



Relational Leadership Theory Informed by John 11:17-46

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Abstract

This paper addressed relational leadership theory through the exploration of John 11:17-46. Specifically, it explained what relational traits can be seen in the biblical text that may be applied to relational leadership theory and the implications for the leader and follower interaction. The pericope was analyzed with socio-rhetorical analysis, including inner texture, intertexture, and sacred texture review. The research found that Jesus in John 11:17-46 exhibited relationship-building characteristics with his followers. He engaged in interpersonal interactions, acted intentionally, and employed purposeful leadership to influence change. The leader-follower dynamic in the Scripture may be harnessed to enhance relational leadership theory in the way relational connections were built, how others were influenced, and the way the audience was motivated for future change. Limitations in the research included analysis of only one section of the New Testament. Further evaluated text may have provided additional or deeper insight from Scripture that could be applied to relational leadership theory.

Keywords: relational leadership, followership, leader-member exchange, Christian leadership, Johannine

Relational leadership theory (RLT) evolved into a multifaceted leadership theory focused on the interpersonal dynamics of the leader and follower in organizations. Features of the theory correlated to multiple leadership strategies inclusive of followership, transformational, transactional, and leader-member exchange (LMX). A deeper understanding of how relational connections were built, how others were influenced, and how the audience was motivated for future change may be discovered through a socio-rhetorical analysis (SRA) of John 11:17-46. Additional research may fill a gap in RLT, as Zhao et al. (2016) questioned where relationship influence came from and how it was present in the business world. Reit and Halevy (2020) noted the need to build the missing links between the impact of roles, power, and leadership theories. The

followers' perspective and desired leader style, per Notgrass (2014), may benefit from more research specific to relational leadership.

Studies conducted in the past decade on RLT appeared to contain significant information on LMX and the leader-and-follower connection. Salehzadeh (2020) studied the changing relationships in LMX based on various types of interpersonal relationships between leaders and followers. Salehzadeh noted that unique approaches were needed as people responded in various ways to the same kind of communication from a leader. In a review of LMX, Megheirkouni (2017) pointed out that the key to understanding relational connection in an organization was the depth of the relationship between the follower and leader. The concept of a high-value relationship in LMX, argued Li et al. (2018), strengthened when the parties were more closely aligned in the desired outcome and goals.

Reit and Halevy (2020) highlighted the influence of the leader and follower, noting that both could impact interactions. They observed that relational leadership was about both the leader and the follower. Zhao et al. (2016) framed relational leadership in the realm of power between two people in an organization and the ability to use that power to create change. In exploring followers' preference for leadership styles, Notgrass (2014) found that followers preferred relational leadership with transformational, transactional, and inspirational characteristics.

McCauley and Palus (2021) observed that the individuals committed to engagement with each other were constantly changing along with the interpersonal dynamic as part of the relationship. Lord et al. (2016) contended that trust, respect, and interactive behaviors were the connective traits with people who aligned relationally. Marchiondo et al. (2015) expanded on the identities of leaders as framed by followers in their acceptance or rejection of the individual regardless of the title. Engelsberger et al. (2022) stressed the importance of relationships in business to create cooperation to reach new goals. In their work on emergent leadership, Gruda and McCleskey (2022) discovered that in teams, relational influence impacted the collaboration toward solutions in groups and created leaders based on perception. Hao et al. (2017) stated that a relational leadership viewpoint led to problem-solving, shared ideas, and future creativity.

The purpose of the current study was to analyze John 11:17-46 to discover the biblical relational and interpersonal aspects that may be applied to RLT. Exploration of Scripture provided a great depth of understanding of how Jesus led in relationship with followers. Leaders may utilize the lessons learned to lead with a relational style from a Christian worldview.

Literature Review: Relational Leadership Theory

Historical Development, Major Authors, and Seminal Works of Theory

Early 1900s scholarly literature suggested an essential link between the interactive relationship of the leader and the follower that became the basis for RLT. Follett wrote and spoke of the uses of relational skills in organizations as early as the 1920s. Follett's series of four lectures in 1925 to the Bureau of Personnel Administration called "The Psychological Foundations of Business Administration" focused on relationships in business at the employee level with titles such as "Business as an Integrative Unity" (1926a), "Constructive Conflict" (1926b), "Power" (1926c), and "The Giving of Orders" (1926d) and spoke of the importance of engagement in dialogue in conflict and understanding each person's point of view. Follett encouraged leaders to be self-aware in the delivery of requests and to give decisions over to followers. Follett suggested that their behaviors may change when followers feel equally respected as part of a process, not separate or less than others. Follett (1926c) advocated for "power with" that developed through collaboration and consideration of the follower as part of a relationship with the leader, not as a subordinate (pp. 176-178).

In 1927, additional works from Follett were published: "Leader and Expert" (1927a), "The Psychology of Conciliation and Arbitration" (1927b), "The Psychology of Consent and Participation" (1927c), and "The Psychology of Control" (1927d; see also Metcalf, 1927). These works focused on relationships in business and purposeful interactions that created opportunities for exponential relational growth. Follett highlighted that when a company created agreement among employees at all levels to engage with each other, it benefited everyone in part due to informative dialogues that were present from the start. Follett explained that a company mission was not enough and that a company needed to show its workers through relationships that it was suitable for everyone to work to benefit the organizational goals. Follett declared that instead of the once-held thought of a leader holding sway over a team, team members might impact the leader in a long-term cycle of interaction. Follett may have been ahead of their time when they referenced relational leadership, as a significant move away from trait-based leadership appeared to take hold after the mid-1940s (Stogdill, 1975).

Decades later, Heinicke and Bales (1953) studied communication and its effects in small groups. Heinicke and Bales found that even when participants started as peers, their perceptions of specific individuals transformed into those of leaders after others experienced being in a relationship with them in the group. In "Basic Concepts for a Theory of Organization," Stogdill (1967) wrote that organizations relied on human factors that underlaid company structures. A key area of Stogdill's theory stemmed from people working together in mutual agreement for the company's growth. Stogdill stated that human interaction and attempts to understand each other's requests

amplified organizations. Stogdill emphasized that a relational leader had the ability to communicate the organization's desires and a company's responsibilities to followers, and all could agree on what those points were. The "interpersonal" aspect from Stogdill supported employee relational engagement and inclusive input from direct reports to supervisors (pp. B670-B671).

By 1975, relational interactions, per Stogdill (1975), were considered part of the leadership theory. Stogdill noted the need for additional research on the followers in the relationship. Stogdill suggested consideration of unity and contentment of team members. In the same year, Dansereau et al. (1975) expanded the idea with the study of the "vertical dyad" based on communication between leader and follower, the impact of how they see each other in their roles, and the outcomes of their interactions (p. 47). Ten years later, Snyder and Bruning (1985) researched the "supervisor-subordinate" socialization in the workplace and how it impacted the perception of the follower about work (pp. 81-94). They found that relational connection increased when the leader and follower had similar levels of intelligence.

Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) and Brower et al. (2000) dug into the field of research on dyads in the 1970s and later named this *leader-member exchange*. LMX explored the degree of relational connectivity, satisfaction, and acceptance of each other to create necessary results (Brower et al., 2000; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Graen and Uhl-Bien proposed that relational participation as part of LMX was both transactional and transformative, with the interpersonal value being different from previous transaction theories. Brower et al. noticed that followers were more willing to take on requests, produce higher quality work, and show loyalty to a leader based on relational trust as the main factor.

Uhl-Bien (2006) coined *relational leadership theory* as an umbrella for all the corollary relational leadership concepts in their scholarly article "Relational Leadership Theory: Exploring the Social Processes of Leadership and Organizing." The term *relational* in RLT was based on the continual adjustment of the leader-and-follower dynamic (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The following year, Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) took the relational concept of being dependent on "interaction" and made it one of the main factors when defining their research on complexity leadership where leaders encouraged small groups and multiple communication tools (pp. 302, 309).

Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien (2012) studied how the relational piece of leadership played out in their analysis using organizational discourse. They explored the relational techniques leaders used, including their words, ways of motivation, and expressions of authority. Another facet of RLT was featured when Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) published "Followership Theory: A Review and Research Agenda." They framed the connection and influence of the follower to the relationship with the leader. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) addressed

company expansion through continual adjustment and flexibility to meet the needs of a changing business world. They defined these thoughts as the relational parts of *conflicting* and *connecting*. Both actions warranted social engagement with the leaders' support to build bonds that improved teams (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018, pp. 99-100).

In the following 20 years, RLT research tied relational characteristics to niche areas of ethics, empathy, and sustainability. Rhodes and Badham (2018) noted that a leader who accounted for relational actions with ethics was part of a continuous cycle of virtuous interaction and responsibility with the follower. Jian (2022) called empathy, ethics, and a relational approach "relational ethics," which aligned with Rhodes and Badham's commitment to and value of relationships (pp. 932-934). Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) considered ethics as an occurrence in social interactions with the weight of genuine consideration. They also saw relational leadership development as a way to increase business sustainability. Kim (2022) pointed out that stability from beneficial employee output was more likely due to engagement with their leader in a relational way that reframed how they saw work.

Beyond 2020, multiple scholarly articles focused on the specific applications of relational leadership during crises in a global and social context. Regarding climate change, Croweller (2022) studied leaders who interfaced with people impacted by natural disasters. Croweller noted outcomes and differences of leaders who applied facets of RLT through valid concern, building interpersonal relationships, and listening to understand the other person's experience.

Another global issue, the COVID-19 pandemic, brought attention to the need to spend further resources on leadership application and training for medical personnel (Maritsa et al., 2022). Maritsa et al. (2022) called for further study of relational leadership in healthcare. They noted the large amount of communication between humans in healthcare and that the industry tended to spend less time on leadership solutions that could make a difference in that environment. Smithson (2022) researched the leadership styles used in a distressed healthcare system and their effects in the COVID-19 pandemic. They analyzed leader behaviors and dialogue, which suggested that relational leadership was needed alongside authoritative interactions in a hospital setting to maintain a smooth-running organization. Aspects of relational leadership continue to be explored in current times. Uhl-Bien et al. (2022) revisited LMX for a deeper understanding and questioned the leader's perspective in social exchanges.

Major Components of Relational Leadership Theory

Grin et al. (2018) identified four elements of relational leadership: transparency of decisions, collaboration for change, collaboration for new behavior, and nurture collaboration (p. 4). Grin et al. indicated that these were reciprocal recurring actions that may produce substantial change. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) summarized the factors of

LMX as both the follower and leader being committed to the relational process, a developed belief in each other, a leader advocating for the follower, and a leader who accepted ideas from the follower. LMX resulted in followers exhibiting organizational citizenship behaviors (Anand et al., 2018). Moorman (1991) associated the five values of organizational citizenship behaviors as “altruism, courtesy, sportsmanship, conscientiousness, and civic virtue” (p. 849). With an understanding of the history and the significant components of RLT in mind, what may be discovered from the analysis of John 11:17-46 in regard to relational and interpersonal interactions that may be applied to or enhance RLT?

Research, Design, Methodology

SRA was described by Henson et al. (2020) as an exegetical method that provided greater clarity of text and its interpretation. SRA consisted of science-based practices that were logical and methodical and used a depth and breadth of processes that made the analysis whole (Henson et al., 2020). Henson et al. contended that SRA had five categories: inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture. The analysis of John 11:17-46 utilized three of the five categories of SRA – inner texture, intertexture, and sacred texture.

To better understand the three SRA categories applied to the paper, they were further defined. Inner texture analysis included six subcategories: textual units, repetitive patterns, emerging or progressive patterns, open-middle-closing patterns, rhetorical or argumentative patterns, and sensory aesthetic patterns (Henson et al., 2020, p. 84; Robbins, 1996, pp. 8-29). Henson et al. (2020) defined intertexture analysis as a study of the words in a pericope, their link to other works, and their connection to society at the time (pp. 105-120). Robbins (1996, as cited in Henson et al. 2020) defined five stages of the intertexture review: oral-scribal, cultural, social, historical, and reciprocal (p. 106). Sacred texture analysis was designed to understand God’s message better, gain clarity on God’s intention, and gave perspective on God’s desired interaction with followers (Henson et al., 2020). Henson et al. described sacred texture analysis as composed of eight factors: deity, holy person, spirit being, divine history, human redemption, human commitment, religious community, and ethics.

Analysis of Passage

Inner Texture Analysis – Sensory Aesthetic Pattern

The sensory aesthetic patterns in John 11:17-46 exhibited words that evoked feeling. The sensory language provided a picture to the reader of what each person may have gone through emotionally in addition to the actual events at the time. Van Belle (2007) identified this as an intentional technique by John and wrote that John intended to create a lively world for his audience (p. 334). In John 11:33-35, Jesus emoted grief and

sadness. Carpenter and McCown (1992) described the impression on the Jews who observed the interaction as Jesus exhibiting great care and compassion for Lazarus.

Intertexture Analysis

Recontextualization

With recontextualization, the words or phrases that reoccur were not directly tied to an individual or source (Henson et al., 2020, pp. 110-111). Instead, per Henson et al. (2020), they appeared as part of an account or story. In John 11:27, Martha told Jesus she believed that Jesus was God's son and that he was present on earth (*English Standard Version [ESV]*, 1971/2020). However, Martha nor the author, John, spoke about who provided this belief. It can be found in the Old and New Testament in Psalm 2:7 and Matthew 3:17, when the Lord called Jesus his son (*ESV*, 1971/2020). North (2001) argued that John recounted Jesus as God's son as it tied to the prayer to God in verses 41-42 and the miracle of Lazarus's resurrection that only the son of God could have performed (p. 99; *ESV*, 1971/2020, John 11:41-44).

Reconfiguration

The Jews in John 11:36-37 hinted at another miracle that would glorify God when they brought up the restoration of sight to the blind man in John 9:1-11 (*ESV*, 1971/2020). This was the use of reconfiguration, which utilized a prior story as part of a fresh narrative that suggested to the audience what was coming next (Henson et al., 2020, p. 111). In John 11, the discussion of one previous miracle in a new context highlighted the possibility that another involving Lazarus would put Jesus in a relationship with God on display (*ESV*, 1971/2020).

Social Relationships

Jesus was called teacher in relation to Mary and Martha (*ESV*, 1971/2020, John 11:28). Per the *ESV Global Study Bible* (2012), the title "Teacher" can be found in multiple references to Jesus, defining how many saw him. Additionally, Jesus' actions in John 11:28-29 to summon Mary and her response to go to him suggested familiarity or that he had a relational pull in the social connection with the sisters (*ESV*, 1971/2020). Barker and Kohlenberger (2004) interpreted Mary and Martha's response to Jesus as exhibiting preexistent trust that they had been built up in Jesus.

Sacred Texture Analysis

Deity and Holy Person

In John 11:40, Jesus and Martha were in conversations about belief in God, and Jesus referred to the "glory" of God (*ESV*, 1971/2020). This was an example of deity being identified and given attributes (Henson et al., 2020). Per Henson et al. (2020), the characteristics of Jesus in the text were of a holy person, which can be Jesus or a biblical person in a relationship with God. Martha described Jesus in John 11:27 as the son of

the deity God, and she proclaimed that Jesus came to earth, indicating he had been in the spiritual realm (*ESV*, 1971/2020).

Later in the Pericope, John 11:38, Martha and Jesus spoke at the tomb of Lazarus. Then Jesus talked to God, thanking God for consistently hearing him and sending Jesus to earth (*ESV*, 1971/2020, John 11:42). Per a commentary by Theology of Work Project (2014), the clear identification of Jesus on earth and as the Son of God was an offering as it opened Jesus to the fulfillment of prophecy, suffering, and death. God the deity listened to Jesus, granting what he asked (*ESV*, 1971/2020, John 11:41-43). The implications for the presence of a deity and holy person in the text are the reminder of God's ability to save people who believed and followers from eternal death.

Divine History and Redemption

Jesus promised Martha that Lazarus would rise from the dead in the future tense, which in the resurrection of Lazarus was their current time (*ESV*, 1971/2020, John 11:23). While Martha mentioned in John 11:24 that her brother Lazarus would rise from death in the end times, which she defined as the "last days" suggesting a faraway future (*ESV*, 1971/2020). Per Bruce (1999), Jesus reiterated the eschatological idea that salvation through him was true and in the now. Jesus clarified in John 11:25-26 that he was the way to eternal life and alluded to redemption through resurrection (*ESV*, 1971/2020).

The inner texture, intertexture, and sacred texture analyses of John 11:17-46 highlighted the deeper meaning of the biblical text in how Jesus reminded believers of prior prophecies, that he was the son of God on earth, and that he would provide eternal life through his own death and resurrection (Loader, 2017). The SRA of the pericope further clarified the message as it pertained to Jesus, his purpose, and his actions through the narrative of the resurrection of Lazarus. In summary, the inner texture analysis showed how Jesus's expression of emotion conveyed the message that he cared for his followers. The intertexture review of recontextualization displayed Martha's belief that Jesus was God's son, previously found in Psalm and Matthew. This technique presented Jesus again as the only one through God who could have done such miracles. The reference back to the blind man regaining sight used reconfiguration to hint that another miraculous event may happen with Lazarus. This brought Jesus's relationship with God and prophecy fulfillment to the front of the audience's mind. Relational connections that resulted in faith and belief in goodwill to each other were found in the social relationship on display between Mary, Martha, and Jesus. The foundation of trust appeared to lead to learning from Jesus, belief in the word of God, and support in the relationship.

Finally, sacred texture analysis strengthened the importance of belief in God as a deity and Jesus as a holy person, as Jesus prayed to God in front of the audience at the tomb

of Lazarus. This reiterated that Jesus was here on earth as a savior and provider of eternal life. Divine history and redemption pieces of the pericope brought Jesus's purpose into the present with the eschatological thought of end times being in the now with his conversations with Mary and Martha. At the same time, Lazarus's resurrection alluded to the salvation of believers and eternal life being near.

Discussion

Through analysis of John 11:17-46, leadership lessons from Jesus may be observed as Jesus engaged in interpersonal communication that built relationships with his followers. He led in a way that appeared to influence and develop followers. Relational interactions he included himself in seemed to impact the future. Jesus took the time to speak with Mary and Martha one-on-one. He engaged them as equal human beings. Mary and Martha dialogued back and forth based on Jesus as the leader, prompting them with questions (*ESV*, 1971/2020, John 11:21-27). Jesus listened and appeared curious about what the sisters had to say. Jesus mentally connected, attempted to invigorate, and considered each of the sisters in his approach. These skills used for relationship building may enhance the base for the leader and follower dynamic studied and utilized in relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The significance suggested by Uhl-Bien (2006) being that relationship development was the cornerstone of leadership.

Jesus was intentional in how he publicly exhibited the way he led and his life as a leader. He also demonstrated his leadership characteristics in combination with miracles. Therefore, word of his behavior and action spread throughout the region, and the Jews continued to reference them in John 11:37 (Barker & Kohlenberger, 2004; *ESV*, 1971/2020). The Jews questioned why Jesus would not prevent Lazarus from dying. Stanley (2011) noted that Jesus, in his leadership wisdom, did not engage in this miracle of saving Lazarus as he knew that the experience of sadness would be acceptable when compared to what the followers would learn from seeing him resurrect Lazarus. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) supported relationship-strengthening techniques by the leader as they led to greater outcomes for followers and organizations.

Jesus utilized interpersonal communication and trust building that led to influence that propelled participants in the relationship to move to a new future. This was seen as he empathetically engaged in the experience of Lazarus's death by seeing the sisters' grief. Jesus also audibly expressed his emotions (*ESV*, 1971/2020, John 11:33-35). McGee (1984) explained Jesus's commiseration in a human way and show of emotions was appropriate as death was sad. Finally, Jesus shared the vision and plan of God with all Jews who were in observance when he spoke to God and resurrected Lazarus (*ESV*, 1971/2020, John 11:41-44). When leadership based on trust from communication was applied, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) found the relationship built on that increased the

leader's influence on followers in a way that they moved to new behavior that changed themselves, their teams, and the organization.

Limitations, Suggestions, and Future Research

The research was limited as only one pericope in the New Testament was analyzed – John 11:17-46. A review of multiple narratives in the biblical text might have resulted in additional meaning and interpretation that may apply to RLT. Additionally, the discoveries that enhanced RLT were the main focus. Scripture may have also been utilized to increase understanding of leadership theories such as authentic or servant leadership. Future research of Jesus in another interpersonal interaction in John 4:7-38, the events with the Samaritan woman at the well, may be beneficial in informing leadership theories with the use of SRA.

About the Author

Britta Anderson is a first-year student in the Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership program at Regent University and a business professional at the Director level at an organization in the financial industry. She is passionate about leadership, healthy organizations, and professional development. She hopes to learn and grow in this academic journey to add knowledge and be of value to the field of organizational leadership.

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