions exist between those who lead and those who follow. Rost (1993) rightly pointed out that Leadership Studies seemed to fall under mythological storytelling since leadership definitions are abound and yet “no single definition unites leadership scholars and practitioners” (pp. 6-7). Nonetheless, the leader-centric approach to leadership, particularly within the *traits approach* (Lord, DeVader, & Alliger, 1986; Nadler & Tushman, 1989; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Zaccaro, 2007; and others), to argue that leaders were somewhat different from non-leaders due to certain traits or characteristics, directly or indirectly has been adding fuel to the leader worship for decades. This myth

⁸ See Socrates’ method or *elenchus*, Plato’s *Republic*, *Theaetetus*, *Laws* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean ethics*, *Virtues*, and *Politics*.

has resulted in “dangerous and toxic leaders obsessed by its fictitious glory and fame” (Chaleff, 2009, pp. 3-5). Not surprisingly, tyrants under various political or religious regimes have not vanished from the time of Homer to Modernity and post-Modernity. Kelley rightly observes, “Once society tips the power equation in favor of the myth [leaders], it can quickly turn into tyranny” (Kelley, 1992, p. 20).

3.3 Sociological Consequences

Sociologically, the word *follower* or *subordinate* comes with somewhat negative connotation as being inferior, less intelligent, powerless, or someone who is weak and lacks vision, character, or skills to influence others.⁹ Few would aspire to be or become a follower, especially in the Western cultural context. Students at a young age are encouraged not to be a follower but a leader. Furthermore, the mass media in the West promotes leadership, not followership. For instance, some TV ads discourage people from being followers and encourage them to become leaders.¹⁰ Such stereotyping has mounted serious sociological problems in human relationships and interactions (Kelley, 1992; Rost, 1993; Kellerman, 2008; Chaleff, 2009).

3.3.1 Followership Dilemma in Research

According to the traditional view of leadership, if leaders and followers exist as separate individual with different identities, then one would assume that leaders do only leadership and follows do only followership in group or organizational contexts. Understandably, this logic would also require to study leadership and followership as separate processes, which has been the case for leadership scholarship for decades. Nonetheless, followership scholars tend not to like the word *follower* (Chaleff, 2008, 2009; Dixon, 2008; Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson, & Morris, 2006). Chaleff tries to disassociate the term *follower* from the *subordinate* arguing that they are not synonymous (Chaleff, 2008, p. 15). Rost (1993, 2008) prefers to use the word *associates*. However, the negative connotation accompanied with the term *follower* is still an issue for followership research today (Rost, 1993; Chaleff, 2008; Kellerman, 2014). Not shockingly, most people are not interested in followership. Most universities do not teach followership, and most leadership programs do not include followership courses in their curriculums (Malakyan, 2014). This means that the university students are not prepared to exhibit courageous followership behaviors to disobey unethical authorities or refuse to follow toxic leaders. In other words, the leadership research remains vulnerable to the “cult of leadership” and the “thirst for obedience”.

Furthermore, the leadership literature speaks less on the mobility and the shifting roles from following to leading and from leading to following (Malakyan, 2014). Rather, the vast majority of leadership and followership literature continues to view leading and following behavioral functions as static and parallel to each other. This industrial mindset to leadership and followership, is problematic for the twenty-first century post-structuralist mind, because the latter does not strictly differentiate leading and following functions in the post-industrial era. Nowadays, followers may follow by leading and leaders

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00vQnH9EpV0>; <http://grey-magazine.com/don-t-be-a-follower>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvDkCiUgIAc>

may lead by following (Goffee & Jones, 2006; Frisina, 2005; Hertig, 2010).

3.3.2 From Identity Separation to Social Segregation

As indicated earlier, humanity has been assigned to two separate entities or social groups for centuries, where leaders have always been perceived as superior to followers and followers inferior to leaders in the context of the Western culture and beyond (Alcorn, 1992; Kelley, 1992; Chaleff, 2009; Rost, 2008; Kellerman, 2008, 2012). The Industrial Revolution, followed by the theories of management and the industrial prototype of leadership, has created fictional entities, *leaders* and *followers*,¹¹ as two separate persons or identities, and *leadership* and *followership* as separate processes that “run in parallel lines” or in different, more or less opposite directions” (Rost, 2008, p. 55). People in factories and organizations have been segregated into group- or social-based identities (one is a leader, others are followers) as opposed to mutually inclusive role-based identities (one leads, others follow, or shift their roles), which require “reciprocal rather than parallel relationships” (Stets & Burke, 2014, p. 69). Thus, the tension between leaders and followers continues to rise due to the ongoing social stratification, unless one chooses to live by illusions as a dream merchant in the presence of bad or toxic leaders (Lipman-Blumen, 2008).

4. Discussion

Leading and following appear nearly in every level of human relationships: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and organizational or community. A positional leader, for instance, is also a follower of the policies of the organization, the societal norms, and the written or unwritten laws. In other words, positional leaders also engage in “following behaviors” (Fairhurst & Hamlett, 2003; Larsson & Lundholm, 2013). It is a common sense to assert that there is no single person in any society or culture that exhibits only leading or only following behavior (Montesino, 2003). Since leaders cannot logically exist without followers (Hogg, 2008), then leaders and followers do not exist apart from each other, nor do leadership and followership as separate processes. Although we have not yet seen the literature on leadership and the literature on followership come together as one subject matter to study, as Burns (1978) stressed,¹² we have already seen a shift from the person to the relational processes in the leadership research (Rost, 1993, 2008; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). As Hollander (1992) states “Leadership is a process, not a person” (p. 71). Without that process, leadership and followership cannot be understood and without leader-follower relationships leaders and followers as separate persons do not exist (Kellerman, 2007; Rost, 1993, 2008). However, we have yet to see a shift from the *leader* and *follower* as nouns to the behavioral functions of *leading* and *following* as verbs in the leadership

¹¹ The structuralist view of leadership theory has created fictive objects, leaders and followers, much like race and corporations as humans, that resulted in leader-follower and manager-subordinate social categorizations as separate persons and identities.

¹² Burns’ quotation can be found in the back cover of Kellerman (2008).

literature, and once for all, to put the “cult of leadership” to rest, at least from the scholarly perspective for now.

4.1 From Person- to Role-Focused Leadership and Followership

As stated earlier, defining, and distinguishing leaders from followers as separate persons remains a weak scientific argument. It undermines the mutual values of leading and following functions and fosters social segregation, discrimination, and stereotyping. These functions should not be personified, since the verb *lead* and *follow* can only be attributed to a person when that person is involved in either leading or following behavioral functions or roles. Outside of this relational process, which I call *leadership* and *followership*, leaders and followers cease to exist. If one is leading or following in a given situation, then he or she is a situational follower or a leader. In another situation, a shift in roles or functions might take place by making leading and following everyone’s experience in various situations. Consequently, leaders and followers as persons are rather myth and thus, must be depersonalized. On the contrary, there are people who take leading and following roles based on their personal preferences, competencies (Jung, 1923/1989; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), as well as motivations through self-regulatory processes (Kark, 2007). The non-static or dynamic approach to leading and following may shed more light on how individuals lead or follow in various situations (everyone does it anyway on a daily basis) for personal or group benefits and mutual betterment in social and cultural contexts (Brumm & Drury, 2013; Kwak, 2012).

Leading and following must be viewed as dynamically interchangeable behavioral functions toward reciprocal interpersonal relationships between situational (non-static) leaders and followers in social group settings (Layder, 1994, 2006; Haslam, 2004). People may lead and follow if they are willing to (1) acquire either one or both skills, and (2) exchange their roles in organizational contexts toward mutual effectiveness across human diversities (Malakyan, 2014; Baker & Gerlowski, 2007). As Cox, Plagens and Sylla (2010) put it, “Leaders and followers both must have the ability to interchange their role. Meaning that the leader must be decisive and desirous of becoming the follower, and the follower must be capable as well as desirous of leading” (p. 45).

Furthermore, leading and following are not only interdependent roles within a social system bound by common group (Hollander, 1992; Mullins & Linehan, 2005), but also abilities to shift leading and following roles by exhibiting extra-role behaviors in different situations (Hopton, Christie, & Barling, 2012). Thus, one can or should not be viewed as always a leader or a follower. The static concept of human functions such as leading and following seem unnatural and make little sense. These relational interactions constantly change or may shift roles for the benefit of the social groups toward common goals (Lobatto, 2013) through dynamic followership and leadership (Latour & Rast, 2004). Accordingly, the person who functions as a leader in one may function as a follower in another situation (Stogdill, 1948, 1974; Malakyan, 2014).

Lastly, not only do individuals shift roles between leading and following in various situations, but they

also lead and follow at the same time. Chaleff's (2012) video on tango dance¹³ discusses the shifting roles between the man and the woman. Within each designated role both the woman and the man lead and follow interchangeably or simultaneously (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Chaleff, 2012). Thus, leading and following behavioral functions can be ascribed to any person if that person chooses to lead and follow sometimes interchangeably or simultaneously depending on his or her personal preferences, sets of skills, and situational variables (Dixon, 2008; Chaleff, 2012; Malakyan, 2014).

4.2 Toward the Process of Leadership and Followership

Leadership and *followership* as separate processes fall under the same mythological category as *leaders* and *followers*, because the leader is not a process (leader + ship) and the process is more than a person. Hogg (2001) rightly notes, "The notion of a social group only of leaders makes little sense; who would lead and who would follow?" (p. 185). Thus, the depersonalization of leadership and followership may allow individuals to abandon the static paradigm of leaders doing only leadership and followers doing only followership and welcome the dynamic and exchangeable nature of mutual *leadership* and *followership* relational process. As Lord (2008) puts it, "Followers may assume leadership roles when necessary" (p. 266). A shift from the person to the dynamically interpersonal processes within complex systems of functional exchanges within social groups has become a necessity (Hurtwitz, M. & Hurtwitz, S., 2015). This dyadic relational process of *leadership* and *followership* may first, take us back to the original etymological meanings of terms *leader* as a function and *leadership*, along with *followership*, as a process, second, stop social segregation between leaders and followers and foster human dignity and freedom, third, put Stogdill's non-differentiation between leaders and non-leaders into a practical use, fourth, resolve the followership dilemma (inferiority complex) in research, and fifth, prevent the emergence of tyrant or abusive leaders, on one hand, and "sheep followers", on the other.

4.3 A Desired State of Being

Throughout human history, the toxic leaders have been unable to provide the promised safety, security, and prosperity for the world (Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Kellerman, 2008), and that the desire to overcome personal anxiety and loneliness, or social injustice and human exploitation, are still a part of our personal and social struggles. We need to stop believing in hero-leaders, whose promises are not more than "unattainable Nirvanas" (Lipman-Blumen, 2008), and demythologize our perceptions about today's heroes in politics, social life, entertainment industry, religion, military, and business. Thus, it is time to pass the era of mythical societal heroes (Carlyle, 1841, 2013; Johnson, 2008; Campbell, 1968) in order to see everyday life heroism by not only situational leaders but also situational non-leaders.¹⁴ As Hopen (2010) states, "Instead of focusing on who has authority and power, we could concentrate on

¹³ <http://www.courageousfollower.net/blog/video/>

¹⁴ See <http://heroicimagination.org> for Heroic Imagination Project (HIP) founded by Dr. Philip Zimbardo, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Stanford University, and the author of Stanford Prison Experiment (1971).

who has the knowledge, skills, and abilities to guide us on the journey to attain desired outcomes” (p. 3).

Why can't we show the same respect to people who choose to either lead or follow (Pina e Cunha, Rego, Clegg, & Neves, 2013; Parmer, Green, Duncan, & Zarate, 2013)? Why not cultivate organic processes of *leading* and *following* and treat “organizations as organisms” where leaders follow and followers lead not only collaboratively but also interchangeably “throughout the scope of their responsibilities” (Dixon, 2008, pp. 173-174) to foster human collaboration within our communities and organizations (Howell, 1997; Rost, 2008; Hurtwitz, M. & Hurtwitz, S., 2015)?

5. Concluding Comments

The depersonalization of leadership and followership, proposed in this article, questioned the validity of the traditional view of leaders and followers as separate identities and leading and following as static roles. It also rejected the notion of leadership and followership as separate and parallel processes. So, the depersonalized version of leadership and followership is *leadship* and *followship*, which sets forth the following changes of terms and concepts in leadership research:

- a. Discontinuing the use of terms *leader* and *follower* as nouns or separate identities in leadership research due to their mythological nature. We all share a common humanity and yet engage in many roles, which do not make one more or less human.
- b. It is not about the person but about the phenomena of *leading* and *following* that should be the target of the scientific inquiry. If one desires to acquire skills and knowledge in leading and following, much like in driving, swimming, flying, etc., then there should be resources in place to help people to learn how to lead and follow.
- c. Considering a role-focused and person-less *leadship* and *followship* relational process toward the development of shared identities. “It takes two people to tango”. This is also true for leading and following, rightly argued by Chaleff (2012).
- d. Embracing *leadership* and *followership* as an interchangeable and role-shifting enterprise, where members of the organization are allowed and enabled to trade their leading and following roles for mutual enrichment and service (Malakyan, 2014).¹⁵ Example: similar to the tango dance, when I encourage my students to exchange their leading and following roles in class activities, they begin to see the benefit and the significance of both functions leading and following. The shifting role environment not only creates a sense of respect and appreciation toward one other, but also protects students from the leader worship and the blind obedience.

5.1 Respect

Individuals, regardless of their leading or following roles, deserve respect. Kant (1785/1996) contended: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or the person of any other,

¹⁵ See Malakyan's Leader-Follower Trade (LFT) Approach.

never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end” (p. 429). When followers are considered as commodities or disposable items to be used or thrown away either for the benefit of the company or at the discretion of the leader in charge, such attitudes and practices are not tolerated anymore in the globalized world neither domestically nor internationally. People deserve respect in the workplace and society regardless of their roles and thus must not be treated as modern-day economic slaves.

5.2 Freedom

Leading and following, or doing both simultaneously or interchangeably, are human possibilities. Plato believed that “the wise shall lead and rule, and the ignorant shall follow”.¹⁶ Although the modern-day followers are not ignorant anymore, nor are leaders always wise; Plato’s multi-millennial argument is still valid today. In post-structuralist and post-industrial era, wise experts should lead ignorant non-experts, regardless of their social or organizational positions or roles. Air traffic controllers, for instance, who are wise experts but perceived to be followers in the organizational chart of today’s commercial airports, lead out of their expertise by safely landing thousands of planes around the world everyday. Top executives and other positional leaders in the airport personnel, who usually lack knowledge or expertise in the above field, are not in a position to limit the freedom of air traffic controllers to lead from their follower roles. Thus, the choices people make in organizations to assume seemingly following roles must be respected and honored no less than the positional roles of the leader.

5.3 Considerations for Future Research

5.3.1 A New Term

If the reader agrees with the main premise of this article, then the depersonalized terms *leadship* and *followship* seem more accurately represent the relational process of leading and following. However, we have yet to find a unifying term in leadership scholarship that represents the *symbiotic* relationships of *leadship* and *followship* that are perceived as mutually beneficial, less commensal, and non-parasitic.¹⁷

5.3.2 A New Organization

Followers in today’s organizations have no freedom or flexibility to lead and leaders to follow. Both are given static roles to play in organizations. To give individuals freedom to choose to lead or follow creatively, or interchangeably shift their leading and following roles, requires a paradigm shift in what it means to be an organization. The current structure of modern corporations is like an “old skin”, that cannot contain the “new wine”. It will require a new way of thinking create and design new job descriptions, responsibilities, salaries, and benefits due to one’s shifting roles in the new organization. While John Lennon’s dream in his “Imagine” song was for a unified world with no religious, political,

¹⁶ See Plato’s *The Laws* in International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences by Popper (1968, p. 690b).

¹⁷ See symbiotic relationships or *symbiosis* in biology.

and possession divides, it seems worth to envision future organizations without leaders and followers, where men and women come together collaboratively to create and produce for the common good of the members of the group, society, and the world. This would require a collective or a group conscience higher than one's own. Is this attainable?

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