



**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**

BAM
CONFERENCE

3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER

ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

About BAM

The British Academy of Management (BAM) is the leading authority on the academic field of management in the UK, supporting and representing the community of scholars and engaging with international peers.

<http://www.bam.ac.uk/>

Developmental Paper
for
British Academy of Management
2019

Track13: Leadership and Leadership Development
Track Chair: Paul Joseph-Richard, Catherine Butcher

**Forgotten but not Gone:
Bring Physical and Non-physical Contexts back in Followership Research**

Summary

An independent relationship between contexts and followership has been widely developed in followership research. Contexts tend to be viewed as external objects constraining follower autonomy. In order to move away from such a passive conceptualization of followers, this paper draws from Critical Leadership Studies to examine the interdependent relationship between contexts and followers. It aims to examine the influence of the hybrid contexts (combining physical and non-physical contexts) on follower autonomy. The empirical findings show that the degree of follower autonomy is strongly associated with the particular contextual elements and illustrates how the followers express their autonomy by accepting, reinforcing, influencing and (re)shaping the contextual elements in diverse ways.

Introduction

The concept of follower autonomy is under-developed in contemporary followership research. Indeed, followership research has questioned the implicit assumption of mainstream leadership studies that portray followers as obedient and compliant ‘subordinates under the orders and directions of their leaders. Its call for more attention on followers not leaders still does away with the notion of autonomy. Under a trait-based approach, it investigates a list of positive characteristics (e.g. hardworking, productive, and constructive perceptions of work) and negative characteristics (e.g. easily influenced, incompetency and obedience) (see Junker & Dick, 2014; Mohamadzadeh et al., 2015). The positive quality such as ‘constructive perceptions of work’ denotes that followers are not always obedient and passive but are able to provide own opinions to leaders’ decisions. Under a role-based approach, it focuses on multiple follower roles such as passive, active and proactive role orientations. The proactive orientation, for instance, highlights followers’ abilities of directly voicing and challenging leaders’ views.

While the two approaches contradict the mainstream view of followers as ineffectual and passive, they still maintain a determinist and essentialist assumption of (Collinson, 2011; Ford & Harding, 2015). We argue that while they seem to provide a simple and effective recipe for moving away from mainstream leadership research, such an easy-to-follow recipe faces theoretical and empirical challenges. Holding an individualist view, a trait-based view tends to automatically allocate particular traits to followers without any consideration of the processes. In a similar manner, role-based approach is risky of allocating existing formal positions and structures to followers; as a consequence, followers are described as those who obediently follow leaders’ orders and instructions.

In order to release followers from the determinist and essentialist followership perspectives, this paper reconsiders the role of contexts on followers. We argue that a key reason why the literature develops a passive understanding of followers is the lack of the nature, features and impacts of specific contexts surrounding them. Trait-based approach focuses on psychological elements while removes followers out of their situated contexts; role-based approach presupposes a formal hierarchy on followers and does not move beyond such a determinist view. Even if there are some papers talking about contextual variables of follower contexts (e.g. Carsten et al., 2010), they do not know much how the formal elements are constructed and reconstructed through followers’ interactions with leaders.

This paper aims to advance a situated and relational understanding of follower contexts. Drawing upon post-heroic leadership theories and Critical Leadership Studies, the paper suggests that contexts are not pre-determined by individuals (leaders or researchers) but are the settings in which interactions between followers and leaders provide situated meanings. We conduct an interpretive study into a group of financial assistants who have face-to-face interactions with their managers within the same workplace and have everyday communications with financial analysts who are located at different cities or countries. We find that the hybridity in contexts (a combination of a physical and a non-physical context) can facilitate and construct follower-leader interactions, thereby contributing to an in-depth understandings of follower autonomy.

We argue that **follower autonomy** is not self-evident, but is intertwined with psychological, cultural, symbolic and technical contexts in which multiple opportunities and challenges are created and recreated to influence follower to improve or reduce their autonomy. In particular, we consider the relational character of followers' capabilities and abilities to shape and reshape their situated contexts. This is because it is only through their relational interactions with leaders that the meanings of contexts can be enacted. In this sense, this view significantly challenges the dualist relationship between followers and contexts in the existing literature. By providing a deeper exploration of the interplay between followers and contexts, we contribute to a nuanced understanding of followership or follower-leader relationships in specific contexts.

Conceptualizing Leadership and Followership Contexts

In this section, we conduct a systematic literature review and identify relevant studies on leadership and followership contexts in terms of three parts: mainstream leadership theories, post-heroic leadership theories and critical leadership studies, which provide different perspectives on the conceptualization of followership contexts.

To begin with, a large amount of leadership papers mentions the term 'context', but they do not provide a definitional

clarification and analytic depth on the concept. They maintain an implicit assumption that individual leaders can make a positive impact on their contexts, thereby undervaluing the role of followers in the processes. As Porter and McLaughlin (2006) argue, leadership context seems to be like "the weather: many talking about it, but very few doing much about it insofar as empirical research is constructed" (p. 559). Historically, mainstream leadership

approach has seen leadership as a function of individual leaders, focusing on characteristics, abilities, actions and roles of leaders; yet, it tends to undervalue context as an important part of leadership itself (Lord et al., 2013). Contingency leadership seems to portray multiple forms of contexts, it merely uses them to fit leaders' behaviors (Kruger & Seng, 2005). Authentic leadership investigates followers' perspectives and behaviors as a significant aspect of the leadership contexts, including followers' assessment systems (Sidani & Rowe, 2018), followers' work-family conflicts and enrichment (Braun & Nieberle, 2017) and follower moral identity and moral emotions (Zhu et al., 2011). Yet, the key problem is that these statistical models assume that follower cognitions and behaviors are one significant independent variable of authentic leadership. In this, leaders are privileged as the key players or dependent variable of leadership and followers are marginalized as a less valuable factor. Consequently, an unbalanced relationship between leaders and followers are produced.

In contrast, starting to suggest that leadership is socially constructed, post-heroic leadership understands contexts as collective, distributed, collaborative. Rather than viewing contexts as products of individual leaders, shared leadership, for instance, describe contexts as the opposite of hierarchical contexts that formal leaders dominate decision-making powers. It advances our understanding that contexts are more like team influencing constructs that contains team potency and team confidence (Nicolaidis et al., 2014) and task cohesion and ambiguity (Serban & Roberts, 2016). In this regard, post-heroic leadership introduces many actors and elements except individual leaders into the construct of contexts, providing a dynamic and relational understanding of leadership context.

Furthermore, Critical Leadership Studies provide a more complicated understanding of leadership contexts. Leadership-as-practice is a good illustration. Endrissat and von Arx (2013) suggest that contexts and leadership practices are recursive: contexts are produced by practices and contexts historically influence and stabilize practices. In this sense, contexts are highly dynamic, carrying multiple practices, negotiations and even conflicts (Liu, 2015). Post-structuralist, post-colonialist and feminist approaches emphasize that contexts encompass power dynamics and the various ways of legitimization strategies (Diochon & Nizet, 2019). In particular, Collinson (2006) points out that followers are an important part of leadership contexts, because followers' interactions with leaders significantly influence the meanings of leadership itself.

Accordingly, leadership research depicts various forms of contexts in which leaders constitute different relationships with followers. This body of literature arises awareness for my argument that leadership contexts do

not pay attention to followers as the contexts to which they refer. Although they attempt to consider followers' influences by drawing on different shapes of contexts, they found it difficult to gain a nuanced understanding how followers themselves become a constituted part of the contexts they are embedded. As argued by Collinson (2005), these leadership studies neglect the fact that followers are "proactive, self-aware and knowing subjects" (p. XX).

This paper addresses this valuable gap by providing a context-sensitive analysis of how followers shape their contexts during their interactions with their leaders. Inspired by a growing amount of followership research in leadership field, the value of theorizing about and studying followers' perspectives, behaviors and processes have been lately emphasized (Bligh, 2011; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). It shifts the focus from how leaders and leading are perceived to how followers and following are influential. This focus shift is insightful to improve the unbalanced relationship between leaders and followers by examining how followers achieve their effects including the (re-)production of contexts.

Nevertheless, I still find that most followership research lacks an adequate analysis of followership contexts. While it is suggested that followership cannot occur in a vacuum, the contemporary studies tend to disassociate followers from their contexts. I concentrate on two major followership approaches, i.e. trait-based and role-based, investigating how they explore the relationships between followers and contexts. In line with mainstream leadership studies, the trait-based followership approach disregards contexts as a very important element of understanding follower characteristics. For instance, Junker and Dick (2014), have identified significant contextual factors including gender, culture and age and these factors are assumed to impact generating follower prototypes. Despite of this, they maintained an objectivist ontology assumption in that followership is about individual followers. This assumption causes them to regard contextual elements as external variables through which they are allowed to come closer to the reality of followership.

In a similar manner, role-based approach repeats the mistake of the trait-based approach. Uhl-Bien and Carsten (2016), for example, suggest that exploring different contexts can produce a deeper understanding of followership. They seek to illustrate three different followership contexts, that is a hierarchical, a distributed leadership and a network context). Here followership context can be seen as significant signals that offer potential meanings to the circumstances in which the actors are embedded. Followers can be influenced to define and enact different roles in different contexts (Carsten et al., 2010). At this point, they appear to place an emphasis on contextual influence.

Unfortunately, their elaborations on the features of contexts reveal an inadequate understanding on the concepts. They illustrate that a hierarchical context 'does not allow much flexibility for a subordinate' (p. 145), since it creates a tight top-down atmosphere that reinforces a leader's capability and authority but constrains the follower to make a substantial contribution; in contrast, they claim that a network context 'provides rich environments for studying naturally occurring followership enactments' (p. 150), as leader and follower roles are not enforced by top-down positions, but are allowed to build up collaborate and open relationships. They consider little about how a hierarchical context produces top-down relationship while a network context shapes collaborative relationship. By assuming too much on the features and functions of the two contexts, they are trapped into a determinist and reductionist way of thinking on followership context.

Hence, the two followership approaches merely focus on their attention on the objective characteristics of followership contexts, instead of conceptualizing it more comprehensively. This produces a passive conceptualization of followers and their contexts in which they are independently separated. The contexts become a passive and pre-determined 'container' where follower characteristics and behaviors can be automatically placed and contained. Their own perspectives and actions do not exert influence on the shapes of the contexts. Yet, it is interesting to see that the term 'context', in Latin root, refers to weaving or knitting together (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). This implies that contexts and individuals are not separated but are intersected to produce complicated dynamics. To produce a more nuanced understanding of followership contexts, the next section moves to pay attention to the specific kind of the followership contexts, hybrid contexts, combining a physical context with a non-physical context. This focus potentially introduces new meanings and dynamics into followership context research.

Understanding Hybrid Contexts

Given context can be viewed as dynamic and relational, this section explores how hybrid contexts add fruitful meanings to the existing followership literature. I argue that the followership literature emphasizes too much on the physical aspect of context while overlooks the possibility that followers may be located in the non-physical aspect of context. I see that leadership research in recent years has started to fill in this gap by examining the non-physical context where actors are dispersed at different locations and use communication tools to interact with each other. Unfortunately, while the literature highlights a new movement away from merely focusing on a physical context towards a new context, it is still constrained within a dualist assumption, i.e. either physical or

non-physical context. Differentiated from the literature, I aim to develop a both/and view by combining a physical with a non-physical context, which provides a more nuanced understanding on how the two contexts influenced followers to shape new dynamics with other actors.

The hybrid contexts were derived from the rise of globalization that produced dispersed work arrangements. Nowadays many employees need to interact with diverse people, which not just include the managers and the peers in the same workplace but also remote person who offer technical supports to projects. Interactions are more dispersed than ever, across cities or countries (Baralou & Tsoukas, 2015; Dixon & Panteli, 2010). This new phenomenon has attracted the attention of leadership scholars who have started to explore what this new context is. It is seen that many leadership studies use the notion of ‘virtual context’ to describe this technology-mediated context (e.g. Purvanova & Kenda, 2018; Zimmermann et al., 2008). This definition is built upon the fact that leaders and followers now use information and technology rather than face-to-face elements (e.g. facial expressions, body movement) to accomplish tasks. I argue that this is a narrow view of the new change in contemporary organizations, because the actors may still have face-to-face interactions with certain actors (e.g. colleagues, managers) in the same workplace and they do not isolate themselves there. So, I suggest the notion of ‘**hybrid contexts**’ that juxtapose physical and non-physical interactions, allowing for multiple types of interactions: followers are located at a physical context where they have face-to-face interactions with other actors; they are also embedded within a non-physical context where they lack face-to-face interactions but employ communication tools to extend their interactions.

Here, it should be noted that geographical distance is an important feature of the hybrid contexts. On the surface level, it may physically constrain followers to interact with geographically dispersed actors; but, at the same time, by reducing the face-to-face interactions with their colleagues, followers may be granted new opportunities of “increase connectivity and interactivity” with those who are geographically dispersed (Dixon & Panteli, 2010, p. 1179). The details of how geographical distance and distance impact followership will be discussed in the next section.

With the definition of hybrid contexts, now I move to see how the contexts offers opportunities and challenges for followers and leaders in their interactions with each other. Many leadership scholars claim that what constitutes effective leadership has been changed, i.e. leadership characteristics, behaviors and styles have to be changed

when the actors are arranged to work dispersedly. Zimmerman et al (2008), for instance, highlight that “(we have to) write down more clearly what we mean...humor is often badly understood in e-communication and I most often go through my own mail messages before sending, to correct ambiguities” (p. 329). Leaders cannot assume that face-to-face knowledge can be directly applied into the new context. Due to the lack of visual elements, manager’s ability can be “diluted by the temporary nature of interaction and the ambiguous, frequently changing reporting relationships” (Den Hartog et al., 2007). Avail and Kahai (2003) explain that “the patterns of how information is acquired, stored, interpreted and disseminated are changed”. As a result, it is seen that leaders use more symbols in virtual teams than in face-to-face contexts (Sivunen, 2006). Besides, there are other challenges including unclear role expectations, lack of motivation and trust, and difficulty in building up a collective purpose (Huang et al., 2010).

These challenges post a call for enhancing limited leadership skills and abilities. It is suggested that leaders need to develop task-oriented and relationship-based behaviors (e.g. Yoo & Alvavi, 2004; Zimmermann, 2008). Concerning tasks, they have to clarify rules, provide necessary resources and monitor performance (Hambley et al., 2007; Shollen & Brunner, 2014). Concerning relationships, informal communication, not formal communication, can bring more detailed, regular and prompt support for team members (Al-Ani et al., 2011). It is also claimed that leaders who are elected to leading virtual teams should have a both-and mindset, as these leaders have particular traits such as tolerance for ambiguity and integrative complexity, which help them to resolve complicated situations in the new context (Purvanova & Kenda, 2018). I do not intend to provide a comprehensive review of all the relevant studies, but just provides a glimpse into how contemporary leadership researchers understand and cope with the threats arising from the new context.

Unfortunately, the studies still take a narrow view of the relationship between leadership and the hybrid contexts. They tend to maintain a leader-centric assumption in that leaders are the key actors in managing and controlling the new challenges of the new context. It is argued by Al-Ani et al (2011) that leadership roles become blurred in the new contexts. The interviewees (distributed team members) indicated that their leaders were selected by multiple reasons: some leaders were selected simply by availability; some were selected by their skills of task completion; others were selected by prior experience. In this sense, traditional leadership lying on one or two single individuals is increasingly ‘fuzzy’ in the contexts, as there are new opportunities for followers to rethink who are leaders and who are they.

Moving away from such a narrow understanding of the relationship between leadership and the hybrid contexts, I draw upon the ideas from Dixon and Panteli (2010)' paper that makes a definition of 'virtuality in team'. They suggest that a 'hybrid' form of team produces 'virtual continuities', emerging to "mitigate the perceived effects of boundaries" (p. 1194). This may be a sign that a formal boundary or position may not play a central role in followership. It is reported that team members emphasized the importance of both task and process roles for 'good' leaders, and undervalue the necessity of a hierarchical structure in which project managers were at the higher levels (Al-Ani et al., 2011). As an employee in an interview conducted by Blom and Alvesson (2014) states, "I think that the ones that exercise the most significant influence on my work are as a matter of the other experts in the global virtual community" (p. 349). By interacting with multiple actors and accomplishing multiple tasks, followers can select someone who is influential and overlook the other who is least influential.

Interestingly, Collinson (2006) also argues that followers may improve their ability of making 'dramaturgical claims' about where they are and what they are doing (Collinson, 2006, p. 186). At this point, the distancing feature complemented by communication tools may enable them to manage their interactions with others. For instance, telephone enables followers to make geographically dispersed actors to feel as if the followers are 'there, together'(Rettie, 2009); simultaneously it allows the followers themselves to strive for breathing space, and even facilitate their resistance. Email is also relevant for strategic interactions. Followers can make choices on who is emailed, who is copied in and who is excluded (Collinson, 2006).

Yet, this does not mean that followers are totally autonomous and independent. While they appear to have fewer constraints imposed by managers and become more creative to act, their autonomy can be restricted by new types of monitoring such as the electronic monitoring (Dimitrova, 2003), collective performance monitoring (Valsecchi, 2006) and time monitoring (McCabe, 2013). They do not have many physical contacts with managers, but they are "still bound up in a necessarily exploitative employment relationship" (Sewell & Taskin, 2015, p. 1509). Thus, there are more ambiguous, contradictory and complicated meanings emerging in the hybrid context.

Hence, paying a specific attention to a non-physical context does not mean that I simply focus on the differences and uniqueness with the physical context. Instead, the similarities of the two contexts are also regarded as the basic appreciation aspect. Johns (2017) argues that contexts share "common contextual antecedents" (p. 588). As elaborated in the paragraph above, followers in the non-physical context also experience power differentials, asymmetric relationships and specific work design. To a certain degree the non-physical and the physical context

provide a list of 'traditional' contextual resources that constrained or facilitated followers' autonomy. As the Latin root of the term 'context' refers to weaving or knitting together (Rousseau & Fried, 2001), the concept of hybrid contexts has the potential to provide for an integration on many contextual elements, allowing for describing a new picture of followership. Hence, my key aim in this paper is to investigate the impact of the hybrid contexts on follower autonomy, I develop three research questions below:

- (a) What are the features of the contexts occurring between the followers and leaders?
- (b) How do contexts constrain or enable followers?
- (c) How can the followers and leaders actively manage the contextual opportunities and challenges?

Research Site: FinanCo

My study organization, FinanCo, is an India-owned financial analytics organization. It offers research and analytics services to more than 500 world's leading commercial and investment banks, insurance companies, consulting firms, private equity players and asset management firms. Founded in the 1980s, it remains headquartered in India; but due to its strategic demand, it has expanded in Europe, North America, South America and Asia. Now it has developed research centers in Argentina, China, India and Poland, which provide research supports all around the world. With such an internationalization of its business, FinanCo has increasingly become more dispersed and localized and owns multiple interactions with various clients across different counties and cities. Concerning its nature, it is an outsourcing organization. Outsourcing, in the financial field, means that top investment banks or other financial institutions receive the demands from their investors and then 'offshore' a significant number of research capacity (collecting and analyzing quantitative data) to a third-party organization. The third party, like FinanCo, is expected to provide acceptable or better quality of quantitative data to those financial institutions.

My study site is not the whole organization, but one of the most important research centers, located at Shanghai, China. It recruits financial assistants who have specific financial expertise and communication skills. There are around 40 assistants who are titled as full-time senior and junior financial assistants. They are expected to provide everyday communication and supports to the analysts of the investment banks globally and satisfy their needs at maximum level. They need to provide the service of data collection and analysis via emails and telephone calls. The assistants are aged less than 35 years old and most of them are fresh graduates who received master's degrees

of US, UK, Australia and other foreign universities.

Besides, the number of managers in the same workplace is limited to two Indian managers and one Chinese manager. They are responsible for daily managerial work including resolving technical and communication problems occurred between the assistants and the clients. Interestingly, they do not directly engage in the content of tasks collaborated between the other two parties; instead, they come to provide supports only when they are called upon. So, at most of time, it is the assistants' decisions if they wanted the managers to help their tasks. Hence, it is explicit to see that there are two contexts, a physical context between the assistants and managers who can have face-to-face contacts everyday while a non-physical context between the assistants and analysts who can utilize communication tools to enact their interactions.

Data Collection and Data Analysis Methods

This paper chooses a qualitative research design. It is an iterative and reflexive process in which the data provides the primary understandings of the research site and the researcher revisits and connects data with the subscribed theoretical concepts. I aim to capture how the three participants' (i.e. financial assistants, financial analysts and managers) understood their relationships with other actors. So, I conducted 32 semi-structured individual interviews in both face-to-face and electronic types. From 28th June 2017 until 10th August 2017, I spent more than two months accessing these participants, negotiating their interview times, and interviewing them. The prime interview source was well recorded and transcribed before data analysis. The participants were selected in terms of different ages (around 22-40), departments (IT, Sales and Research departments), positions (both junior and senior), the sectors they focus on (real estate, media, clothes), working years (from several months to five years), education backgrounds (US, UK, Australia and other universities) and gender (male and female). Especially for the financial analysts who were located at different countries, I chose to use Wechat, popular Chinese mobile chatting software, to collect how they interpreted their interactions with their assistants. The interviews provide the opportunity to understand actors' experiences and interpretations in such hybrid contexts.

Concerning data analysis, I used an inductive approach to draw codes, categories and themes from the empirical data. Although data analysis is considered as "the black hole of qualitative research" (Lather, 1991, p. 149), I tried to clarify my analysis and convincingly show my work step-by-step by drawing upon interpretive data analysis frameworks (e.g. Gioia, 1991, 2012; Leitch & Hill, 2017; Marlow & McAdam, 2015; Micelotta & Raynard, 2011).

I see that the boundaries to methodological flexibility lie within any particular framework are open to be altered bit by bit based on different empirical situations (Lyons & Coyles, 2007), so I have certain freedom to design the analysis framework in a way that closely relates to my specific research aims.

First, by making sense of data, I identified hundreds of descriptive codes that derived from the participants' interpretations. These codes capture the contextual elements the followers and leaders experience. I did not use a start-up list of codes from the existing followership research, because the specific contexts the participants were embedded is sharply different from those described in literature. Second, I developed dozens of categories and sub-categories to capture the connections and relationships between codes (leitch & Hill, 2015). The categories represent the 'contextual elements' embedded within the participants' interactions. In the following section, I use two tables to summarize the features and impacts of the elements on the followers. It is important to note that all the elements or categories belong to certain narrative accounts that prevent them from removing out of their original interpretation. Third, I produced themes that represent the mediate between categories and the theoretical stories (Gioia et al., 2012). In this study, the themes represent specific contexts that are embedded within the broad physical and non-physical contexts. The cultural, temporal, symbolic and structural contexts reveal different aspects of the hybridity. Finally, after several rounds of interpretation, the codes, categories and themes emerged to develop a theoretical story of the relationship between followers and their contexts.

Findings

In the process of analyzing the relationship between follower autonomy and contexts, two key questions arise in my mind: what is 'a context' to a follower if all her interactions and relations are somehow constitutive part of the context? Should I consider only the actors as the relations relevant to him or her, or does non-human aspects such as physical workplace and communication tools count as well? I recognize that shifting from leadership context to followership context is not only about relocating context, giving voices to followers and getting closer to their work. It is rather an important matter of changing our understanding of what followership context is and what the relationship between contexts and followers is. Doing this, as discussed above, requires a situated, dynamic and relational view of context. I suggest that followership context is constituted and displayed not only through the assistants' interactions with their managers and peers in the same workplace, but also with their remote analysts across cities and countries. This means that turning to followership context does not necessarily privilege given or pre-determined organizational and social elements that play significantly role in determining the context. Instead, I

need to understand their lived experience and perspectives through which the meanings of contexts can emerge and can be articulated. Moreover, the communication tools such as email and telephone play a significant role in influencing followers' interactions with other actors. Yet this does not mean that the tools themselves facilitate or constrain followers' autonomy. The use of the tools, especially taking advantage of the features of emails and telephone, offered followers and leaders different opportunities of influencing each other.

According to the findings, I exhibit a list of contextual factors that facilitate and constrain followers' actions and perspectives. The contextual factors are sharply different from those in pre-existing literature. Because the latter treat the factors as priori constructs that generate a static view of leadership and followership context. As discussed above, this static and determinist view of context is problematic, since it implies a high level of predictability and neglects how the factors are constructed. My study shows that these contextual factors are more dynamic: this dynamism means that they emerge and evolve through the interactions between the assistants and other actors. The following diagram presents a table of the contextual factors and briefly illustrates the extent to which they enable and constrain followers' perspectives and actions. In doing so, I can develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between followers and their contexts.

Generally, the two tables show two kinds of contextual factors, widely-shared contextual factors and personal-specific contextual factors. The first refers to organizational, cultural and social factors embedded within the hybrid contexts. The factors reveal how the managers and analysts made use of the factors to exert impact on follower autonomy. In contrast, the second refers to those related to the analysts' and managers' personal characteristics such as knowledge, work experience and education backgrounds.

Table 1: The person-specific contextual elements mentioned by the participants

	Features	Impacts on followers
Analysts' personal characteristics	Analysts' professional knowledge, work experience, education backgrounds	Motivating followers (or assistants) to build up strong expectations of learning from these analysts; Followers' autonomy is delimited by the strong personal characteristics
Supports and feedbacks	Some analysts' timely feedbacks on the assistants' questions; Others' reluctance of providing feedbacks;	Encouraging followers to engage in more discussions with the analysts; Causing followers to withdraw their questions and discussions; Followers are able to articulate own judgments and challenge the analysts' negative responses;
Allocation of resources	Some analysts granted part of decision rights to their assistants; Other analysts dominated the decision rights tightly;	Inspiring followers to produce insightful ideas and consider themselves as key parts of the collaboration processes; Constraining followers within passive and obedient subordinates; Followers accept and maintain the dominant relationships by allowing the analysts to control the main arguments of the reports;
Colleagues' personal characteristics	Colleagues' prior study experience, education backgrounds, skills and hobbies;	Perceived similarities in personal characteristics allowed them to establish friendship and produce 'collusive' actions. \ Perceived differences caused them to view each other as distinct and not so attached; Followers are aware of the similarities and differences with the colleagues and attempt to re-shape the relationships;
Working atmosphere	Managers' strategies of creating friendly and relaxing environment	Enabling followers to engage in many discussions with managers and expression of negative emotions; Causing them to undervalue the role of managers; Followers are able to proactively underplay the roles of managers and perceive themselves as more important; but they are partially constrained by the managers' strategies;

Table 2: The widely-specific contextual factors mentioned by the participants

	Features	Impacts on followers
National culture	The power distance between the analysts' national environments and the assistants' national environments	Serving as precondition of understanding the analysts' environments; Leading followers to classify the analysts into different attached and detached relationships; Followers accept and maintain the power differentials in terms of national culture.
Nature of jobs	Independent tasks and no individual conflicts involved	Enabling followers to establish friendship and co-produce collusive actions; Followers utilized their self-control on tasks to re-shaping relationships with colleagues;
Nature of communication tools	Emails as an asynchronous tool with a time lag; telephones as a synchronic tool without time lag;	Enabling followers to create and manage their 'presence' to the analysts; Constraining followers to comply with the instructions of the analysts; Followers perceive and manipulate the specific features of the tools and exert strong control over their interactions with the analysts.
Camera surveillance	Office and door cameras to monitor the assistants' performance	Exerting controlling on the assistants' actions; Facilitating followers the opportunities of 'escaping' from the cameras; Followers are able to identify the blind spaces out of cameras and challenge the camera power.
Geographical distance	Physical separation between assistants and analysts	Constraining followers to have face-to-face interactions which bring nuanced meanings and understandings; Enabling followers to transcend beyond the separation; Followers are able to develop flexible means of moving closer to their analysts; but at the same time, they are constrained by the physical distance.
Formal work	Assistants and managers are in	Causing followers to respect for managers

relationships

formal superior-subordinate relationships; assistants and analysts are in client-supporter relationships;

and analysts;

Offering the chances of transforming the relationships in new ways;

Followers are able to utilize various contextual resources to challenge and reproduce the relationships; but they at the same time reinforced the relationships to a certain extent.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results presented above, I represent the hybrid contexts in terms of cultural, temporal, symbolic and structural dimensions. As I define before, the context refers to a setting in which interactions between followers and leaders take place. Within the hybrid contexts, I suggest the geographical or physical distance as a necessary factor, but not a sufficient condition to constitute the contexts. Because I hold that the contexts must have potential for significant psychological, cultural, symbolic, temporal and structural consequences that occur in physical distance or proximity. More importantly, these consequences of which are considered as significant are highly constructed through the interactions between followers and leaders who have the capacity to produce different degrees of impacts on followers.

First of all, the cultural context here is defined as the setting in which a set of shared values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of the group of followers and leaders. It includes the cultural backgrounds of the analysts, the office atmosphere as friendly and relaxing and workplace surveillance.

Secondly, the temporal context refers to the positioning of a particular task or resource, an immediate order or feedback within the interactions between the followers and the leaders. It influences how their communication topics are to be addressed and related, and how their work relationships are maintained or challenged. The context includes the supports and feedbacks and allocation of resources.

Thirdly, the symbolic context refers to the setting in which all messages or orders (primarily in texts and voices) from the remote analysts influence the followers' understandings and actions of the orders. The category of nature of communication tools is a typical example. Next, the psychological context refers to the subjective experience arising from the individual characteristics of others. Followers produce different feelings towards the remote analysts and colleagues whose professional knowledge, work experience, education background, skills and hobbies evidently impact the followers.

Finally, the structural context is defined as the setting in which formal positions and informal relationships are constructed and reconstructed around the followers and leaders. The formal superior-subordinate relationship between the followers and their managers and the informal relationship between the followers and the remote analysts are the typical examples.

My conceptualization of the hybrid contexts provides several theoretical implications for future followership research. First, my use of a contextual lens starts to recognize that followers are highly embedded within their contexts. The role of the followership context has been largely undervalued in the literature with regard to theoretical elaborations as well as empirical design. My study advances the existing understanding that the hybrid contexts play an important role in shaping and reshaping what followership is.

Second and relatedly, my research unpacks the various elements and dimensions of contexts, which are co-constructed by followers and leaders and also exert influence on their interactions. On the one hand, followers themselves are often powerless to change their contexts involving leader surveillance and control; as a result, they look to their leaders' instructions and orders. In this sense, the hybrid contexts serve as a crucial precondition for followers' perspectives and behaviors. On the other hand, followers are responsible for their own perspectives and actions and they are capable of managing the meanings of their contexts. My discussion helps inform the literature of the complicated nature of follower autonomy, which is both constrained by their leaders and enabling to transfer meanings of the contexts. Concerning the existing followership literature, it merely considers either the active (or proactive) aspects of follower autonomy or the passive aspects of autonomy; it fails to develop a more dynamic and complicated perspective on the concept. In this way, followers are still conceptualized under the dualist understanding in which followers and leaders are placed at the opposing poles of followership or leadership. In contrast, my study presents how follower autonomy is shaped and reshaped in terms of a contextual lens. Especially, my analysis shows the details on how the followers created, maintained and challenged the elements and dimensions of their contexts.