



The Correlation of Free Will Within the Relationship between Leaders and Followers.

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Abstract

Is the notion of free will a human construct devised to explain fundamental human choices? Or is it a manufactured paradigm with limited relevance in an ever-evolving world? The dynamic between a follower and a leader sheds light on this inquiry. Oc and Bashshur (2013) propose that "research in leadership has largely marginalized followers to the role of passive recipients, or at best, moderators of leader influence and behavior" (p. 919). This assertion implies that followers have a restricted voice in the relationship. This study employs quantitative analysis to examine the leader-follower relationship across five domains: peaceful, organizational, business, political, and military. It also scrutinizes the concept of free will in the context of following a leader. How does our perception of a leader shift when we lack the choice to follow? The research findings suggest that while most respondents perceive the presence of free will with peaceful, organizational, and business leaders, there is a perceived loss of free will with political and military leaders.

Keywords: Leader, follower, free will, leadership

INTRODUCTION

The leader and follower relationship have been evaluated in a variety of different context. This research will evaluate the connection between followers and leaders to gauge the amount of free will that exist when following a leader, either by choice or by authority. The article examines leaders as they relate to their followers, but not in a physical action but the perception of free will. This article begins with defining leadership, follower, and free will; later, the concept of leadership is categorized into five leadership areas: peaceful, organizational, business, political, and military. The study evaluates the perception of free will as it relates to the listed types of leaders to evaluate their perception of free will. The primary research question examined here is: Do we have free will in the leaders that we follow? The research is relevant today as the general population is becoming more aware of the role of leadership in their day lives.

Leadership

The idea of leadership is a straightforward concept; without intensive evaluation, anyone would be able to provide a reasonable definition—or even a definitive example—of a historical or modern day leader. We would draw on our understanding of our experiences, which includes the environmental experiences we have encountered (Wheatley, 1999). This is an important concept for this research study, for it is this researcher's opinion that, based on our experiences, we as humans interpret leadership differently. Each person has a differing idea of how a leader leads, and each unique perspective impacts the leader-follower relationship. Many leaders today do not realize they are leaders or have no desire to acknowledge their contribution to society. For example, leadership is a perceived notion that is built upon their beliefs and values. Joshua Kahn Russell is a recognized leader, for he inspired an environmental movement to stop a power company from continually harming the environment (Hunter, 2011). Based on his actions and how he has developed his movement, he is a leader, though not to all. When considering whether to view him as a leader, we have free will. We can choose whom we follow.

Much of the literature has stated that a leader has a vision, sets goals, has problemsolving skills, thinks holistically, and wills to take on mammoth tasks (Clawson, 2006; Kouzes & Posner, 2010; Oc & Bashshur, 2013). With these abilities, they can see their far-reaching vision and can guide their followers. These traits appear in most leaders today throughout the various levels of leadership. These include leadership from community leaders, corporate leaders, and political leaders. What type of leader a person develops into is in accordance with their drive to become a leader: do they have a mission of self? Or do they have a mission for one's followers? The quality of leadership is linked to a leader's follower's behavior and attitudes (Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, & Uhl-Bien, 2007). In other words, leaders gain power, be it physical or emotional, from their followers. According to Kouzes and Posner (2010), "when leaders are in tune with the emotions of others, they create resonance between leaders and constituents and among constituents" (pp. 65–66). To be an effective leader with longevity, there must exist an acknowledgment of this relationship.

Depending on the level of leadership, do followers lose their ability to follow in accordance with free will? Does the level of leadership affect the free will of its followers at all? The research evaluated free will as it is associated to the five following leadership types: peaceful, organizational, business, political, and military. When individuals have, less choice regarding whom they follow, do they lose free will or the desire to achieve free will? As Shamir et al. noted, “the leader’s influence on followers’ attitudes and performance depends on followers’ characteristics” (p. xiii). There for the is an underlying context of free will and the leader themselves. Clawson (2006) suggested, “in true leader-follower situations, the willingness of the followers is essential to effective leadership” (p.58). Furthermore, “Leadership doesn’t happen without followers, so any map or model of leadership must include the ‘others’ or followers” (Clawson, 2006, p. 37). Thus, there is a precedence set that leaders cannot be leaders without followers to reinforce their position.

Followers

Leaders cannot be sustained without followers, nor can fellowship endure without a leader: “without the leader-follower relationship the leader-follower will cease to exist” (Malakyan, 2014, p. 6). These two ideas are linked concepts; leaders need followers, and followers need leaders. Neither can be sustained without the other. “The compliance of the followers is the mirror image of successful leadership” (Pfohl, 2001, para. 2). Concurrently, a highly-motivated leader’s success is typically an outcome of their follower’s efficiency and effectiveness (Pfohl, 2001). One can question if this efficiency and effectiveness is accomplished through admiration or fear. Are follower’s true followers if they follow out of fear? Do they have a choice in their support for their given leader? These specific questions will be answered in the upcoming text. The leader’s influence on “followers’ attitudes and performance depend on followers’ characteristics” (Shamir, 2007, p. xiii).

Leaders can influence their followers but not without follower compliance; leaders that understand what their followers want are successful leaders and gain the compliance of their followers (Tee, Paulsen, and Ashkanasy, 2013). Furthermore, “followers have more rights and freedoms than ever before in the history of humankind (Malakyan, 2014, p. 7). Thus, it is essential the relationship be further evaluated to ensure that the followers are considered when a leader is making decisions for the followers.

Free Will

Free will is a conceptual function of the individual psyche. We have the freedom to make choices for ourselves, and to act on matters that engage us in our environment; “most philosophers suppose that the concept of free will is very closely connected to the concept of moral responsibility. Acting with free will, on such views, is just to satisfy the metaphysical requirement of being responsible for one’s action” (Stanford Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2015, para. 1). However, the construct that is accepted to all humans, per common wisdom, people either believe in free will or they do not (Earp, 2011). The idea of free will is associated with leadership and our journey to understand how or if we have choice in our leaders.

Leaders that have direct impact on our day-to-day lives, or leaders that have the potential to impact our daily lives.

The Leader-Follower Relationship

To further evaluate the idea of the leader-follower relationship as it relates to free will, this researcher introduced five categories of leaders. Research has indicated functionality of the role of leader, but there is limited research on the contrasting the role of leaders. This research study will investigate free will in association with the following leadership categories:

1. Peaceful Leader: A peaceful leader is a leader that has given of themselves for social justice. Examples of such individuals are Mother Theresa, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King.
2. Organizational Leader: An organizational leader is a leader that guides an organization; in this context, an organization includes entities such as the Red Cross, the Diabetes Foundation, and the United Nations. Leaders within this construct give of themselves for a worthy cause.
3. Business Leader: A business leader is a leader that enhances economic growth, typically for an entity that has a mission to gain fiscal profit; this leader is typically appointed by a governing board.
4. Political Leader: A political leader is a leader that is either an elected official or a civilian that can sway over civic issues; this leader is either elected freely by the general population or a governing council.
5. Military Leader: A military leader is a leader that can be political, but most often is a leader that has been appointed by a governing body, not appointed by the public.

METHODOLOGY

The research exploration (noted below) were formulated to ensure the statements had limited ambiguity. The study was posted on social media sites (LinkedIn and Facebook), and the data were collected anonymously via Survey Monkey. The survey was open for responses from November 22, 2016 to December 22, 2016. There was a total of 73 responses. The statements were evaluated on a Likert Scale. Strongly agree indicated a strong belief in the participant’s free will, agree indicated a robust (though not as robust as strongly agree) link to free will, neutral indicated an impartial stance, disagree indicated a belief in the participants have limited free will, and strongly disagree indicated the participants believe that they have no free will.

Five questions were asked regarding recipients' belief or lack thereof regarding the existence of free will in leadership:

1. I have free will to decide whether I follow a peaceful leader
2. I have free will to decide whether I follow an organizational leader.
3. I have free will to decide whether I follow a business leader.
4. I have free will to decide whether I follow a political leader.
5. I have free will to decide whether I follow a military leader.

ANALYSIS

The data illustrates that most of the respondents believed they had free will in the leader-follower relationship. Of the five categories, there was a general belief that there is more free will when following peaceful leaders (Table 4) with responses indicating strongly agree and agree: 49 strongly agreed (67%), 22 agreed (30%), and 2 (3%) were neutral. This result was also found with the organizational leader (Table 5), with most of the respondents agreeing that free will existed, though there were a few outliers who disagreed: 41 strongly agreed (56%), 26 agreed (36%), 1 (1%) were neutral, 5 disagreed (7%).

The business leader (Table 6) responses revealed that there is significant uncertainty if free will exists or not: 31 strongly agreed (42%), 26 agreed (36%), 6 (8%) were neutral, 9 disagreed (12%), and 1 (1%) strongly disagreed.

There was a high significant with the political leader (Table 7): 24 strongly agreed (33%), 25 agreed (34%), 9 (12%) were neutral, 12 disagreed (16%), and 3 (4%) strongly disagreed.

However, regarding military leaders (Table 8), there was a shift in response 15 strongly agreed (21%), 18 agreed (25%), 10 (14%) were neutral, 17 disagreed (23%), and 13 (18%) strongly disagreed. The respondents indicated they felt that they had less free will in this category.

Table 4: Peaceful Leader

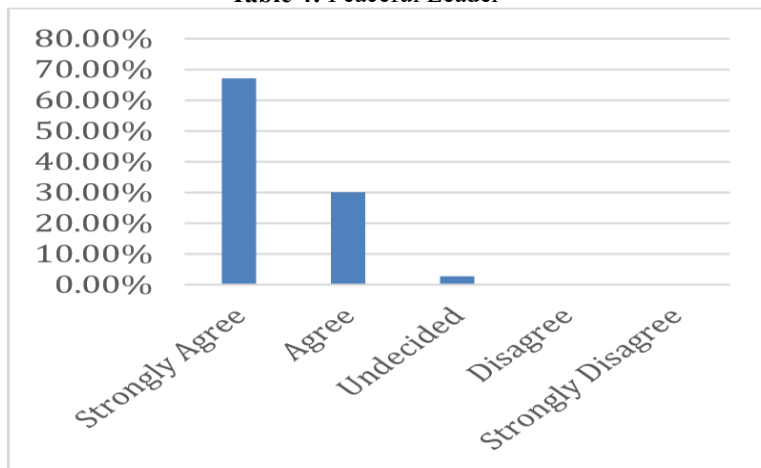


Table 5: Organizational Leader

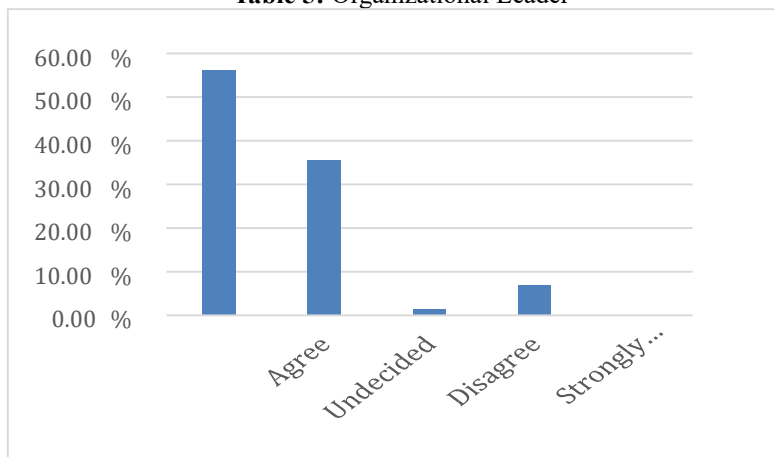


Table 6: Business Leadership

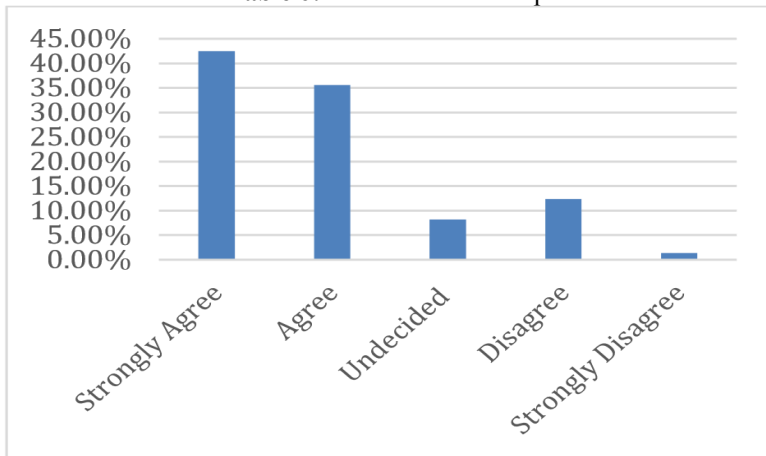


Table 7: Political Leader

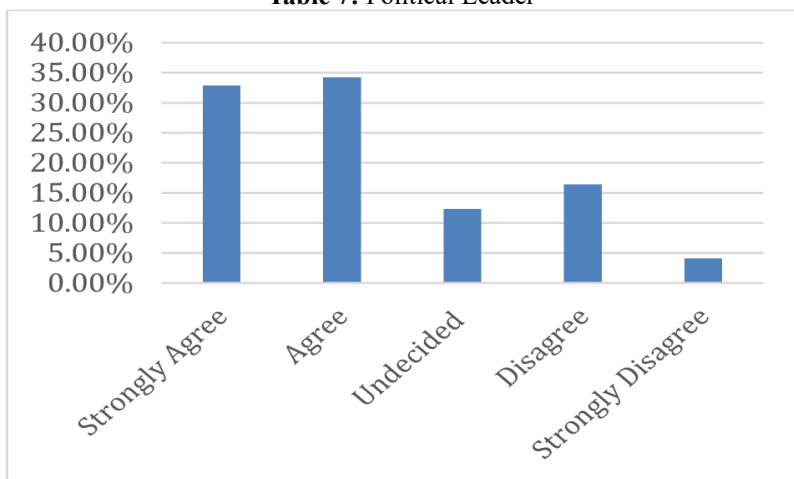
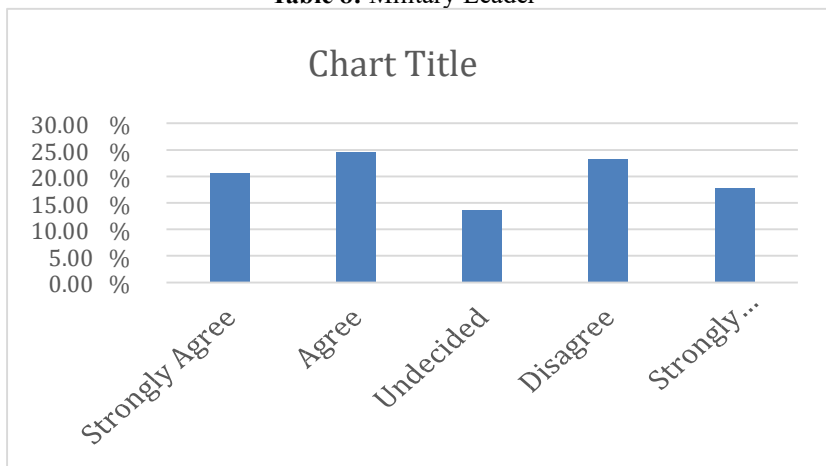


Table 8: Military Leader



Demographics

Females represented 77% of the responses, males 22% of the responses, and 1% identified as other. Regarding the ages of the participants, there were more responses from individuals born in the 1960s versus the 1940s-1950s and 1970s-1990s. The location of the participants was primarily the United States, followed by Europe, South America, and Central America.

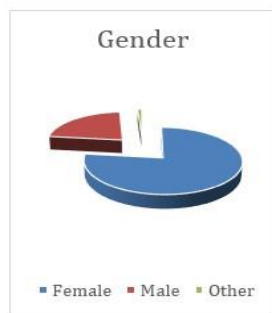


Table 1: Gender

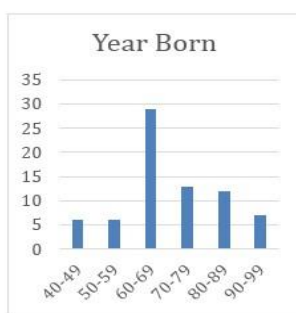


Table 2: Year of Birth



Table 3: Location

The research indicates that people overall have confidence in their ability to follow leaders. Table 9 is a graph illustrating the trend in respondents' beliefs about free will in relation to the type of leader. There is a strong indication that the recipients believed they steadily lose free will from one category to the next.

Table 9: Free Will Perception

Table 1: Gender

Table 2: Year of Birth

Table 3: Location



Biases in Design: Validity and Reliability

There were a few biases in design that could have led to skewed results. First, a respondent could have answered the questions from multiple devices which may result in reliability issues. However, this researcher has ruled this out due to the variation of responses. The sample size is small related to the population which could lead to validity concerns. Further, there could have been some biases considering the recent election in the United States, which could have led to enhanced feelings.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The idea of leadership is an important part of daily life. Depending on a follower's perception of free will, leaders can either empower one's follower or destroy its existence. The outcome on the survey illustrates that:

1. 98% of the respondents perceived that they have free will when following a peaceful leader.
2. 92% of the respondents perceived that they have free will when following a organizational leader.
3. 76% of the respondents perceived that they have free will when following a business leader.
4. 67% of the respondents perceived that they have free will when following a political leader.
5. 46% of the respondents perceived that they have free will when following a military leader.

The data illustrates that there is a clear indication that free will exists in the leader-follower relationship. Although, there is a paradigm shift when it comes to political and military leaders. Peaceful and organizational leaders illustrate confidence of 98% to 75% perception that free will exists. This paradigm shifts with political and military leaders to 67% and 46% respectfully. The presenting issue is that nearly 33% of the respondents perceived that they have less free will with political leaders. While with military leaders there is, a significant paradigm shift that 52% of the respondents perceive that they have limited free will when following a military leader. This outcome illustrates that the leaders that have more control over our daily existence illicit a lack of choice with the leaders that followers are forced to follow.

Further, research could be conducted to assess (1) how individual's choose to follow leaders; (2) how individual's increase knowledge of leaders; and, (3) how individuals relinquish power to unknown leaders. Overall, it is essential that we better understand the roles of leaders who have a significant impact on our day-to-day lives; only then can we have a better impact on the world.

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