

TALLINN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

School of Business and Governance

Department of Business Administration

Anna Christina Reite

**REVERSING THE LENS: THE ROLE OF FOLLOWERS IN
BUILDING THE LEADER-FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP**

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Supervisor: Marii Haak, MA

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I hereby declare that I have compiled the thesis independently and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors have been properly referenced and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading. The document length is 15486 words from the introduction to the end of conclusion.

Anna Christina Reite

(signature, date)

Student code: 202100TVTM

Student e-mail address: annareite13@gmail.com

Supervisor: Marii Haak:

The paper conforms to requirements in force

.....

(signature, date)

Co-supervisor:

The paper conforms to requirements in force

.....

(signature, date)

Chairman of the Defence Committee:

Permitted to the defence

.....

(name, signature, date)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to advance the discussion of leadership as a process co-produced by both leaders and followers, and to expand the followership and leadership literature by providing detailed data concerning followers' impact on the leader and the leader-follower relationship. Most of our current theories of leadership as well as our approaches to the study of leadership are heavily focused on individuality and the assumption that leadership is a role or a behaviour, which if mastered, creates a top-down influence from leaders to followers, who in the process and context appear secondary. By seeing leadership as an act rather than a social process, we have ignored the underlying mechanisms and processes at the core of the leadership theory; the relationship between leaders and followers. To advance our leadership theories we now need to reverse the lens and start analysing how followers affect their leaders and the leader-follower relationship. This thesis shall open up additional doors in a new subdivision ready to be studied within the topic of leadership. The aim was to raise awareness regarding the responsibilities one has as a follower, present ideas on what can be taught in followership training, and bring forth the first hints on how followers in organisations affect leaders and the leader-follower relationship, both negatively and positively, and suggest topics worth studying more detailed at a larger scale. Through qualitative research involving the interviewing of a diverse group of leaders within organisations in Estonia, a collection of followers' behavioural traits and characteristics affecting leaders as well as the leader-follower relationship were identified. A total of 13 leaders were interviewed, males and females, representing eight different industries. Based on the data it was evident that followers do impact leaders on a personal level, hence the topic of followership is worth studying further. Most important among the list of topics to be researched at a larger scale according to the data gathered in this thesis are: values, trust, feedback, openness, honesty, respect, friendship, passivity, rivalry, negativity as well as clarity in roles and responsibility. If studied at a deeper and wider scale, these findings can have the potential to improve the leader-follower relationship, the leadership process and the organisational outcome.

Keywords: Followership, leadership, leaders, followers, leader-follower relationship, constructionist viewpoint

INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness and outcome of an organization is strongly dependent on how human resources are being utilized, and in today's modern business world, we are convinced that the potential of our corporations' success or failure, competitiveness or collapse is on the basis of how they are led. One common misconception about leaders is that they are heroes who will save our companies. As Rost (1991) states, a leader is being compared to "a saviorlike essence in a world that constantly needs saving". Our constant overemphasis on the development of better leaders is concerning because it makes us completely forget to appreciate the art of being a good follower.

Leadership has traditionally been conceptualised as a skill at an individual level, and within this tradition, leadership development has occurred primarily through training individual, primarily intrapersonal abilities, and skills (Barling et al. 1996). According to data from the Training Industry, the total amount of money spent by companies globally for insourced and outsourced leadership training activities reached a staggering 370.3 billion dollars in 2019 (Training Industry 2021). However, according to Barker (1997), the people who emerge from these training courses rarely become what one might define as good leaders. Is the current expenditure on leadership courses worth it for today's organisations? The truth is that many have a difficulty in defining leadership, and in differentiating the terms leader, leadership, and management (Barker 1997). If we do not know what leadership is, then how can we improve leadership? Developers of leadership training programs study the psychological traits of great leaders from the past and present, though unfortunately, these kinds of approaches often ignore the research showing leadership to be a rather complex interaction between designated leaders and the social and organizational environment (Fiedler 1996). Having such a leader-focused perspective is problematic for the advancement of research within the topic of leadership, because limiting the research to such easily observed leader behaviours, linked directly to the outcome, ignores the underlying mechanisms and processes at the core of the leadership theory; the relationship between leaders and their highly important followers (Lord, Brown 2001). Our romanticisation of leaders and our assumption that leadership is a role or a behaviour, which if mastered, creates a top-down influence from leaders to followers, who in the process and context appear secondary, is currently restricting us from optimising leadership in organisations today, and that is a big problem. Not optimising leadership will most

likely have a negative effect on the outcome which, as a result of our leader-focused perspective on leadership, will result in leaders being either blamed or praised unfairly. Clarifying the definitions of leadership, management, and leaders, which will be done in this thesis, is the first essential step towards the improvement of leadership. Justifying the role of followers in relation to leaders and the leadership process will elevate the importance of focusing on the followers' impact on the leader-follower relationship.

Leaders can be defined as individuals having a differential influence on the initiation, direction, and coordination of group activities, followership represents a willingness to defer to another in some way (Shamir 2007). A review of previous leadership literature reveals an array of different views on followers and followership. The stereotypical views of leaders and followers through the leader-centric lens see leaders as the motivating bodies that direct followers to action, towards the ultimate goals (Bass 1985), and followers as recipients of the leaders' influence who dutifully carry out the orders without resistance (Kelley 1988). These stereotypical views on the roles of leaders and followers can possibly be the sources of our continual confusion with regard to the importance of followership and how followership relates to leadership. The newly emerging constructionist approach sees leadership and followership as co-constructed roles in social and relational interactions between individuals, and it believes that the process of leadership can only occur when leadership influence attempts or identity claims are met, at the other end, with followership granting behaviours (DeRue, Ashford 2010). This thesis takes the constructionist viewpoint with the belief that followership is worth studying just as much as leadership, and by seeing leadership as a social relationship co-produced by both leaders and followers.

Even though our history is filled with perfect examples of followers who have helped and supported their leaders in reaching their goals, be they good or bad, the subject of followership itself doubtlessly has a lack of inclusion in research and literature. For all content published on Google by January 2022, the word "followership" provides 1 240 000 results, while the word "leadership" provides 2 880 000 000 results. One of the main causes for our lack of focus on followership could be the fact that from an early age we are urged to be leaders, and we are given the view that being a follower is a passive, submissive and subordinate role, and that followers are somehow worth less, when in reality no organized effort can succeed or be sustained without followers (Blackshear 2004). Without their followers, leaders such as Hitler, Napoleon, Osama bin Laden and Mao Zedong would have just been men with grand ambitions. One could suggest that

the strength of a leader lies in the followership. As Maxwell (2012) says, “he who thinks he leads, but has no followers, is only taking a walk”.

Therefore, instead of trying to solely build individual leaders by training selected skills and abilities, we now need to approach the process of leadership through a complementary perspective by seeing leadership as a social process that is influenced by everyone in the team (Barker 1997). In this thesis, the theory that leadership is fundamentally a group process has been brought forward, and by doing so it not only highlights followers as a key piece for the development of leadership, but also brings forth the fact that no analysis of leadership is complete without the study of followership. By seeing followers and leaders together as co-producers of leadership, the nature of the relationship between the leader and the followers has been viewed as jointly influenced by the behaviour and characteristics of both of them, and the consequences of the leadership in the end depends on the nature of the relationship. In this way, leadership is conceptualized as an effect rather than a cause (Drath 1998). To get a comprehensive understanding of the leadership process, and to improve the leadership process, all variables in the framework need simultaneous attention. Much more attention has been given to the leaders’ influence on followers and on the relationship, hence why it is now necessary to reverse the lens and start analysing how followers affect the leader and the leader-follower relationship. The aim of this thesis is to raise awareness regarding the responsibilities one has as a follower, present ideas on what can be taught in followership training and bring forth the first hints on how followers in organisations affect leaders and the leader-follower relationship, both negatively and positively, and suggest topics worth studying more detailed at a larger scale. If studied at a more detailed and larger scale, generalised conclusions could be drawn, and those conclusions could be used to develop followership training enabling followers to become better followers, and help leaders find the right followers, which could potentially have a big impact on the leadership process and the outcome of an organisation. In addition, it could decrease the number of leaders blamed unfairly as a result of poor outcomes caused by their followers’ shortcomings. While the data from this thesis cannot be generalised, it can provide followers with valuable details concerning the responsibility their roles might involve. A qualitative approach was used to provide answers to the following three research questions:

1. What is the role of followers in impacting the leader and the leader-follower relationship positively through a leader’s perspective?
2. What is the role of followers in impacting the leader and the leader-follower relationship negatively through a leader’s perspective?

3. What types of events, actions, or forms of interaction by a follower could cause a leader to question and reassess their relationship?

The theoretical background will provide a base for understanding the role of leaders and followers, as well as the importance of their relationship in relation to the outcome of leadership. Followers have had many different roles within leadership literature, and these will be reviewed to bring forth the view of followers used in this research. Gaps discovered in the literature will guide us to the research questions, which we hope to answer in the data analysis and conclusion following the qualitative data gathering process.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The following chapter will give an overview of the role followership has had through human history, its role in the study of leadership, and its role in the leadership process. An overview of the different roles that followership has had within the study of leadership will be presented, and based on that, a theoretical foundation will be established for the thesis based on the view on followership considered appropriate by the author. In addition, we will outline what is thought to be the underlying mechanism and process at the core of the leadership theory; the relationship between leaders and their followers. At the end of the review, visible gaps within the literature, and topics lacking research will be highlighted and brought forward to the development of the research questions.

1.1. Defining leadership and followership

While leadership can be defined as individuals having a differential influence on the initiation, direction, and coordination of group activities, followership represents a willingness to defer to another in some way (Shamir 2007). DeRue and Ashford (2010) describe the leadership process as individuals granting leader and follower identities in their social interactions. Townsend and Gebhart (1997) define followership as “a process in which subordinates recognize their responsibility to comply with the orders of leaders and take appropriate action consistent with the situation to carry out those orders to the best of their ability”. In their article “The romance of leadership and the social construction of followership”, Uhl-Bien and Pillai (2007) state that “if leadership involves actively influencing others, then followership involves allowing oneself to be influenced”.

It is important to note that followership itself is not simply the same as employee behaviour. Likewise, leadership is not the same as the behaviour of a manager. Followership is the characteristics, behaviours, and methods of people acting in relation to their leaders. It is not the same as general employee behaviour, which also means that the term follower is not the same as an employee. For a construct to qualify itself as followership it must be both conceptualized and operationalized, either in relation to leaders or the leadership process, and/or in the context of individuals identifying themselves in follower positions (Collinson 2006). Management involves planning, building, and directing organizational systems to accomplish missions and goals, while

leadership involves focusing on change by establishing a direction and aligning people while motivating and inspiring them (Wajdi 2017).

Hollander and Webb (1955) have drawn attention to the difficulty of defining the term “followership” given that one’s conception of the term might vary depending on whether being approached from the perspective of a follower or a leader. Followers and leaders having different views on the role or characteristics of a follower was also apparent in Lonnes and Åfeldt’s (2012) study on the social constructions of followership. Based on their research, while describing the role of a follower, codes such as “follow decisions once made” were more common among the leaders’ perspectives, while the word “empathy” (making the life of the leader easier) was more frequent among the followers themselves. In 2010, Carsten et al. conducted interviews with employees in various industries to examine how these individuals socially constructed their roles as followers. A qualitative methodology was used to get a more detailed insight into what followership meant to those acting in such roles. What the data revealed was big differentiation between the socially constructed definitions of the follower role. While 39% of the definitions were strongly aligned with traditional and passive descriptions putting emphasis on the importance of taking orders and deferring to the leader’s knowledge, others saw their roles as more proactive and participative emphasising the importance of expressing oneself, offering input, and also influencing and challenging the leaders.

1.1.1. Why is followership forgotten

One of the main reasons why followership has been forgotten is that we are urged to be leaders. We should not just follow along, we should not be servants, we should think for ourselves and not let anyone get in our way. From childhood we are given the view that being a follower is a passive, submissive and subordinate role, and that followers are somehow worth less, when in reality no organized effort can succeed or be sustained without followers (Blackshear 2004). Without followers, military brigades would not be able to accomplish their missions. Religions present in the world today would not have been able to grow and stay sustained without parishioners. What would the outcome of a team of football players be if all team members coached? Organisations are on a constant hunt for their magic bullet for improving the outcome and beating rivals. New visionary CEOs are hired with the hope of their magic dust turning the spaceship around back towards the sky. New marketing plans and strategies are implemented to turn the business goals into sales. New management courses are organised for all team leaders to get better at motivating their teams. According to Meindl et al. (1985), it seems as if we have developed highly

romanticized, heroic views of leaders, what leaders do, what they are able to accomplish, and the general effects they have on our lives. Based on these views, we see leaders as being able to singlehandedly determine the fate and fortunes of our organisations. But in reality, group success will occur from the combined efforts of both leaders and followers. Followers' contribution to organisational productivity is indisputable (Blackshear 2004). Lord and Brown (2001) argue that having such a leader focused perspective is highly problematic for the advancement of research within the topic of leadership and management, because limiting the research to such easily observed leader behaviours linked directly to the outcome ignores the underlying mechanisms and processes at the core of the leadership theory.

1.1.2. Perfecting the art of followership

Blackshear (2004) has outlined four traditional institutions that have perfected the art of followership: religion, military, politics, and sports. The followership foundation in religion is based on discipleship, stewardship, and service to others. The consequences of a void in followership within religion would be a decrease in the spread of the religion, followed by potential collapse. Military followership is built on adherence to the Chain of Command and following orders. If failing to do so then the authority would not prevail, the orders would be questioned, and the discipline would dissipate. Followership within politics is built on loyalty to one's party. If there was no loyalty, then the political ideologies and strongholds would erode and crumble. Being a good follower in sports involves putting the team above oneself, otherwise, the team would not excel, and only individualism would exist.

1.2. Views on followership in leadership literature

A systematic review of the leadership literature reveals an assembly of different views on followers and followership through history; leader-centric, follower-centric, and relational views, all of which discuss followers but not necessarily followership, followed by the newly emerging views, role-based and constructionist.

With its focus on the leaders, the leader-centric approach has contributed to a view of leaders as the power-wielding performers who affect the group and organizational outcomes (Yukl, Van Fleet, 1992). The stereotypical views of leaders and followers through the leader-centric lens see leaders as the motivating bodies that direct followers to action, towards the ultimate goals (Bass

1985), and followers as recipients of the leaders' influence who dutifully carry out the orders without resistance (Kelley 1988). These stereotypical views on the roles of leaders and followers can possibly be the sources of our continual confusion with regard to the importance of followership and how followership relates to leadership.

The newly emerging role-based and constructionist viewpoints are distinct from earlier approaches in that they privilege the roles of the followers in the leadership process and identify followership as a topic worth studying just as much as leadership. The constructionist approach sees leadership and followership as co-constructed roles in social and relational interactions between individuals, and it believes that the process of leadership can only occur when leadership influence attempts or identity claims are met, at the other end, with followership granting behaviours (DeRue, Ashford 2010). Followership is herewith not tied to a specific role, but a behaviour. DeRue and Ashford's view circles around the concept of leadership and followership being co-constructed in an interactive and reciprocal identity "claiming" and "granting" process (DeRue, Ashford 2010). Shamir (2007) on the other hand refers to his approach as "co-production", in which leadership is jointly produced by leaders and followers by forming effective relationships that help them co-produce the leadership outcomes.

According to Shamir (2007), followers have owned five different roles within leadership theories: (1) followers as recipients of a leader's influence, (2) followers as the moderators of a leader's influence, (3) followers as the substitutes for leadership, (4) followers as the constructors of leadership, and (5) followers as the leaders themselves in self-leadership or shared leadership.

Followers as the recipients of their leader's influence

In the traditional leadership theories, the leader's traits and behavioural style are viewed as independent variables, while the followers' behavioural styles, attitudes, and perceptions are seen as the dependent variables. These theories are behavioural, arguing that a leader's behaviour (e.g. articulating a vision, encouraging innovation and creativity, and setting a personal example) affects the followers' behaviours and attitudes (e.g. work effort and commitment to the organization). According to this view, followers do not play an active role in the organization's leadership process (Shamir, 2007).

Followers as moderators of leader impact

While traditional theories consider followers as empty vessels waiting to be led, or even transformed by the leader (Goffee, Jones 2001), these theories acknowledge that the leaders' influence may be affected and moderated by the characteristics of the followers. Known as "contingency theories" they state that leaders' influence on their followers' performance and attitudes depends on the characteristics of the followers. Business and management psychologist Fred Fiedler (1967) believed that a person's leadership style is the result of his or her experiences in life and is herewith very difficult to change. He also argued that it is more important to match a person's leadership style with a particular situation, rather than trying to change the leadership style. He also states that different groups require a different relationship by which the leader wields power and influence. Fiedler's so-called Contingency Model states that there is no specific style of leadership that is the best (Fiedler 1967).

Followers as substitutes for leadership

Kerr and Jermier's (1978) substitutes for leadership theory assigns followers a more dominant role in the leadership process by suggesting that certain characteristics among the followers can neutralise the need for leadership. The theory emphasizes followers' previous experience, knowledge, and training, and implies that these characteristics can potentially provide them with all the needed guidance, motivation and support needed, as long as they are highly motivated and have the internalised norms that support the task performance.

Followers as constructors of leadership

Followers are given a much more central role in theories that look upon leadership as something socially or cognitively constructed by followers. According to some of these theories, leadership is largely the result of attributing our wishes, ideas, fantasies, and desire to another person. In addition, it involves the process of responding to another person as if he or she was one's parent, or another significant individual from one's childhood. One becomes attached to the leader and obeys them, not because of the leader's personality or behaviour, but because the leader symbolises a parent, who can provide psychological safety and reduce one's anxiety. (Shamir. 2007) A social identity theory of leadership by Hogg and van Knippenberg (2003) proposes that the emergence and social acceptance of a leader depend on the extent to which the leader represents and embodies the central followers' characteristics, values, norms, and aspirations.

Followers as leaders

The theories of shared, distributed, or dispersed leadership offer an even more radical perspective on the role of followers in the leadership process. Even though there remains a distinction between the roles of followers and leaders, the theories suggest that there should be no fixed roles, and that everyone should be regarded as both leaders and followers. Through this perspective, instead of being looked upon as a role, leadership is considered as a function or activity that can be shared among the members of an organisation or a group. According to Manz and Henry (1987), these self-managed groups of employees are characterised by their attempt to create a high degree of behavioural control and autonomy in decision-making at the work-group level. They also state that when the employees become members of such self-managing groups, they tend to define their job roles more in terms of their value as contributions to the whole group's task, rather than in relation to the description of one specific job role.

As Shamir (2007) states, leadership (which does not arise without followership) is a universal phenomenon evident in both human and non-human societies. All the commonalities found across implicit leadership theories around the globe, through different cultures, suggest that leadership (and followership) is a basic feature of humans. While collective action sometimes can occur without a leader and followers, it is rather uncommon, especially for collectives that exist for a longer period. Whether or not one thinks that leadership can be shared or substituted depends on whether or not one believes leadership is a function or activity, because functions and activities can be shared by group members or substituted by other arrangements. (Shamir, 2007) However, if one similarly to Shamir (2007) sees leadership as a social relationship, characterised by disproportionate social influence, then leadership cannot be shared or substituted. Leadership exists only when someone exerts disproportionate noncoercive influence on others, an influence that is greater than that of the other members of the organization. Such influence and the relationship between leaders and followers cannot be shared or substituted.

1.3. Followers as co-producers of leadership

The view through which followership has been approached in this thesis goes along Shamir's (2007) path of followers as co-producers of leadership and its consequences. Leadership is a phenomenon that emerges in the interaction between leaders and followers, and because leadership is a social relationship, both sides of the relationship (leaders and followers) contribute to the

formation, nature, and consequences of it. Figure 1 is a model that illustrates the connection between the leaders, followers, and the outcome of their relationship. The behaviour and characteristics of the followers are influenced by the leader, whose behaviour and characteristics are influenced by the followers. The nature of the relationship between the leader and the followers is jointly influenced by the behaviour and characteristics of both of them, and the consequences of the leadership in the end depends on the nature of the relationship. Both leaders and followers are herewith seen as co-producers of leadership. To get a comprehensive understanding of the leadership process, and to improve the leadership process, all variables in the framework need simultaneous attention. Much more attention has been given to the leaders' influence on followers, hence why we now need to reverse the lens and start analysing how the behaviour and characteristics of followers affect the leader, the relationship, and the outcome of leadership. In this thesis we will not see leaders as casual agents and followers as recipients of leader influence, instead, we will see the followers as the casual agents and dig into how their behaviour affects leaders and the relationship between leaders and followers.

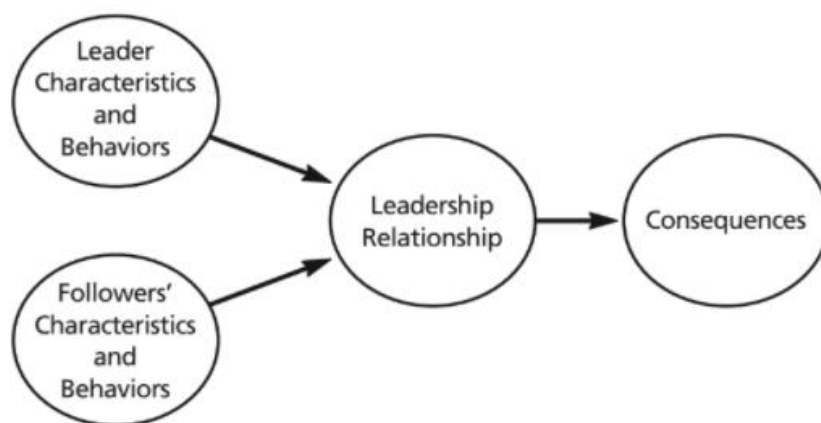


Figure 1. The connection between leaders and followers

Source: Shamir (2007)

1.3.1. The leader-follower relationship

Social relationships, be they good or bad, permeate every aspect of human life. We are born into relationships, we live our lives in relationships, and even after our death, the effects of our relationships survive in the lives of the living, reverberating throughout the tissue of their relationships. Relationships thus are the context in which most human behaviour occurs (Berscheid 1999).

Relationships also involve culturally informed cognitive models that coordinate interaction, and a shared understanding of the rules and norms governing the social transactions (Fiske, Haslam 1996). Going back to the military, which according to Blackshear (2004) has perfected the art of followership, what might be a contributor to their excellence is the relationship, which Fiske and Haslam (1996) refer to as an asymmetrical and transitive relationship within the hierarchy in which there is a shared understanding of rank, precedence, responsibility, and the meanings of salutes, flags, and bars on the shoulder of a uniform. The pragmatic meaning of the bars on one's shoulder are not attributes of you as an individual, they are characteristics of the way certain relationships are collectively organised in a culture. Although certain relationships may be described in terms of the roles, such as a leader and a follower, these terms do not reduce relational mediators to individual attributes. An individual may be a "follower", but only in relation to certain other individuals in certain contexts (Fiske, Haslam 1996). That takes us back to our business culture overlooking the art of followership: people need to be reminded of the fact that one's role as a follower does not downgrade one's qualities as an individual, the role is just a part of the characteristics of the way certain relationships in an organisation need to be built for the process of leadership to work.

Followership is an under-explored source of variance in the leadership process (Lord et al. 1999) and according to Howell and Shamir (2005) that is especially noticeable within the field of charismatic leadership. Charismatic leadership is a topic of much debate. According to research, it is the leadership theory that has received the most attention from scholars in the new millennium (Dinh et al. 2014). Charismatic leaders are thought to be able to transform organisations by motivating the members to higher levels of performance and commitment by inspiring them with an appealing vision that is highly contrary to the currently unsatisfying status quo (Fragouli 2018). According to Riggo (2012), charismatic leaders are often called for in times of crisis, or when in the need of change, and they exhibit exceptional devotion and expertise within their fields. These leaders are individuals with a clear vision in business or politics and they have the ability to engage with a large audience. Fiedler (1996) describes charismatic leaders as individuals who are committed to their particular vision and course of action. One major leader whose charisma has been pointed out as one of his main assets is Nazi Party leader Adolf Hitler. Hitler telling millions of Germans that they were Aryans and herewith racially "better" and "special" people in comparison to everyone else, is something that built a strong charismatic connection between him and his followers.

More newly emerging research on leadership suggests that the variance in charisma does not solely depend on the exceptional leader but also on the relationship between the leader and the followers (Balkundi & Kilduff 2005; Howell & Shamir 2005; Klein & House, 1995). Meaning, followers are no longer just being seen as flammable material waiting to be ignited by their charismatic leaders, but leaders and followers are seen as coming together to form a dynamic relationship, which influences the perception and resulting benefits of the charismatic leadership (Campbell et al. 2008). Even though the word “charisma” was originally derived from the Greek word “charismata” meaning “gift from the gods” (Campbell et al. 2008), agreement has appeared among researchers suggesting that rather than being a gift of the gods, charismatic leadership is built through the relationship between leaders and followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995; Howell & Shamir 2005; Klein & House, 1995).

According to Maxwell (1998), the true measure of leadership is influence. Influence is developed by the quality of the relationship one has with another, and if a follower perceives the leader-follower relationship as positive then he or she might begin to take more ownership within the sphere of influence and go beyond his or her job classification role to achieve the desired goals (Fisk, Friesen 2012).

Ian Kershaw’s (2000) biography of Adolf Hitler reveals that Hitler did not look upon himself as a great leader in the beginning. It was not until later that he started to view himself as that great leader of all time, and that change in the perception he had of his own leadership was most likely a result of the behaviour and attitude of his followers, and the feedback he got from them. That just shows what an effect the style of followership has on the leader, on the relationship, and the ultimate consequences, which in the case of the Nazis were horrific and resulted in the death of millions of people. Considering the impact these followers have had on their charismatic leader and eventually the outcome of the leadership process, it seems straightforward that the study of leadership should include the studying of the followers in question.

Another big focus of leadership research is that of positive emotions, possibly as a result of an underlying assumption that leaders’ emotions are directly transferred to followers. Leadership courses herewith often promote the importance of motivating one’s team and giving positive feedback. And that does make sense as empirical evidence and theoretical arguments do identify the regulation of emotions among group members as an important function within leadership (George 2000). Some studies even indicate that the emotions expressed during a leader’s

interaction with the audience can be more important than the content of the message itself (Newcombe, Ashanasy 2002). However, because leadership is a social relationship, one would assume that the emotions within the team are not only transmitted from the leader to the followers, but also from the followers to the leader. In 2002, Dasborough and Ashkanasy proposed that team members who experience positive emotions are overall more likely to attribute positive intentions to leaders. Overall, to better understand the effects that the expression of emotions has on the relationship between leaders and followers, we not only need to focus on how leaders' expression of emotions affects followers, but also on how followers' expression of emotions affects leaders.

By seeing leadership as a social relationship, with followers as co-producers, rather than passive receivers of their leader's influence, this research puts focus on how followers affect the relationship between the leader and his or her followers. If charismatic leadership is the most effective style for the leader, how can followers, through their leaders' opinions, contribute to the relationship?

1.3.2. Recent research

While the study of the leadership process and the relationship between leaders and followers has almost entirely focused on how leaders influence their followers, a recognition of the need for less leader-centric perspectives has increased, and there have been some researchers during the last few years who have reversed the lens, including Ahmad et al. (2020) who through their studies have concluded that leaders can claim moral credit for their followers' organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB), which then frees them to behave unethically. OCB can be defined as discretionary and non-required contributions by members to the organization that employs them (Organ 2015). Their findings also indicate that the effect of the followers' OCB is exceptionally noticeable when the leaders feel narcissistic or when they closely identify with their followers. Shamir (2007) states that certain relationships between leaders and followers may "over empower" the leader because of all the adoration, idolisation and unquestioning obedience from the follower, and these exaggerated appraisals of the followers may be internalised by the leader, causing him or her to develop an illusion of omnipotence, which can eventually lead to the abandonment of ethical restraints on the use of power. According to Salas-Vallina (2020), there is still a very limited understanding of the interactions between leaders and followers in terms of workplace dynamics and social contingencies.

A study by Wilson and Cunliffe in 2021 concluded that trust is implicated in the leader's and followers' interpretations of the actions, and the intentions of each other, and that it develops in far more complex and nuanced ways than what the current studies allow for. According to Wilson and Cunliffe (2021) trust is an important element within the leader-follower relationship, and it may develop or be disrupted over time as the leaders and followers make ongoing assessments relating to the nature of their relationship. In addition, they stated that friendship and emotions are important influences on the relationship process. What Wilson and Cunliffe (2021) ultimately drew attention to is the need for more qualitative studies that examine the nature of trust and relationship quality. What types of events, actions, comments, or forms of interaction could cause a team member to question and reassess the relationship? This thesis has taken the first steps toward answering those questions and provides more qualitative data concerning the relationship between leaders and followers.

2. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The following chapter will present the research design, sampling method, as well as the data collecting and analysis method used in the research. It will also provide an overview of the level of quality of the research.

2.1. Development of research questions

By seeing leadership as a social relationship co-produced by both leaders and followers, the literature review has revealed a rather big gap within the study of followership, and the leadership process that clearly lacks research: how do followers and their actions, comments, behaviour, and form of interaction affect the leader-follower relationship through a leader's perspective? This gap will be the foundation for the construction of three research questions, all of which will hopefully provide valuable qualitative data on the subject of how to possibly improve followership, the relationship between leaders and followers, and ultimately the outcome of the leadership process.

Research questions:

1. What is the role of followers in impacting the leader and the leader-follower relationship positively through a leader's perspective?
2. What is the role of followers in impacting the leader and the leader-follower relationship negatively through a leader's perspective?
3. What types of events, actions, or forms of interaction by a follower could cause a leader to question and reassess their relationship?

2.2. Research design

Leadership is a complex phenomenon that operates under multiple levels of analysis, it takes over a substantial period of time, and it involves multiple moderating factors. Unfortunately though, a lot of the research that has been done on leadership has ignored the cumulated effects of transitional processes, such as one's emotions and thoughts, which can fundamentally alter one's behaviour as a leader, and the leadership process (Dinh et al. 2014). People's emotions and thoughts, which is what this research focuses on, are difficult to group, categorise and generalise. One's thoughts and feelings can usually not just be described with the use of a single word either.

A structured survey is not sufficient to cover all the different emotions and thoughts a leader might have with regard to how a follower can affect their relationship. Therefore, a qualitative research approach with semi-structured interviews was used to get an insight into leaders' thoughts on how followers affect them and their relationships. All interview questions are presented in Appendix 1. As revealed in the literature review, the theory of followers as co-producers of leadership is rather new, there is still confusion among people as to how followership relates to leadership, and many still approach leadership through a leader-centric view. Having qualitative interviews provided the opportunity to explain and discuss these theories with the interviewees if needed.

2.2.1. Formulating interview questions

Interview questions one, three, and four (concerning the interviewee's time in a leadership position, whether he or she enjoys it, and how many there are in the team) are not directly relevant to the research questions, they were added to get the discussion flowing and make the interviewee feel more relaxed. These three questions are easy to answer, and starting at ease did hopefully make it easier for the interviewee to open up more in the coming questions. Question number two, concerning what being a leader means to them and what it involves, was added just to get an insight into how the interviewees perceive the role of a leader. Because, as stated by Barker (1997), many have a difficulty in defining leadership, and in differentiating the terms leader, leadership, and management. The question is not directly linked to the research questions, but it might bring out valuable details to followers concerning how leaders perceive their own roles and what their intentions are. The following three questions introduced the interviewee to the topic of leader-follower relationships. Questions 8-16 required more thinking, and they generated detailed answers, providing valuable data to the research. In the end, the interviewees had the chance to add any other thoughts relevant to the topic. The word "good" is subjective, and leaders have different opinions as to what a "good" relationship looks like, which is why the interviewees were asked to describe a "good" leader-follower relationship through their own opinion. All interview questions are presented in Appendix 1.

2.3. Sample and sampling

This study seeks to get an insight into leaders' thoughts concerning how their followers affect them on a personal level, their leadership practice and the relationship between them. To increase the authenticity, and to provide a wider scope of data, the research fairly represents different

viewpoints among members of the social setting by including interviewees of different genders, ages, and industries. There is also variance in the number of followers the interviewees have, as well as the number of years of experience they have as leaders. The interviewees all work in Estonia, though their nationality is not limited to Estonian, as such limitations would prevent the sample from being a reasonable representation of Estonia's international workforce. An upper-age limit of 60 and a lower-age limit of 30 were set to reduce the potential differences between generations.

The sampling method used was a mix of convenience and snowball. Suitable and available representatives within the network were first contacted, and they were asked to nominate further possible interviewees known to them. The lack of understanding and prior discussion of the topic within the public lowers the risk of selection bias. To prevent the interviewees from overanalysing their thoughts and not providing honest answers, and to get a better grasp of the reality, information concerning the constructive view on leadership was not shared with the interviewees before the interview.

The difference between managers and leaders was taken into consideration in the interviewee selection process. The interviewees' work roles did not just involve the monitoring of hours worked, or approval of salary slips. Their roles involved establishing a direction for the team and aligning people while inspiring them to work towards a common goal.

2.4. Data collection

The interviews taking place offline were held in quiet rooms in which the interviewees would feel comfortable and relaxed, possibly at their office, or at the university. The interviews were all held in English. To cultivate trust, calmness, purity, depth and stability, the interviewer did clothing-wise stick to a navy blue and white colour palette, and an outfit style-wise suitable for the place at which the interview took place. To build trust and a relaxed atmosphere, making it easier for the interviewee to open up, and to improve the engagement, offline in-person interviews were considered more suitable. However, the world is changing at a rapid pace, current global circumstances had also set limitations, and one has to adapt to that. Therefore, some of the interviews were kept online.

Before the first interview question, the terms “leader” and “follower” were briefly explained to the interviewee. In addition, the interviewees were reminded that during the interview they are not expected to prove their own leadership competence.

A total of 13 interviews were executed, eight of which were held offline, and five of which were held online. The list of interviewees consisted of eight males and five females, which was an appropriate gender balance for individuals in leadership positions in Estonia in 2022. The age range among the interviewees was 30-56. The industries represented by the interviewees were as follows: maritime, forest, higher education, energy, banking, aviation, education and public sector. The list positions or titles among the interviewees included founders, CEOs, CFOs, export managers, trade directors, team leads within banking, professors, development managers, and members of management boards. The number of years of experience as a leader ranged from only a couple of years to over 30 years. The number of followers each leader had ranged from less than 5 to over 100. All interviewees were given a random number ranging from 1 to 13. The interviewee number is not correlated to age, gender, industry, title nor the order in which the interviewees were interviewed.

2.5. Data analysis

Content analysis was used as the research method for making valid inferences from the data gathered to the context, with the purpose of providing new knowledge, and insights, as well as a guide to what topics need further research. The content gathered was divided into five sections: a general analysis of the interview process, an analysis of leaders’ views on good relationships, leaders’ views on weak relationships, leaders’ thoughts on what can make them question relationships, and a summary of how followers, based on the data gathered, can take responsibility for the relationship. The data within each of these sections was analysed using an inductive approach as there were little or no predetermined answers or frameworks. The data itself was used to derive the structure of the analysis. The analysis was not structured in correspondence to the interview questions due to overlapping data. The depth to which the words and topics brought up by the interviewees were analysed and discussed depended on their predominance.

2.6. Research quality

The external reliability is partly hard to meet because, as LeCompte and Goetz (1982) state, it is impossible to “freeze” the social settings and circumstances of the study. All organisations are unique, so are all leaders and followers, however, because human behaviour is never static, no study can ever be replicated exactly, regardless of the methods and designs employed (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). The aim of this research was not to bring forth generalised ways through which all followers in Estonia could contribute to the leader-follower relationship and to the leadership process, but to bring about the first hints on how followers in organisations affect leaders and the leader-follower relationship, both negatively and positively, and suggest topics worth studying more detailed at a larger scale. The sample is small, which unfortunately decreases the validity, and it concerns thoughts and emotions, which makes it difficult to generalise, though the aim was not to generalise.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The following chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the interviewees' responses to the interview questions presented in Appendix 1, not just in the context of their explicit answers to the questions provided, but also in regards to how they answered the questions. The content collected has been compared to the information gathered in the literature review.

3.1. General analysis of the data

During one of the first interviews it was rather apparent that the interviewee felt a need to prove his/her knowledge and competence as a leader, and also to come off as what in today's modern-world society might be considered a good leader. Instead of directly giving his/her thoughts on how the followers affected him/her, the interviewee worked his/her way around the questions, answering what he/she does for the followers to feel like the relationship is good. Even though one's automatic reaction to that might be that the interviewee is an amazingly caring person and a type of leader the world needs more of, it does build on the theory of us seeing leadership through the leader-centric perspective, it builds on our stereotypical view of leadership, as well as the theory of us being too focused on leaders today and having heroic views of leaders, what leaders do, what they can accomplish, and the general effects they have on our lives. We have become so focused on how leaders affect followers that we are almost unable to even consider whether and how the followers affect the leaders. The interviewee was more focused on how the followers perceived his/her behaviour than how he/she perceived the followers' behaviour. At that point, it was evident that to gather qualitative data concerning the interviewees' thoughts and emotions on how followers affect them, they would have to be reminded, at the beginning of the interview, that it is not a job interview, their competence as leaders are not being questioned. The interviewer is their friend, and she already trusts the fact that they are great leaders, but no matter how good of a leader one is, we are still humans, and humans have feelings and emotions, and they do get affected by their surroundings.

Despite this, some of the interviewees, especially Interviewee 11, did seem to have difficulty in reversing the lens and reviewing how the followers affect them and their relationship, both positively and negatively. Answers from the interviewees could include phrases such as "I always approve the vacations", "I don't make decisions without discussing them", "I'm not the kind of

person who is running away” and “I always use the word “we””. While analysing the interviewees’ answers in relation to gender or age was not part of this research, it was noted that the males spoke more about their own leadership style and their private past in comparison to the females, while the females were more open to pointing out small details that bothered them in specific individuals, events or in the leader-follower relationship. Females spoke more about relationships at an individual level, while males spoke more about relationships at a group level.

Interviewee 1, Interviewee 8 and Interviewee 9 all mentioned that they don’t like to use terms such as “subordinate”, “follower” or “blue collar”, because they tend to have a negative connotation, which can even reduce the person in that role. That takes us back to what was mentioned in sub-chapter 1.1.1. concerning the fact that from childhood we are given the view that being a follower is a passive, submissive and subordinate role, and that followers are somehow worth less, when in reality no organized effort can succeed or be sustained without followers. As mentioned in the literature review, people need to be reminded that one’s role as a follower does not downgrade one’s qualities as an individual, the role is just a part of the characteristics of the way certain relationships in an organisation need to be built for the process of leadership to work.

When asked how long he/she has been a leader, Interviewee 11 mentioned that there is always the question of whether one is a leader or a manager, and that corresponds with the theory of many having difficulty in differentiating the terms leader, leadership, and management. Interviewee 10 on the other hand seemed to have some kind of clue regarding the difference between the term “leader” and “manager”, as he/she mentioned that he/she started as a manager, but then step by step moved into the position of a leader.

3.1.2. Leaders’ view on what the role of a leader involves

Common among the interviewees’ perceptions of what the role of a leader involves was that of helping people grow. Though, as mentioned by Interviewee 8, helping followers grow is only possible if they want to grow, because some prefer to stay where they are. And that corresponds with the statement mentioned in part 1.1. that “if leadership involves actively influencing others, then followership involves allowing oneself to be influenced”. If a follower does not allow himself or herself to grow under the influence of the leader, then the leadership process, specifically involving that of helping people grow, is not working. Based on that, one could say that leaders cannot be expected to solely take the responsibility of helping their followers grow, the followers need to recognise their responsibility in growing as well. What was also mentioned by several

interviewees was that of getting the maximum out of the followers and/or the team so that, as stated by Interviewee 5, the outcome is bigger than the sum of its parts.

Other words mentioned by the interviewees were “goals”, “organising”, “policies” and “inspiring”. Interviewee 10 mentioned the process of setting values and finding people who are interconnected to those values. “Values” was a rather popular word among the interviewees’ answers and is discussed further in section 3.2.4.. Interviewee 11 mentioned that the expectations of a leader differ between organisations; in some organisations being a “leader” involves doing quality checks and adding signatures to paperwork, while in other organisations it involves building things from scratch, building processes and creating policies. Doing quality checks and approving paperwork by adding one’s signature would, according to the literature review, be more of a management role, though as mentioned, many have difficulty in differentiating the roles of managers and leaders. According to Interviewee 3, the most valuable part of being a leader involves being a people’s servant, because without followers there are no leaders, so the greatest assets of a leader are the followers.

3.2. Leaders’ views on good leader-follower relationships

3.2.1. How leaders describe a “good” leader-follower relationship

“Trust” is a word that was mentioned by nearly all of the interviewees, and that correlates with the conclusions of recent research of trust being an important element within the leader-follower relationship. Interviewee 5 referred to trust as knowing that the followers will put their utmost effort into the job, and not having to fear that the followers are lying or not telling the whole story. Interviewee 8 mentioned that relationships built on trust, together with respect and collegiality, do improve the outcome. In addition, trust is an important element in the development of an open relationship. As mentioned by Interviewee 1, we often hide failure, but if there is a certain amount of trust in a relationship then we will open up and admit that there was a learning curve. Interviewee 11 specified that trust refers to one as a leader knowing that if a follower says that he or she needs to go to the dentist, then you don’t feel the need to ask the follower to show his or her teeth the following day.

Another common word among the interviewees’ descriptions of a “good” relationship between a follower and a leader was the word “open”. Interviewee 1, Interviewee 13 and Interviewee 9 all

described an open relationship as one in which people do not have to be afraid of speaking up and asking questions. Even though the interviewees referred to openness from the followers' side "they have the courage to tell me if something is wrong" (Interviewee 9), and not from their side, it seemed like the interviewees got a good feeling from knowing that their followers felt comfortable enough to be open. Meaning, reflecting one's trust in the leader, as a follower, by speaking up and asking questions could make the relationship more "good" from a leader's perspective. Interviewee 6 mentioned openness through the context of taking up problems if they are occurring, and trying to solve them together. Interviewee 3 did not directly mention the word "open" or "openness", though he/she did point out that of there being no obstacles in communicating with each other as something that would contribute to a better relationship. No fear of approaching each other and talking about problems.

One word mentioned by four interviewees, while asked to describe a good relationship, was the word "respect". When asked to describe in more detail as to what reflects respect, Interviewee 8 mentioned that he/she does not only analyse how the followers behave towards him/her, but also how they treat other followers. In addition, Interviewee 8 pointed out that very simple gestures such as saying "thank you" or "good morning" are ways of showing respect. Interviewee 5 mentioned that even though relationships should be candour, meaning people should be open and honest to each other, the relationships still need to be respectful and professional, as in you cannot say "go and fu.. yourself" to someone.

Interviewee 2 mentioned that a "good" relationship in his/her opinion involves everyone knowing what their roles are, and being comfortable in those roles. That takes us back to the description of the leadership process as individuals granting leader and follower identities in their social interactions. What might contribute to the feeling of a good relationship through the perspective of Interviewee 2 is that the leadership process is working effectively, and that is a result of the leader's and its followers' awareness of their own position in the relationship. As mentioned in part 1.1. followership represents a willingness to defer to another in some way, hence if the followers of Interviewee 2 had not taken their position as followers then there would not have been any leadership, and Interviewee 2 would possibly have considered the relationship less good. Interviewee 13 also mentioned that a relationship is "good" when the expectations and work-related targets have been clearly communicated to the followers.

3.2.2. Leaders' opinions on whether good relationships lead to better outcomes

Almost all interviewees, without hesitation, were convinced that a good leader-follower relationship ultimately leads to a better outcome. “Oh definitely!”, “I do for sure.”, “Absolutely.” and “Yes, that I definitely think!” were some of the first phrases in the answers to interview question number five. Interviewee 7 mentioned that the better the relationship is, the more inspired the followers are about what they are doing at the company, and that will make them put more effort into securing success for the company. In addition, it will make the followers feel like they are a part of something. Interviewee 10 stated that if you are in the same value system then it will be easier for you to understand each other, which will speed up the process and lead to better overall execution.

Interviewee 12 however, mentioned that good relationships provide better outcomes until a certain point. Leaders and followers being too close to one another, and being too close as friends, can bring about obstacles and prevent the outcome from being optimal. Friendships are discussed further in section 3.2.4..

3.2.3. Leaders' opinions on who is responsible for the leader-follower relationship

The answers to the question concerning whether a leader is solely responsible for the leader-follower relationship were not as analogous. Interviewee 1 immediately answered “Yes, of course!”, Interviewee 10 said “Pretty much. I’m responsible for that.” while Interviewee 5 answered “No, I think not at all.”, and Interviewee 6 answered “It takes two to tango.”. Some interviewees started their answers with more uncertain words or phrases, including “It’s a good question” by Interviewee 2 and “It’s also a very good question.” by Interviewee 9. The disparity among all the answers might be linked to our personal level of romanticising the role of a leader. As mentioned in the literature review, having very romanticised and heroic views of leaders can make us see leaders as being able to singlehandedly determine the fate and fortunes of our organisations, when in reality, group success will occur from the combined efforts of both leaders and followers. The disparity can also be due to a difference in culture, as relationships involve culturally informed cognitive models that coordinate interaction, and a shared understanding of the rules and norms governing the social transactions. Even though all interviewees work in Estonia, they could still have different cultural backgrounds, not only on a nationality level but also based on the neighbourhood they grew up in, the schools they attended and their family traditions. What was also interesting was that despite stating that he/she does not see

himself/herself as a leader at all, but as a team player, Interviewee 1 still thought that he/she had more responsibility for the relationship. Interviewee 10 stated that he/she as a leader does have the biggest responsibility in building a good atmosphere. Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 7 both mentioned that although both leaders and followers have responsibility for the relationship, leaders have more responsibility. Interviewee 2 mentioned that the person with more power, in this case the leader, is the one who has more responsibility. Interviewee 7 said that today it seems like leaders are primarily expected to take responsibility for the relationship, though that is through his/her understanding an underdeveloped understanding of relationships.

Interviewee 13 stated that both are responsible, like in any other relationship. What was brought up by Interviewee 4 was that being a leader for a team that one has not chosen can be challenging because one needs to adapt to many new personalities with whom one maybe does not have a common understanding. Interviewee 5 stated that as a leader one maybe needs to manoeuvre and drive the relationship, but that it can not be done alone, meaning if the other party has a totally different world view then one as a leader cannot change everything. The same was brought up by Interviewee 11 who said that we are all humans and that relationships need two parties at least, meaning if someone is standing still as a stone and not saying a word even when being provoked then one as a leader can't do anything about that. According to Interviewee 8, a relationship for him/her means that everyone is prepared to do something so that the relationship can develop and also be maintained over time.

Interviewee 9 mentioned that he/she had recently attended leadership training, and from those three days of intensive training he/she discovered that as the leader he/she is mostly responsible for the relationship, although he/she doesn't know whether that is 100% true. Based on the constructionist viewpoint on leadership it's not true. As mentioned in the literature review, companies today spend staggering amounts of money on insourced and outsourced leadership training activities, many of which focus on training individual, primarily intrapersonal abilities, and skills, but leadership is not an act or a behaviour, it's a process built upon the relationships between leaders and their followers, and many leadership courses ignore this underlying mechanism and process at the core of the leadership theory.

3.2.4. Leaders' opinions on how followers positively contribute to the relationship

Giving feedback is often considered essential for good leadership, though based on the data gathered from these interviews, giving feedback does not seem to be something important solely

when given from a leader to a follower, but also the other way around. Interviewee 13, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 8, Interviewee 6, and Interviewee 10 all mentioned the word “feedback” and considered the receipt of feedback from their followers an important part of a good leader-follower relationship. Several of the interviewees linked the receipt of feedback to openness, and Interviewee 5 stated that receiving feedback from followers is a reflection of them feeling protected and not being scared of expressing their feelings. Interviewee 10 mentioned that problems need to be solved, otherwise they can develop negative emotions, and that it’s herewith important to give honest feedback in a leader-follower relationship, just like in a family or a marriage. It is better to be honest and speak up about the actual problem than to go and nag about small issues that might not even be related to the problem. That was also brought up by Interviewee 11 who stated that it’s better to just be honest, transparent and say things the way they are, rather than fooling around. If you are tired, say that you are tired. Honesty and openness were also mentioned by Interviewee 9 in the sense that if something has happened, either at the workplace or in one’s personal life and one for that reason cannot concentrate, then the followers should be honest about it, because being a leader does not mean that you are a mindreader. Interviewee 1 did not use the word “feedback”, though he/she mentioned that seeing the satisfaction reflect back from a follower contributes to a good relationship. When asked to describe in detail how that reflection is shown, the interviewee said that one can simply see when a follower “lights up”. Interviewee 3 did not use the word “honesty”, though through his/her perspective, the main way in which followers can contribute to a better relationship is by being themselves, simply being the person they actually are.

According to Interviewee 2, having followers that are experts in their field does take some weight off one’s shoulders as they do not necessarily have to be trained and they can be given more responsibility. Experts can be easier to respect, not in the sense of human respect, but respect at a professional level. Therefore, when the follower either questions something or disagrees, there is a bigger chance that you as a leader will take a step back and think “maybe the follower knows better”. In that way the relationship becomes more equal, just that the leader and follower have different responsibilities. Interviewee 4 also pointed out that there needs to be a willingness to work together and learn from each other. As mentioned in the literature review, sports is one of four traditional institutions that has perfected the art of followership. Being a leader to experts in an organisation could be compared to that of being a biathlon coach. The athletes taking part in the 4 x 5km relay are the experts, they do, in most cases, perform better on the track than their coaches, but they still need their team coach. Based on the feedback from the athlete who did the

first round, the coach can then re-assess whether changes should be made for the strategies of the following team members, the coach will also show the athlete his or her shooting results which he or she will use to analyse whether or not there should be any adjustments done for the next round of shooting. No one in the team, including the coach, is worth more or less than the rest, they just have different responsibilities, all of which are essential for there to be an optimal outcome. Interviewee 11 compared a team in an organisation to that of a team in chess. There are different figures, with different moves, and they are all highly important. If you move all pieces in the right way then you will eventually win, though if only two or three pieces are moving and the rest are standing still then you will most likely lose.

One very popular word among most of the interviewees was that of “values”. Knowing that your eyes are shining towards the same things and the same goals makes it a lot easier to work together according to Interviewee 4. In addition, he/she stated that using a value-based acquisition when hiring eventually leads to a better team. How can we know potential followers’ true values when interviewing them for open positions in an organisation’s team? People often just want a new job quickly, and the amount of available jobs in the preferred sector is limited, hence followers do not necessarily take a company’s values that much into consideration, and during their interview they do not necessarily show or speak up about their true values. If you are a fashion designer against the use of real fur then you most likely will not apply for designer jobs at a brand that uses real fur, but such wide and general company values do not necessarily affect the leader-follower relationship that much, unless the organisation is very small. It is herewith a question of matching the leader’s and followers’ personal values, as pointed out by Interviewee 6. When asked how one can make sure that a potential follower’s values match those of one’s own before being hired, Interviewee 6 answered “you can’t really”.

Part of one’s role as a leader according to Interviewee 10 is to set the values, and then find the right people that interconnect to these values. Many leaders in organisations today though do not necessarily get the chance to build their own teams. In institutions such as religion and politics the followers will in most cases choose their leader based on their values, though in organisations today many leaders are often just given a group of followers to lead. If the personal values do not match, affecting the outcome negatively, then whose responsibility is it? As mentioned in the literature review, leaders and especially charismatic leaders are often called for in times of crisis, or when in the need of change, and they exhibit exceptional devotion and expertise within their fields, and these leaders are individuals with a clear vision of business or politics and they have

the ability to engage with a large audience. And, based on our romanticised views on leaders we believe that they can singlehandedly determine the fate and fortunes of our organisations. Though unlike attitudes and specific goals, which are usually context-dependent or time-sensitive and herewith change rather easily, values are relatively stable across time, hence they are hard to change. Our personal values are a joint product of genetically inherited factors, including our needs and temperament, and of socialization in our societal culture, social groups, including friends and family, and social institutions, such as schools and religious groups. As mentioned by Interviewee 10, what level of education a potential follower has is important, but when it comes to one's values, it's not as important as one's family and DNA, because it all starts at home with one's family. For that reason, Interviewee 10 said that he/she, together with the HR manager, tries to ask "deep" questions during interviews concerning the follower's background. The more honest one is about one's values, the bigger the chance of having a leader's and a follower's values match, which according to Interviewee 10 makes the leadership much more effective and results in a better outcome.

Interviewee 7 raised the importance of good communication. The level of communication between a leader and follower might automatically decrease as a company grows, as there just might not be enough time anymore to communicate with each follower at a personal level. The word "time" was also brought up by Interviewee 7, though in the sense that it takes time to develop good relationships. The more time you have spent together the better you will know each others' way of thinking.

Interviewee 10 brought up the importance of having a good atmosphere in the team. When asked to specify how a follower can contribute to a better atmosphere, the interviewee said that it begins with trust, because he/she is not a control freak. In addition, there should be good and honest communication in the team, and one should have good personal relationships where one can talk about hobbies and enjoy a drink together every now and then. Interviewee 12 mentioned "one for all and all for one" as an attitude that when present among the followers will lead to better relationships.

Having followers ask good questions and take initiative in things at work gives a leader the feeling that the followers care about both their leader as well as the business itself according to Interviewee 2. Being proactive and delivering tasks were some of the key messages from Interviewee 13. Mentioned by Interviewee 3 was that of taking ownership of one's work as a follower. What

Interviewee 7 expects from his/her followers is for them to see a glass as half full and not half empty, meaning they should search for solutions and not for problems. Interviewee 6 mentioned a “can-do attitude” as something he/she admires. Interviewee 1 brought up the importance of followers having a “drive”.

Friendship is a rather complex topic because while people, including Interviewee 12, often say that one should never start a company with one’s best friend, several interviewees mentioned that of “being like a friend” as a way in which followers can contribute to a relationship. Interviewee 5 stated that it does help the relationship if people get along and if you are friends in the sense that you can talk to each other about everything, though at the same time Interviewee 5 said that it’s more difficult to give constructive feedback to friends. Interviewee 6 mentioned that he/she is not “best friends” with the followers at work, instead the relationship is built in a constructive way. People do get along well and there is a positive atmosphere, but the relationship is not a “best friend” relationship. Interviewee 3 stated that knowing how the followers’ lives are going and knowing how their kids are doing creates a stronger bond. Interviewee 2 mentioned that he/she once made the mistake of being too friendly, which led to his/her followers forgetting that he/she had the role of a leader, in addition, existing friendships mixed with leadership did eventually bring forth obstacles in the leader-follower relationship as time went on, and from that he/she learned not to work with friends in such a way again, you can have “very good relationships, but not friends”. Interviewee 12 brought up an incident in which a close relationship made a follower come with inappropriate jokes about the leader in front of other colleagues in the organisation. According to him/her, that’s what happens when the relationship gets too personal. Now, how does one draw a line between a good leader-follower relationship and a friendship? In what ways should followers behave differently to a leader in comparison to a good friend?

3.2.5. Leaders’ opinions on how good leader-follower relationships affect them

Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 4 both mentioned that having a good relationship takes a burden off one’s shoulder. Interviewee 4 also mentioned that having a good relationship involving trust allows one to delegate more responsibility to the followers, believing that they can handle the responsibility. After delegating responsibility to someone reliable one can just have meetings now and then to check that things are going in the right direction. Based on the answer of Interviewee 4, one could say that followers who either feel like they are not getting enough responsibility, or who feel that they are being micromanaged, should maybe take their time to consider whether

there is a lack of trust in the relationship, and how the follower himself/herself can improve the level of trust.

Interviewee 5 mentioned that having everything go well feels empowering. Similarly, Interviewee 7 stated that it makes him/her feel better and more confident as a leader. And that correlates with the theory of followers being co-producers of leadership. As mentioned in section 1.3.1., Hitler did not consider himself a good leader until after a good relationship between him and his followers had been formed. The perception leaders have of themselves does believably get affected by the attitude of the followers, and the feedback received from them, not just verbal feedback, but also feedback through the followers' attitude, their trustworthiness, and body language.

Having a good relationship affects one a lot as a leader according to Interviewee 10. In fact, having a good relationship is essential in his/her opinion in order to be able to execute as a leader. Having a team whom you feel as though you can trust well enough for you to go on a vacation without having to receive calls and emails is a great feeling according to Interviewee 11. Similarly, Interviewee 2 stated that having a good relationship makes him/her less stressed, as all the responsibilities the role of a leader involves can increase one's level of anxiety. Interviewee 13 mentioned that strong relationships give him/her solid ground and improve one's sense of security in knowing that the teammates will support him/her when needed. Having good relationships with followers simply makes being in the role of a leader more fun according to Interviewee 8. Walking into the workplace is simply more pleasant when having good relationships according to Interviewee 3.

3.3. Leaders' views on weak leader-follower relationships

3.3.1. Leaders' opinions on how followers negatively impact the relationship

Going back to the question of whether the relationship is solely a leader's responsibility, if a person is passive, completely lacks interest in his/her work, and does not contribute, is it up to a leader to make the relationship work? In some countries, responsibility for the leader would involve firing such an individual, though in some countries, such as Sweden, terminating an employee simply due to relationship problems or a lack of interest is not legal. Interviewee 1 mentioned a lack of drive as something that would weaken a relationship. Interviewee 2, Interviewee 7 and Interviewee 11 mentioned passivity. Interviewee 3 used the word "unmotivated". Lack of responsibility and

not delivering what has been agreed upon were brought up by Interviewee 4. Not delivering results was also mentioned by Interviewee 6 in addition to keeping one's promises. According to Interviewee 5 indifference among followers is something he/she has struggled with and is yet to find a solution for. He/she also mentioned followers being dismissive and not liking their work. Such behaviour makes it difficult for him/her as a leader to involve the followers in question in groupworks and company activities.

Interviewee 8 mentioned that one should never underestimate body language because through reading body language one can easily tell whether a follower is happy or whether he/she is just sitting there without really being interested in what is going on. If there is no interest, then the question of "why is he/she here" arises, and it would be easier for everyone if the follower who is not interested would just leave the room because such behaviour influences others as well, and not only the other followers but also the leader. Imagine being a leader looking forward to a meeting and then realising that it's actually just you there. According to Interviewee 8, it's not nice, and what can bring about such a lack of interest among followers is that some people put the external pressure of having to take what is considered as the next vertical step in a career or education in front of their personal interests.

Interviewee 13 stated that relationships not working can simply be a personality thing, with the leader and follower not matching, and that is fair as we are all humans, we are different, and we cannot be expected to match personality-wise with all other humans. The same was brought up by Interviewee 6 who said that differences in one's backgrounds, languages, practices, and ways of doing things can negatively affect the leader-follower relationship. As mentioned in section 3.1.5., one's values play an important role in making a relationship work. Difference in personal values was mentioned as something that could directly weaken the leader-follower relationship by half of the interviewees. Problems arising as a result of different languages were also brought up by Interviewee 1.

What can also cause friction to a certain extent based on the answers of Interviewee 2, Interviewee 9 and Interviewee 12 is rivalry or envy. Becoming the leader of a new team whose members are older and/or have more years of experience within the company than oneself can create attitude obstacles in the leadership process. Followers' "toxic" attitudes were also brought up by Interviewee 13 who mentioned that he/she does not appreciate sarcastic comments, unfriendly

tones during communication as well as pointing out problems and questioning him/her as the leader.

Seeing opportunities rather than problems was mentioned as something that could strengthen relationships. Only seeing problems in things on the other hand would, according to Interviewee 2, weaken a relationship, and such attitude would also be demotivating to others, the same applies to arguing. Interviewee 6 mentioned that of complaining, Interviewee 9 used the word “negativity”. Interviewee 8 mentioned that followers talking negatively about him/her would weaken the relationship. Dishonestly lowers one’s trust in a follower according to Interviewee 1. The word “dishonesty” was also mentioned by Interviewee 3 together with the word “lying”. Similarly, Interviewee 10 brought up that of followers not telling the truth and hiding things.

3.3.2. Leaders’ opinions on how weak leader-follower relationships affect them

Having followers whose attitude is toxic is demotivating according to Interviewee 13, especially when one is trying to be open and honest about things. Interviewee 9 mentioned that negativity is something that really affects him/her and that he/she finds it hard to communicate with “no people”. A new system might be brought into the organisation to make things work more efficiently, and the jobs of the followers easier, though the “no people” will instantly be against it, and such people are difficult to deal with. Having followers with whom the relationship is weak is really hard according to Interviewee 6, and “it eats you”, especially if you’re not sure whether there is a way to continue the relationship or not. Interviewee 9 stated that a weak relationship did definitely affect him/her, though to his/her surprise. Weak relationships generate negative emotions according to Interviewee 10, hence he/she tries to solve problems as quickly as possible. Interviewee 11 mentioned having a high stress level, hence he/she has to work very hard to get his/her blood pressure down when in such situations. Even though Interviewee 11 does not cry, he/she still feels like crying. Interviewee 3 brought up something that seems so obvious that one almost forgets about it: having to deal with weak relationships consumes time, which is fairly critical considering the hectic and dynamic world we are living in today.

Having weak leader-follower relationships makes Interviewee 2 question himself/herself whether he/she has what it takes to be a leader, and that takes us back to the old leader-centred view upon leadership. Because we are given the image that the outcome lays in the hands of the leaders, we are convinced that the potential of our corporations’ success or failure, competitiveness or collapse is on the basis of how they are led. As a result of that, the leaders will often be blamed for the

failure by others, and as mentioned by Interviewee 2, it feels like everyone is against you, and it's painful. Automatically you will start to question your own potential as a leader and/or as an entrepreneur "can I even trust my own evaluations, can I even trust myself?". But what about the followers' responsibility, should they not be questioned?

Interviewee 5 mentioned that he/she felt as though a follower was trying to put him/her in a bad light. Interviewee 5 decided on doing an experiment in which the follower got to make all the decisions for a while, and things got better, after which he/she changed his/her perspectives on things a little bit. Maybe the follower was actually trying to benefit him/her. However, Interviewee 5 did also mention that when it comes to followers that do not show interest in their work, he/she will also show less interest in them. The same was brought up by Interviewee 13 who said that he/she will not give such followers as many opportunities and he/she will not develop them as he/she used to. If his/her trust has been betrayed then he/she will not focus as much on those followers. Interviewee 4 believes that it is better to end weak relationships, as changing people will require more effort and resources than finding a new follower.

3.4. Leaders' thoughts on what can make them question the relationship

The interviewees' answers to question number 16 were content-wise related a lot to those concerning how followers negatively affect the relationship. Openness was earlier mentioned as something that could strengthen a relationship, hence a follower who used to be open and then suddenly appears closed raises suspicion according to Interviewee 2. In addition, he/she mentioned snobby and negative comments as something that would make him/her take a step back and question the relationship. Similarly, Interviewee 5 stated that negative feedback can bring about emotions "OK, I thought that you were my friend, but you're saying negative things to me?". Interviewee 13 brought up a story concerning a follower questioning his/her decisions as a leader, as well as a bad tone together with the follower not respecting the difference in responsibilities between him/her and the leader. Interviewee 4 said that sabotaging or malicious behaviour would be very obvious reasons to question a relationship. What would also make him/her question a relationship is things not being delivered even though he/she feels as though he/she has done everything right as a leader. Followers creating issues among other team members are also a concern.

Interviewee 8 mentioned that the questioning of relationships can happen during times of crisis because that's when people show their real faces. And that can maybe be correlated with people's values, which are today sometimes partly hidden behind a facade because getting any job might be considered more important than making sure that the leader's values match with one's own. Showing different sides of oneself was also brought up by Interviewee 11 who compared some followers' behaviour to that of being a chameleon; amongst one group of people a follower will act as one person, and then he or she will go to the people standing in the coffee corner and suddenly behave like a different person. Such behaviour is awakening according to Interviewee 11.

Interviewee 10 brought up the topic of one being a leader to another leader, because that is very common, especially in large organisations. One reason why we should put focus more on followership in literature now is that most of us spend more time in life being followers than leaders. We are followers of our parents, our teachers, our football coaches, our religious groups, and our orchestra conductors. Even individuals who have the top leadership positions in organisations do most likely have a followership position in some form of group outside the organisation. What Interviewee 10 mentioned was that having a follower (who also has the role of a leader in the same organisation) who suddenly seems to be more on his/her own followers' side, makes you question whose side the follower actually is on. Is the follower supporting the employer, his/her leader and their strategies and decisions, or is the follower actually more on his/her own followers' side, some of whom might not support the company's strategies and decisions?

3.5. Discussion on what could be taught in followership training

Overall, what seems to be one of the most fundamental elements of making a leader-follower relationship strong, according to the data above, is that of having similar personal values. As mentioned, personal values are hard to change and based on the constructionist viewpoint on leadership, it is not solely up to the leader to make a relationship work. It is herewith crucial to be honest and open about one's personal values as early as in an interview if a good relationship and an ultimate outcome are on the list of goals, which they most likely are at least for the leader. To lift weight off the leaders' shoulders, to save them from stress and anxiety, to stop them from questioning their own capabilities, not only should leaders be open and honest about their personal values, but people applying for followership positions should avoid entering organisations and

relationships where he or she doubts that the personal values match. How to analyse a leader's personal values during an interview and how to avoid entering an organisation where the leader's values do not match those of one's own is something that can be taught to followers, though it is not relevant until they are applying for a new job.

Openness and honesty are not just important when it comes to one's personal values, they are also highly important when it comes to maintaining good relationships. Followers should be open to discuss any problems, both private and work-related, directly with their managers rather than having a bad attitude. Followers should also remember that to maintain a good relationship with their leader, positive feedback is not something that should solely be passed from the leader to the followers, leaders want positive feedback as well. If one as a follower wants to create a better atmosphere from the beginning of the workday then give the leader positive feedback, and do not underestimate simple gestures such as saying "hello". What can be taught to followers is how to give leaders positive feedback.

Followers should try to see opportunities in things rather than problems, and they should try to take more initiative. Followers should take responsibility for developing trust with their leaders by delivering what is expected and being honest and transparent about things. According to the data, trust can potentially result in leaders delegating more responsibility to followers and checking up on the followers' work less often, hence followers who do not want to be micromanaged should focus on building trust. Followers should avoid being negative, avoid questioning their leader, and avoid coming with snobby or sarcastic comments. One's attitude and tone should be kept in mind at all times as it can affect not just the leader but other followers as well. Followers can be taught how to develop trust with their leaders, how to handle their emotions and how to contribute to a good atmosphere.

What should also be pointed out to followers is that the process of leadership can only occur when leadership influence attempts or identity claims are met, at the other end, with followership granting behaviours, and according to the leaders, helping followers grow was among the list of responsibilities for the leaders themselves, though in order for the follower to grow, he or she needs a drive and a desire to grow. By following these points, followers could have a positive impact on the follower-leader relationship, which based on the data most likely would result in better outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to advance the discussion of leadership as a process co-produced by both leaders and followers, and to expand the followership and leadership literature by providing detailed data concerning followers' impact on the leader and the leader-follower relationship. The literature review made it clear that much more attention has been given to the leaders' influence on followers and on the relationship between their followers and themselves, hence why in this thesis the lens was reversed, and the followers' impact was analysed through the perspective of the leaders.

As mentioned in the methodology part, "freezing" the social settings and circumstances of the study is impossible, and the sample was small, hence the data could not be generalised. The aim was to raise awareness regarding the importance of good followership, present ideas on what can be taught in followership training, and bring forth the first hints and pieces of detail within the subject, some of which could be later researched at a larger and more detailed scale. Even though bringing about generalised answers concerning the relationship between leaders and their followers was not the aim of this thesis, based on the data it was rather evident that better relationships lead to better outcomes, and that followers do affect leaders at a personal level and the leader-follower relationship. Approaching leadership through a constructionist viewpoint has herewith proven to be a good option.

Though there were some opposing views upon whether leaders solely are responsible for the leader-follower relationship, all interviewees were able to specify certain characteristics or behavioural traits among followers that affected them and their relationship either positively or negatively. Based on the data, most important within a follower's role in impacting his or her leader as well as the leader-follower relationship positively was that of having personal values similar to those of the leader. Because one's values are difficult to change, people should take responsibility in avoiding joining teams whose leader's values do not match their own values. Trust plays an important role in a leader-follower relationship, and followers should try to develop trust by delivering what is expected and being open, transparent, and honest. Also important in a follower's role is that of giving leaders positive feedback. Followers should also not underestimate the importance of showing respect and getting a clear understanding of what their responsibilities work-wise involve in relation to their leader. Most significant within a follower's role in impacting his or her leader as well as the leader-follower relationship negatively is that of being passive,

indifferent, or not showing interest in one's work. In addition to incompatible personal values, differences in one's practices, personality, and language skills can create obstacles. Additional behavioural traits include negativity, rivalry, commenting, dishonesty, and questioning the leader. The answer to what would make a leader question a relationship partially circulates around the answers to how followers affect relationships positively or negatively. Any sudden change in behavioural traits affecting a relationship positively, such as openness, respect, and honesty could make a leader question the relationship. One's true personal values are often exposed during times of crisis, hence any serious events, either within the organisation or in the society, could cause a leader to question the relationship.

More research is needed within all areas of followership because we are currently so far behind in relation to the effort we have put into studying the topic of leadership. Most important among the list of topics to be researched at a larger scale according to the data gathered in this thesis are: values, trust, feedback, openness, honesty, respect, friendship, passivity, rivalry, negativity as well as clarity in roles and responsibility. In addition, research should be done on what specific forms of follower behaviour and characteristics of leader-follower relationships promote confidence, joy, and lower levels of stress among leaders. Other subject matters mentioned include body language, "can-do attitude", snobby commenting, tone, transparency, and delivering what is expected.

Considering the significance of personal values in this data, what should not be avoided nor underestimated within the topic of followership is how our upbringing affects our values, our characteristics, and our behaviour as followers. What types of cultures were we surrounded by during our upbringing, how much discipline was expected at home, did our parents and/or school teachers expect respect and authority, were there real consequences if rules were not followed, did we receive candy whenever we asked for it or did we have to work hard to earn it, did we have to attend church every weekend, were our parents very affectionate and cuddly, or not so much? The list can go on forever because the ways in which our upbringing can affect how we position ourselves as followers are endless. More focus should also be put on how to match the right leaders with the right followers. How can leaders develop their interviewing process to get a clearer understanding of a potential follower's values? On the flip side, do teams where all members have the same values perform better, or can teams become too analogous value-wise?

Other ideas on topics to research at a deeper and wider scale include:

How does the leadership process in a team in which the leader has chosen the followers differ from a team in which the leader has been assigned followers?

Do followers believe that leaders are solely responsible for the leader-follower relationship?

How can followers give positive feedback to leaders, and how does it affect the relationship?

How can followers build leaders' trust?

Does the level of micromanagement decrease the more a leader trusts his/her follower?

How do leaders treat followers they trust differently from those they don't trust?

In what ways should a leader-follower relationship differ from a best-friend relationship?

Can leader-follower relationships become too close? If so, what are the consequences?

How can followers show respect to leaders in organisations today?

How does the clarity of everyone's roles and responsibilities within an organisation affect the relationships and the outcome?

In what instances does the founding of companies with best friends cause friction and why?

What are the main causes of indifference and passivity among followers?

How does followers' body language affect the leader-follower relationship?

What are the main causes of rivalry and envy between leaders and followers, and how does it affect the relationship?

How are rivalry and envy between leaders and followers related to one's gender and age difference?

Researching the topics mentioned and the questions above at a more detailed and larger scale could provide generalised answers concerning followers' effect on leaders and the relationship. The answers could be used to develop followership training, as well as guides regarding what leaders should consider when hiring their followers.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview questions

1. How long have you been a leader?
2. What does being a leader mean to you, what does it involve?
3. How does it feel to be a leader, do you enjoy it?
4. How many followers do you have in your team?
5. Do you believe that the outcome of your team is better if you feel like you are having a good relationship with your followers, and if so, in what way?
6. How would you define a good relationship between you and your followers?
7. Do you believe that you as the leader are solely responsible for the relationship between you and your followers, why or why not?
8. Have you experienced a relationship with a follower that you felt was very good?
9. If so, what do you think made that relationship so good?
10. How did that strong relationship affect you as a leader? How did it make you feel, and how did that affect your leadership practice?
11. Have you experienced a relationship with a follower that you did not feel was good?
12. If so, what do you think prevented the relationship from getting good?
13. How did that weak relationship affect you as a leader? How did it make you feel, and how did that affect leadership practice?
14. What kinds of actions, comments or behaviour from a follower do you feel could strengthen the bond between the two of you?
15. What kinds of actions, comments or behaviour from a follower do you feel could weaken the bond between the two of you?
16. Can you think of any events, actions or forms of interaction that would make you take a step back and question the relationship between you and your follower?
17. Would you like to add any other thoughts?

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REVERSING THE LENS: THE ROLE OF FOLLOWERS IN BUILDING THE LEADER-FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP

supervised by Marii Haak

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