Followership: Exploring the Role of Trust and Surveillance in Hybrid Contexts

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Abstract

Challenging a leader-centric assumption, followership research appears to complement the missing half of mainstream leadership research by exploring the role of followers. The research now has examined the concept of trust, understanding how followers constitute new trusting relationships with leaders. However, such a contribution lacks a critical analysis, that is, how trust is actively constructed in their interactions with others. This study extends to consider power dynamics embedded within the trust relationships. By conducting an interpretive study, it suggests that trust is deeply intertwined with surveillance, both of which reproduce dynamic interactions between followers and leaders.

Followership is a much-debated topic. The research is developing rapidly, but it lacks a critical analysis (Collinson, 2006; 2017; Ford & Harding, 2015): while the studies have portrayed various followers' traits (e.g. Sy, 2010) and roles (e.g. Carsten et al. 2010, 2017), they merely shift the focus from individual leaders to followers, undervaluing how followers interact with others to shape these elements; hence, the mistakes of dualism, essentialism and romanticism of mainstream leadership studies may be repeated (Collinson, 2011). To release followers from such asymmetric relationships, power is a key lens through which followers are considered as living in organizations' structures and norms while simultaneously understanding, accepting, challenging and reproducing their relations with leaders (Collinson, 2006). Indeed, followership research has started to look at power that is portrayed as something individual followers possess; yet, it fails to understand the dynamic and relational nature of power to date (Ford & Harding, 2015).

To further analyze how followership research examines power, I focus on the concept of trust, which is increasingly concerned as a primary constituent of positive follower-leader relationships. Followers build and repair trust towards leaders so as to give better support to them (Chaleff, 2008). Hopper (2008) even claims that high degrees of trust to leaders can reduce the conflicts derived from perceived status. This is because trust can produce a charisma perception that makes followers to allow the leaders to be normatively influential (Hogg, 2008). Trusting relationship has been seen as the foundation of cooperation and positive organizational outcomes (Avolio & Reichard, 2008). Indeed, trust has been depicted as a desirable quality in relationships in social and organizational theories (e.g. Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Sievers, 2003); yet, overly relying on trust is risky, as it potentially wipes authority or asymmetric states out of trusting relationships. A growing number of management studies have started to explore trust's dark side or trust's levels (e.g. institutional trust), which offer a deeper understanding of power dynamics in trust (Skinner et al., 2013).

To widen the scope of this dynamic view on trust, my study explores a China's branch of finance outsourcing organization where financial assistants not just interact with managers and colleagues in the same workplace, but also collaborate with financial analysts across cities or countries. By responding to the call for exploring specific contexts of followership (Bligh, 2011), this study considers the hybrid contexts, that is, a physical context (with face-to-face interactions) complements with a non-physical context (without face-to-face interactions). This focus shift not just challenges followership studies emphasizing too much on a physical context, but also questions a dualist view in leadership studies that either considers physical or non-physical contexts. This combination of the two contexts can potentially provide a more nuanced understanding of follower dynamics. Concerning the research methodology, I adopt an interpretive perspective to understand participants' interpretations of their interaction experiences with each other. Thirty face-to-face and electronic interviews for the assistants, managers and analysts were conducted, and an inductive data analysis approach was employed to identify trust and surveillance as the two important themes. Because of the scope of this paper, data analysis as follows merely focuses on the interactions between the assistants and the analysts. A broader picture including the

interactions with the managers and colleagues will be present in the conference.

The empirical data demonstrates that trust and surveillance mutually enable each other to shape central aspects of power dynamics of followership. Specifically, active knowledge sharing processes allowed the assistants to develop trust towards their remote analysts; the analysts also fostered trust towards their assistants based on the successful cooperation. Yet, in the meanwhile the analysts took advantage of this trust to issue expectations and responsibility to the assistants. The assistants had to take on but felt stressful, and as a result, some of them became more aware of reducing discussions and engagements with their analysts. This high level of obligation caused the assistants to be unwilling to be vulnerable to the orders and instructions of the analysts. In other words, distrust was produced.

Moreover, trust and distrust are not the end of the story. Along with issuing trust towards the assistants, the analysts also exercised high levels of electronic surveillance on the assistants. Facing the expectations of constant availability on the emails and calls, the assistants employed both 'visibility' and 'invisibility' strategies. Some of them, for instance, pretended to be 'present' in the telephone meetings by saying 'yes' and 'ok', but drew pictures or did online shopping in the meanwhile; others chose an off-line mode in Communicator (an Office software) at noon to inform of their analysts that they were in lunch time. In these cases, they presented their 'visible' aspects to the analysts while they simultaneously made themselves 'invisible'.

Therefore, this study challenges a dualist assumption that privileges trust in the central analysis of followership dynamics and overlooks surveillance and control. This study is developing the view that power is embedded within the interplay between trust and surveillance. Power can be positive and productive, as trust serves as a 'lubricant' to improve followers' relationships with leaders; power can be also negative and oppressive, because trust can be a 'poison' to question the asymmetric relations. So as surveillance. It can be a powerful way of monitoring and controlling the assistants' behaviours; simultaneously it can be challenged and navigated by the assistants' strategic visibility and invisibility.