

# REWRITING THE NARRATIVE: BREAKING THE SILENCE OF A LIFELONG FOLLOWER

Gabrielle Gibson & Cristobal Salinas

College of Education

## Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of lifelong followership in a world that romanticizes the role of leadership, shown through personal, hand-written journals. I will argue that while leadership paradigms can be constructive to those who see themselves and their identities having access to capturing leadership roles, the importance of inspiring and practicing value within followership has been dismissed. Therefore, I will not only inspire value in the role of a follower and in followership as an “uncertain terrain of leadership”, but also argue that “Authentic Leadership” is not produced in leadership that requires public and private expression. Therefore, I attempt to call in to need curriculum that creates a culture that explores the identity, role and value of followership; one must publish more literature on followership to rewrite the narrative, and instill worth in a follower’s storyline through curriculum to combat the destructive and exclusive narrative of leadership pedagogies.

## Introduction

In leadership curriculum across the nation, the relationship between leaders and followers is one described as necessity; in order to lead, one must have followers who stand behind them and support the cause. With this sentiment, the role of followers can and has been stigmatized and has created a hierarchical distance that positions leaders as those at the forefront of change and activism, and followers as their “subordinates” (Kellerman, 2008, p. 25). As a result, followers are seen as weak, and mindless “sheep” who join causes and obey, but never valued for skills such as “stronger decision” accountability of “behavior they believe is unethical”, and critical thinking (Bien, Riggio, et al, 2013, pp. 89-90). In fact, “in Western society, individuals are encouraged to be autonomous, independent, and to call oneself a follower “carries an undertone of failure” (Kellerman, 2008, pp. 15-16). Along with deep rooted societal beliefs, leadership curriculum is leader-centric, emphasizing the role of a leader with “little to no education on followership” (Bien, Riggio, et al 2013, pp. 89-90). Without the critical lens of followership as a “terrain of leadership” (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002, p. 86), the role of a follower and practice of followership are devalued by default. Deemed as a “student-leader” myself, these findings have pointed me to the crucial realization that I have not been a leader, but a champion lifelong follower who has questioned my ability to lead, so much so that I joined teams and earned membership in organizations to breathe life and

importance in an authentic and shared vision through followership. In journals and poems from the age of 16 years old to 22 years old, I battled the stigma of being a “sheep”, rebelling the storylines of a follower and trying to place myself in the romantic narratives of a leader.

In the midst of a competitive arena with high achieving siblings, as well as a cultural upbringing that silenced conversations in mental health, leadership was exclusive instead of empowering. Without the valuable culture of followership that curriculum has created for leadership, I was left to lead in different ways through public and private spaces. Following the mission of others, encouraging ideas with compassion, and building deep human connection felt natural for me, and yet that voice could only be expressed in the private spaces of my journal. Conversations of mental health felt necessary and developmental for me, yet were often silenced or looked down upon. If outwardly expressed, I was seen as weak, mindless, and emotional. In journals and handwritten letters, I challenged taboos and ideals of success; through poetry and daily entries I began rewriting the narratives of success and leadership with the pen in my own hand and therefore, the value of followership grew. However, it was still private. In doing so, my identities and experiences as a twin sister and one of five siblings, a biracial woman, and a writer who struggled with mental health and voicing emotions did not give me the confidence to lead, but gave me personal power to strengthen and enable others to make social change through the role of a follower; a role of knowing the power and potential of building emotional relationships and growing skills in communication and emotional intelligence. Rather than hold positional power in public spaces and personal power in private spaces, I criticize that Authentic Leadership should hold each power in every space, and more so that followership be valued as a “terrain” of leadership. Curriculum creates a culture in which identities are oppressed or given opportunity for value publicly. Therefore, the presence of private spaces diminishes the capacity to lead authentically with a valued identity.

As a result, the purpose of this writing is to use journals and other personal processes of reflection to inspire value in the role of a follower, and also argue that “Authentic Leadership” is a privileged practice and can only truly be accessed when all identities are brought to

the table to lead. In this, I ask if leadership is a relationship with followership, why is followership stigmatized and leadership romanticized? How can one see the inherent value and worth in serving as a follower? I argue that curriculum on followership can close that gap. By first reviewing literature on Leadership and Followership, I will show that while these paradigms can be constructive to those who see themselves, their identities or their potential having access to capturing leadership roles, the importance of inspiring and practicing value within followership has been ignored. After I will explore personal journal entries to capture my experiences of social change and self-development in myself from ages 15 years old to 22 years old in which my identities did not give me access, confidence or knowledge to lead, nonetheless authentically; In fact, the followership that became my natural sense of "leadership" was dismissed. In doing so, I will advocate that one must publish more literature and curriculum on followership to rewrite the narrative of social change, practice authentic leadership and instill worth in a follower's storyline to combat the destructive and exclusive narrative of leadership.

### Literature Review

Literature written on leadership has been developed and prevalent in curriculum recently. These practices and theories supported the need to understand Leadership as more than the "Great Man" (Komives, 2013, p. 57), and therefore create value in different capacities of leadership. However, these theories and practices are leader-centric, focusing on individual rather than a relational process. Specifically, at Universities that study Leadership, this curriculum continues to dismiss the value of followers in relation to leaders by not acknowledging books, articles, or set curriculum that study Followership, compared to those that study Leadership or center on change made by leaders. In fact, in Googling "Followership courses at colleges", and "Followership studies Collegiate", one would find only two course syllabi with curriculum "designed to correct the over emphasis on leaders and under emphasis on followers" (Texas A&M, 2015, p.1) and show "how followers often become subtle but influential leaders themselves" (University of Oklahoma, 2017, p.1). Curriculum is power, as what is taught in classes implicitly provides insight in what practices, skills, and professions are held as valuable.

Curriculum therefore, has the power to write which narrative or terrains of leadership are acceptable and valued, consequently creating public and private spaces to act in these narratives. While in such literature there is an acknowledgement that "leadership is a relationship" (Kouzes and Posner, 2014, p.11-12), and shows that leaders need followers to bring forth positive and community based change, this literature does not inspire or practice value in followership on its own; it is leader-centric and leaves out the importance of who a follower is and their specific role in the leadership process. This is a critical perspective that should not

be overlooked in Leadership Studies. With this, those who do not have the confidence or knowledge to access change-agent roles and opportunities are left to search for development and activism with empty hands. Literature goes so far as to identify leaders as those who "give orders and are superior in rank" which deems followers as "Inferior" "sheep" who are "given conditions to obey and act" (Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten, 2013, p. 89-90). And yet, the classes, though minimum in presence, mention the same textbook, *Followership: How Followers are Creating Change and Changing Leaders* by Barbara Kellerman, that calls out followers as "those who have an impact on those far better positioned than they" (Kellerman, 2008, p. 11). With this critical perspective being taught in classrooms, students develop a competence that not only puts value in followership in the process of leadership, but as a valued "uncertain terrain of leadership" as well. As a result, the role leader-centric studies and classes on leaders and studies of leadership romanticize leaders as catalysts for action, making followers and their contributions invisible and misunderstood. Yet, with the presence of follower-centric curriculum, students will not only value followership, but find their own worth as identify followers.

Consequently, this self-worth of publicly identifying in Followership will push toward less of a need for private spaces, and develop more public spaces-developing a true process of Authentic Leadership. Authentic Leadership is defined as "the confluence of positive psychology, transformational leadership and moral/ethical leadership, and the authentic leader is someone who is confident hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, moral/ethical, future-oriented and gives priority to developing associates to be leaders" (Komives, 2013, p. 86). In this, authentic leaders are those who act in alignment with their values, knowing "who they are, what they believe in and value, and act upon those values while transparently interacting with others" (Komives, 2013, p. 86). While this form of leadership is ideal, it does not recognize the spaces that provide (or do not provide) full support of identities, giving identities access to full authentic action. In this, even if followership was taught as an "uncertain terrain of leadership", the identity of a follower- meekness, conformity, and obedience to cause or leader- do not reside in public spaces or at tables that deem them valuable. Instead, these identities are only talked about and processed in private spaces. Like the emotional leaders in *The Wounded Leader: How Leaders Emerge in Times of Crisis* (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002), leaders who define themselves as those who make change through following are left feeling powerless because only certain identities are allowed to take lead. In this, more published literature on Followership will not only rewrite the narrative of social change agents, but also make way for leaders of all capacities and identities to truly practice Authentic Leadership, and instill value in the role of followers and the concept of followership.

## Methods

For this research, I chose to collect data through personal, private journals from throughout my childhood through my early adulthood. Journals are rich data that provide “multiple and competing identities” in one single space, without being influenced by outside perspectives (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004, p. 173). Collecting data on experiences, identities, and feelings of belonging has potential to be tainted or revised to seem appropriate. In the same way that leaders are given systems that may not allow for full expression of some identities, research accumulated from interviews or panels may be tailored to fit the need of the image of the topic provided. For example, perceptions of experiences in in-person interviews may “change over time” and “be limited by what the participant remembers” and how they remember it (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004, pp. 174-175). These pieces of research can be called “solicited diaries” or “accounts produced specifically at the researcher’s request” where the writing or interview responses are in full “knowledge of external consumption” (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004, p. 173). In this, response authenticity is negotiated for collectors’ approval. As a result, in order to avoid these biases, I chose to use my own personal, private journals as means means to analyze processing of competing identities without mediation.

## Journaling

As one of five siblings who is also a twin, a young biracial woman, and a writer, I used journals and notebooks to process sibling rivalry, develop senses of self-worth, and create worlds in which genuine and authentic narration of life events could be expressed without mediation. In these journals, I could take on more authentic roles of myself than the outside world, where culture and family dynamics often censored which identities were appropriate and which seemed weak or taboo. With five siblings and a twin sister, I found myself in the crosswinds of everyone else’s success and beliefs. Sibling rivalry caused me to perceive myself as “always coming up short” and only achieving success through an “inheritance” of my siblings best-selling storylines. My siblings were natural born leaders, and I was never at the forefront. I followed in their footsteps, and even though I gained respect and academic success by doing so, I was seen as weak and emotional because I spent most of my hours alone in my room curled up next to journals. I used journaling to cope with feeling outcasted, to express battles of mental health that were mocked by my mother, and to find myself in the midst of my siblings. Certain inherited pieces of my identity were valued- such as having a similar GPA to that of my siblings, or joining the same sport teams as my siblings- but those that were not like my siblings- like struggling with an eating disorder or making sense of physical abuse from my mother- were explored in weekly journals and poems that I wrote from ages 16 years old to 22 years old. As a result of uninterrupted and uncensored expression, I began healing, using private spaces to process and inform needs in public spaces. Journals taught me the importance of

following others, while also teaching me that systems like societal beliefs or cultural beliefs can or cannot give our identities access to worth and authentic expression. In this, my journals have become rich data that has called my attention to authentic expression and rewriting the narrative of destructive and exclusive roles and practices of leadership. The journals I wrote exposed me to the idea that private spaces like journals, are the places in which “uncertain terrains of leadership” lay.

## Themes of Journaling

### The Stigma

In poems and journal entries from the age of 16 years old to 22 years old, I found escape and voice by writing to process the world around me. At the age of 13 years old, my parents divorced, and for 3 years, I struggled to process new dynamics and expectations in the household. While I’ve identified myself as a biracial woman, born to an Irish father and a Filipino mother, the time in which my parents divorced and father moved out, I found myself surrounded by heavy Asian cultural expectations. Success was seen through the lens of academic excellence, an inherent slim figure, and a mental toughness that was unbothered by pressure or high expectations. With five siblings, my mom encouraged us to “not follow the pack” but would contrast her sentiments and tell us to “be more like each other”. I wondered what this meant, and what it looked like to get the nod of approval. These expectations were my greatest motivation and burden, as they left little to no room for failure, following, or growing. I felt stuck. I wanted nothing more than to “please my mom”, but struggled with how to fit her molds, and feel “comfortable with who I was”. I wrote often that, “family isn’t supposed to call you fat, stupid, emotional, or sensitive. I just seem so bad- but how do I apologize, for just being... ME?” (Gibson, 2012, Journal). In fact, in a journal entry I wrote on November of 2013, I wrote:

“With so many kids in my family,  
Reputation is like an inheritance of hand me downs.  
The Old, the Good. The Tattered, the Torn.  
At first, you’re cold-  
Vulnerable enough to do anything to create the warmth of  
making someone proud.  
You stand stripped and alone,  
And appreciate what is given to you.  
It’s easily recognizable, and comfortable  
Even if it is not you.  
Then, people look at you-  
Who you are, and who you aren’t.  
Why aren’t you REALLY like everyone else, they’ll ask.

You've been handed down these reputations and  
 expectations,  
 And no one understands that you've grown out of it-  
 You've become your own person.  
 No one understands how much power,  
 That inherited sweater can hold."

### Isolation and Processing in Private Spaces

The turmoil of cultural expectations and characteristics my mother affirmed, meant a false sense self-esteem and guilt, because I knew how to win the approval of those closest to me, but the "person in the mirror, I began to hate" (Gibson, 2013, Journal). I questioned what role I played in my own storyline. In the same way, curriculum at school echoed the sentiments I was taught at home; Heroes in literature were fearless, and the characteristics of leaders were always described as limitless. It felt like I could not escape the narratives written before me; I felt as though there was not a story for me to fit. As a result, I began writing in journals hidden from my family, a secret place to cry over break-ups with boyfriends, battles with body issues, and verbal abuse that seemed to only bother me. In this, my journals were the spaces in which I talked about experiences that were stigmatized as taboo, inappropriate, or "airing dirty family laundry" (Gibson, 2011, Journal) by my mother. My journals became a space that I privately fit in, even when I stood "alone, afraid, hurt, and broken hearted. Scars open, tears shed, ready to take in more pain- because I am a fighter" (Gibson, 2011, Journal). I was expected to do nothing more or less than make my school's honor roll, compete in the same sports as my siblings, and to "not cry or show fear" (Gibson, 2012, Journal). These expectations painted a heavy picture that made leadership and acceptance seem out of reach, and stigmatized followership as a "weakness of not making a name for yourself, and just stealing the success of someone else". Therefore, the stigma of being seen as "fat", "weak", a "loser" and "cry baby" were contrasted with ideals of being "valued", "beautiful" and "a leader". Words began holding definitions that took away a personal and authentic power, and the value of certain titles or characteristics isolated who I was and who everyone expected me to be. The comfort of an inherited and approved definition of self was served with an exhausting burden of expectations.

### Isolation and Processing in Private Spaces

Navigating these identities was a challenge, and I desperately yearned for a place to authentically express my truest self without penalty. While the journals remained unshared for years, the pages provided small glimpses into critical processing that gave me permission to voice frustration, illustrate beauty in intersections of self, and how I instilled worth and value "unexplored terrains" of my own leadership and followership. In public

spaces, I was scared to voice passions or fears, but in my journals, I was the hero of the narrative- I had the power to pen the story with the ending that made me feel most valued. Navigation through personal journals gave me the space to make sense of inherited identities. In fact, in a journal entry from February of 2012, I wrote:

"Out on the sea  
 Navigating my journey,  
 With another captain's compass.

It feels like the destination is right, but not for me.

Forging through waters,  
 They make the call,  
 All I do is steer.

Yes ma'am. Yes sir.

Anywhere you want, out on the open sea

Without me.

I'm no one's captain

Not even my own.

I don't belong on this ship

Or at home.

I'm here

Tell me why

I'm out on the sea

With someone else's compass."

With these words, I discovered the rich tool of journaling and poetry as a sacred, yet private space that informed me of the authenticity and need for personal leadership (or "unexplored terrains of leadership") to be valued in public spaces that allowed for new perspectives. I saw the need to empower those like me- without a narrative to truly be proud of- to rewrite the narratives that pressure us out of being our most authentic selves. Therefore, I recognize that if public spaces, like expectations, curriculum, or widespread societal values do not outwardly accept, value, or encourage our most prized identities, we are left to battle with self and navigate in private spaces like journals, to compensate

and compromise for positional acceptance. In this, I desired to break free of private spaces and lead or follow unapologetically. How was I truly practicing authentic leadership, with this desire to be visibly valued and accepted in the way? As a result, rewriting the narrative in my journals meant regaining a sense of personal power that I could not yet unleash publicly, but developed strength in private. While processing in journals helped, I often wondered if the world was “ever going to be ready for me”. In fact, in a journal entry from September of 2013, I wrote:

“These are the only pages where I can honor and love myself.

I want to break the silence, with an authentic belting echo.  
But I know that there will always be someone, in some place that will tell me to

Sit down, be quiet, and act appropriate.

I'll just write here instead. Stories make the most sense anyway.

Maybe this one will break the silence of a lifelong follower.”

In summary, I use the term “rewriting the narrative” as my own exploration of unexplored leadership terrain. The weapon against exclusive narratives and leadership pedagogies has been the processing of thought, cultural expectations, and societal values in journals that have remained private. Now, as rich data, they provide insight that calls forth the need to publish more literature and curriculum on followership to rewrite the narrative of social change, practice authentic leadership and instill worth in a follower’s storyline. Like myself, there are many waiting for a storyline to be written in which they can relate and find meaning in a character and plot like their own. While rewriting the narrative can complicate the way in which leadership has become a highly recommended skill, one must push to include another voice in the exploration of these terrains. Redefining a long-standing cultural mindset like the one formed on leadership takes an immense amount of time and investment, but building curriculum and publishing literature to support the outward expression and growth of an identity like followership will allow students the ability to feel personal responsibility and passion for the change they are making. With this, one must take charge of this narrative with the pen in their own hand and rewrite the narrative in which even more people have the opportunity to be the catalyst for needed change. As a result, we break the silence and remove the stigma of what was once unexplored, not only to deepen our own understanding of followership as leadership, but giving authentic and personal power to those to which it belongs.

## Works Cited

- Gobble, M. M. (July 2017). The Value of Followership. Retrieved from <https://www.Research-TechnologyManagement.org/followers/017/>
- Ackerman, R.H & Maslin-Ostrowski, P. (2002) The Wounded Leader: How Real Leadership Emerges in Times of Crisis. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kellerman, B. (2008) Followership: How Followers are Creating Change and Changing Leaders. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing .
- Komives, S. (2013) Exploring Leadership for College Students Who Want to Make a Difference. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley and Sons Publishing
- Uhl-Bien, M. , Riggio, R. , Lowe K., & Carsten, M. (August 1 2013). Followership Theory. Retrieved from <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua>
- Guzzetti, B. & Gamboa, M. (2005).The informal writing of two adolescent girls. Retrieved from <https://asu.pure.elsevier.com/en/publications/online-journaling-the-informal-writings-of-two-adolescent-girls>