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ABSTRACT

An essential component of effective leadership is the cultivation of followers. This study examined whether 67 California and Ohio elementary and secondary school teachers understood the role and importance of followership in influencing school leadership. Teachers provided demographic data and completed the Teacher Sentiment Inventory, which assessed the extent to which their specific actions and characteristics reflected their understanding of followership. They ranked statements associated with particular actions or beliefs concerning the relationship between the teacher and the principal. Results indicated that teachers fell into one of three styles of followership: exemplary followers (with high levels of active engagement and independent thinking), pragmatist followers (who perform required tasks well but seldom venture beyond them), or conformist followers (with high active engagement but low independent thinking). None of the teachers were classified as alienated (independent thinking only) or passive (neither independent thinking nor actively engaged) followers. Both men and women scored high on independent thinking in their work. Female teachers reported higher levels of active engagement in the role of follower than did male teachers. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

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Running Head: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE LEADERSHIP/ FOLLOWERSHIP  
DIALECTIC

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Teachers' Perceptions of the Leadership/Followership Dialectic

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## Abstract

Research has demonstrated that corporations succeed or fail, compete or collapse, on the basis of how well they are led. Systems thinking researchers contend that the world is interconnected and influenced by underlying patterns of interdependence requiring an examination of the whole system and its relationships rather than the delineation of the parts of a system for effective change to occur. And while the importance of leadership in organizational decision making has been recognized and studied extensively, an essential component of effective leadership is the cultivation of followers. Many practitioners and researchers have lost sight of the people these leaders will lead. The purpose of this study was to determine if public teachers in the states of California and Ohio understand the role and importance of followership in influencing school leadership. Investigation of the data revealed that these teachers were aware of and saw as essential the importance of followership in their roles in schools. The teachers in this study were identified as three types of followers: Exemplary, Pragmatist, or Conformist. Subscale scores were obtained for *independent thinking* and *active engagement*. Female teachers reported a higher level of active engagement in this role than male teachers in this study.

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE  
LEADERSHIP / FOLLOWERSHIP DIALECTIC

Background

William Cohen, in his new book *The Art of The Leader*, says no leader can succeed without the help of others. In fact he recognizes that leadership exists throughout any organization, regardless of any individual title or position. Certainly the importance of effective leadership in any organization has been recognized and widely studied (Burns, 1978; Covey, 1993; Graham, 1995; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Senge, 1994). Leadership has been the subject of much interest and discussion in the latest round of school reform debate as well. Many argue that strong leadership is essential for schools to accomplish the restructuring and improvement that is proclaimed necessary for the continuation of our educational system. While a majority of such studies have focused on the leader and the leader's effects on organizational success (Burns, 1978, Leithwood, 1994), rarely is the follower's role contemplated (Kelley, 1991; Lundin and Lancaster, 1990). When it is addressed, followership is linked with leadership rather than being considered a separate entity (Hafsi and Misumi, 1992). Wheatley (1994) suggests that examining the whole system, its underlying processes, and relationships rather than describing parts of a system gives insight into the organization not otherwise seen.

This study involves an integration of theories from various disciplines, thereby producing a unique insight into the relationships of leaders and followers within the context of an educational organization. While the concept of followership is not new (Graham, 1995), current misconceptions of this relationship are inhibiting many current educational reform efforts. It is for this reason that an investigation into the situational and interdependent relationship between followers and leaders was examined. With ever increasing demands of accountability in education, and a greater emphasis on the creation and fostering of school culture (Bennis, 1984; Greenfield, 1984; Sergiovanni,

1992) institutions need to focus greater attention on relational interventions in order to achieve more significant and lasting change.

The importance of followership in business and organizational development has been recognized by various writers (Graham, 1995; Burns, 1978; Kelley, 1991; Hollander and Offerman, 1992; Lee, 1991; Lundin and Lancaster, 1990). Increasingly leaders have recognized that workers can provide valuable and important input into the successful management of any organization. As workers become "empowered" they assume new leadership roles and responsibilities. This empowerment is best demonstrated in schools which are moving toward site based management in which teachers and principals share leadership roles and responsibilities. Sergiovanni (1992) has pointed out that as teachers become more professional, less leadership is required of the principal. The more professional administrators and teachers become, the more a less directive form of leadership is needed by administrators as everyone in the school assumes more responsibility for change and improvement. Leaders in schools and businesses are shifting their vision of workers as no longer just subordinates but also as empowered followers who are part of a community which works together toward a common goal (Petersen, 1993; Senge, 1990). Followers have responsibilities to assist the leader by challenging decisions and participating as leaders when they are needed. Teachers are in a unique role in that they can model the followership role as both leaders in their classrooms and followers within their building and the school district.

The concept of followership is not a new one. As early as the 1920s, Mary Parker Follett (Graham, 1995) suggested that leaders need to teach workers how to be followers, to engage them in self-management and an emotional commitment to the organization. She believed that managers influence workers who influence managers; this interaction also changes the environment because of the interaction itself. Experience on every level alters the terms of relationships between workers and managers as well as the relationship itself. The importance of "power with" workers

rather than "power over" workers incorporated this idea of "followership," i.e., workers would become engaged and involved in working for the success of the organization if they were empowered to ownership and given responsibility. The value of her ideas were not recognized at the time; the hierarchical type of leadership, espoused by Frederick Taylor, which supported a structured and scientific form of management has prevailed for the past fifty years.

The terms leadership and followership can be misleading. There are many definitions of leadership. Leadership is sometimes confused with authority or power, yet neither is automatically acquired or bestowed (French & Raven, 1960). Leadership is often assumed to emanate from the head of an organization such as a school. However, true leadership is not vested in a position or person. Various authors agree on a definition of leadership as the ability to mobilize resources in order to accomplish goals (Owens 1995; Heifetz, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 1995). Leadership is confused with authority or power because the term leader is often used interchangeably with manager, president, boss, or CEO. However, these positions of power are not necessarily positions of leadership. Leadership may be accomplished by various people in organizations who may also have authority, power, and influence. It is important to note that leadership occurs when two or more people interact; it is a group function involving relationships between people (Owens, 1995). Therefore, leaders need to attract followers, those who will help with the accomplishment of the goals.

Follower is a term that is frequently confused with subordinate or worker. However, follower, according to Chaleff (1995), Kelley (1988) and Lee (1991), is not synonymous with subordinate. Followers are characterized as stewards (Chaleff, 1995) or partners (Kelley, 1992). For the purpose of this study, the term "follower" will reflect the meaning of Kelley and Chaleff: someone sharing a common purpose with the leader, believing in what the organization is trying to accomplish, and wanting both the leader and the organization to succeed. Nearly all individuals recognize that any organization

requires the talents and skills of all its workers; people perform different tasks but all contribute to overall success. Leaders and followers acknowledge their mutual need and responsibility, but not all of them recognize that leaders and followers are locked in a symbiotic relationship that is required for the organization to become successful in attaining its goals. Followers also play a powerful role in determining the success or failure of any leader (Kelley, 1988) for they are able to subvert leadership or ensure the success of the leader, depending upon their use of influence, power, and recognition. Kelley (1988) believes that followers are more important than leaders. Kouzes and Posner (1995) go further. They believe the best leaders are also the best followers. They suggest that the "Clint Eastwood" type of leader is really a myth, and a true leader pays attention to the desires and needs of his followers. Followership and leadership are roles, not position or people, which many members of an organization may fill at different times (Kelley, 1991).

Not all subordinates are followers. Kelley identifies six skills which he believes are characteristic of followership: self management, commitment, competence, credibility, contributions, and courage (Kelley, 1991). Lundin and Lancaster (1990) identify four characteristics which they believe make followers effective: integrity, owning the territory, versatility, and self-employment. Chaleff (1995) described four types of behavior which he believes assist followers in being effective: they are collaborative and cooperative, are able to so integrate their ego needs sufficiently into the organizational goals that they do not need to compete with the leader, can serve to guide leaders around pitfalls, and serve as support for the needs of both leaders and followers. Followers feel a sense of self-efficacy, a type of empowerment (or enabling, as Kelley prefers to call it) which allows them to assume leadership for many of the organization's goals. Chaleff (1995) reminds us that it takes courage to be a true follower.

It seems apparent that followers display many of the qualities desired in exemplary leaders. Kelley(1992) identified two dimensions which undergird the concept of followership: the first of these is the ability to think independently and critically. Followers have personal integrity. They have a strong personal ethos which guides their action; they do what they believe to be right, despite prevailing attitudes and beliefs. Lee (1991) cites Warren Bennis' comment that the single most important characteristic of a follower is a willingness to tell the truth as s/he sees it. Followership, like leadership, requires courage. The second dimensions which Kelley identifies is active engagement with and for the organization. The ability to act, often without direction from a leader or sometimes in spite of a leader's opinion, is an important quality which true followers possess. Followers also display commitment to the organization. Followers feel a sense of ownership for mutually agreed upon goals. Followers are collaborative in decision-making and implementation of plans to achieve goals. Followership requires competence and the responsibility for developing new skills which are important to the organization's success. Finally, followership demands self-management. Followers are enterprising, creative, and enthusiastic and like "leaders" they take initiative and possess a certain amount of "get-up-and-go." Exemplary followership results in a redistribution of power within the organization which can be unsettling and challenging for many administrators.

Kelley identified five types of followers, based on their levels of active engagement and independent thinking (See Figure 1). Those who score high on both dimensions are called Exemplary Followers. Exemplary Followers are focused and committed to the success of the organization and exercise a courageous conscience which guides their activities and relationships within the organization. Pragmatist Followers "hug the middle of the road." They perform their required tasks well, but seldom venture beyond them. They are particularly sensitive to the shifting winds of organizational politics. Conformist Followers are high on the active engagement scale



but low on independent thinking. According to Kelley (1992), "Conformists are all too eager to take orders, to defer to the leader's authority, and to yield to the leader's views or judgments. They assume that the leader's position entitles him or her to obedience and accommodation for the subordinate" (p. 108). Alienated Followers score high on the independent thinking scale but are not actively engaged in the work of the organization. They may see problems but shirk responsibility for involving themselves in solutions to these concerns. They are thoughtful but are also disengaged, unwilling to provide support for the leader or active involvement in the goals of the organization. Last but not least are Passive Followers, those who are neither actively engaged nor thinking independently. These teachers have essentially quit. They hope to quietly maintain their positions, by going along and hoping no one will notice their indifference or disengagement.

When teachers do not understand the important role that they play as followers in the success of the entire building and school district, their ability to contribute may be undermined or weakened considerably. Yet few teacher education preparation courses include a discussion of followership and the importance of the teacher/principal relationship to organizational success. Many school personnel have been trained in a organizational process which still proposes an hierarchical style of decision making. They assume that the superintendent is the CEO and the principal is middle management and their decisions are not to be questioned. And while the "political survival" of various personnel may depend on acquiescing to the superintendent's decision, if schools are to be successful in accomplishing the restructuring and improvement goals that are expected of them, administrators and teachers will have to replace the hierarchical image of superintendent/ principal/teacher with a new concept: partnership (Kelley, 1991). Teachers need to become aware of their role in fostering collegial relationships with all others in their school community. How they understand that role and exhibit it in their belief systems is the purpose of this study.

## Methodology

### Subjects

The teachers who participated in the study comprised of a convenience sample of 90 public school teachers in the states of California and Ohio. Approximately 74% of the sample responded to the survey, resulting in a total sample size of 67 teachers. Respondents were asked to answer several queries concerning the following: gender, age, location of school (i.e., rural, suburban or urban), building level, years in current position, and total number of years in education. Responses to these demographic questions are listed in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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### Instrumentation

The *Teacher Sentiment Inventory (TSI)* is based on the Followership Questionnaire developed by Kelley (1992) to assist people in understanding the key aspects of followership. Questions were revised in language and item order with the intention of addressing the work of building administrators. The *TSI* consists of questions using a Likert response scale to assess the extent to which specific actions and characteristics on the part of school teachers reflect their understanding of followership. Respondents were asked to rank statements associated with a particular action or belief concerning the relationship between the teacher and the principal. Survey questions were based on a five-point Likert scale. An initial screening of the survey instrument was conducted in order to insure survey clarity as well as to determine the length of time necessary for respondents to complete the questionnaire. Internal reliability was assessed using the data gathered with these pilot surveys which resulted in further revisions of survey question wording and placement. The final survey was two pages in length with an area for demographic questions and general instructions. It contained 20 items reflective of

the significant concepts, characteristics, and dimensions of followership (Kelley, 1992). The time it took participants to complete the survey ranged between 5 and 8 minutes.

### Data Analyses

All analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 6.1). Four types of analyses were used on the completed surveys. First, descriptive statistics were computed for purposes of summarizing the demographic characteristics of the sample and the ratings for each item appearing on the survey (means and standard deviations). Second, a scatterplot of the two subscales of followership (i.e., active engagement x independent thinking) as outlined by Kelley (1992) was examined. Third, Cronbach coefficient alphas (Crocker & Algina, 1986) were conducted in order to ascertain the degree of internal consistency exhibited by the instrument. Examination of the reliability analysis indicated that the instrument exhibited moderate to strong internal consistency. The overall alpha coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) was equal to .84. Finally, a series of one-way analyses of variance were conducted to determine whether significant differences existed on the two followership subscales based on demographic group comparisons. All analyses of variance were conducted at the  $\alpha = .05$  level of significance.

### Procedures

A copy of the *Teacher Sentiment Inventory (TSI)* was sent to each teacher along with a cover letter explaining the nature of the study, a request for participation, a request for demographic information, and a self-addressed stamped envelope. Sixty-seven (74%) of the sample responded to the first mailing; therefore no subsequent mailings were made.

Along with demographic information, means and standard deviations were calculated for each of the two followership subscales by summing the ratings of the individual items on each scale. In order to examine individual responses and their

ratings on the followership scales (Kelley, 1992), a scatterplot of the subscale scores (*active engagement x independent thinking*) was plotted and examined by the authors.

The central analysis of this study consisted of one-way analyses of variance to examine the subscale scores with respect to differences based on demographic reporting. For each subscale, group comparisons were made on the following variables: gender, age, location of school, building level, years in current position, and total number of years in education.

### Results

Two subscale scores were computed for each respondent of the survey. The mean and standard deviation of the two subscales are shown in Table 2.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Of particular interest to the authors was the participants' assessment of their own followership style. Using the Followership Style Grid in Kelley (1992, p. 97), a scatterplot of the individual responses was generated (see Figure 1).

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Responses indicated that the teachers in this study fell into one of three styles of followership: Exemplary Followers, Pragmatist Followers, or Conformist Followers. None of the teachers were classified as Alienated or Passive Followers. Nearly all reported high levels of active engagement in their work within the school district. Varying levels of independent thinking were reported.

Through a series of analyses of variance the researchers wanted to determine whether significant differences existed on the followership subscales (i.e., *independent thinking* and *active engagement*) based on respondents' demographic classifications. The

analysis of variance comparisons on the *independent thinking* subscale resulted in no significant differences between any of the demographic comparisons (see Table 3).

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Insert Table 3 about here

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While a majority of the comparisons on the *active engagement* subscale were not statistically significant, the comparison of gender did result in a significant difference (see Table 4). Female respondents ( $M = 41.36, SD = 4.39$ ) had a significantly higher mean score on the *active engagement* subscale than did the male respondents ( $M = 37.90, SD = 4.12$ ) on this survey [ $F(1,63) = 5.29, p < .05$ .]

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Insert Table 4 about here

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As further follow up of the significant finding with gender and active engagement, a second scatterplot based on gender (e.g., female and male respondents, coded with different symbols) was plotted and examined. Women and men respondents were both represented in the three categories of Exemplary, Pragmatist, and Conformist followers (see Figure 2).

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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### Limitations, Suggestions for Further Research, and Discussion

#### Limitations

This exploratory study examined the understanding that public school teachers have about their role as followers in a school district. The study is limited by the

number of respondents in this case. The study is also generalizable to predominantly elementary school teachers, rather than all teachers. Additionally, while the researchers indicated logical and possible interpretations of the data, there may be other plausible explanations for the findings which are, as yet, undiscovered.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

Further research should include other levels of administrators, a larger sample, and a qualitative understanding of teachers' beliefs about followership.

#### Discussion

The gender difference in this study is significant in that it indicates that women recognize the importance of active engagement in the role of follower within the school building more than men do. Research is overwhelming in pointing to ratings of women as equal to or better than men in various administrative/educational positions (Frasher and Frasher; 1979; Shakeshaft, 1989; Perrault and Irwin, 1996). Research has demonstrated that women consistently display active engagement and independent thinking in their roles as educators and administrators in educational environments. In this study, women recognized the importance of active engagement within the school organization and reported higher levels of initiative, independent work, and commitment to their work than the male principals in the study. Women also reported more collaborative, enthusiastic, and highly energized behaviors as important to their success. Both men and women scored high levels of independent thinking. The results suggest that women should continue to be actively recruited for educational and leadership positions in school districts, for they exhibit characteristics of true followership.

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Table 1  
Frequency Counts of Survey Respondents for Demographic Variables<sup>a</sup>

Variable	Level	Frequency
Gender	Female	55
	Male	10
Age	30-40	23
	41-50	13
	51-60	28
	61 +	1
School Location	Rural	45
	Urban/Suburban	17
School Level	Elementary	51
	Middle/High School	15
Years in Current Position	1-5	26
	6-10	17
	11 +	22
Years in Education	1-10	22
	11-20	19
	21-30	24

<sup>a</sup> Note. Numbers in this table are based on frequency counts for each category (N=67)

Table 2

Independent Thinking and Active Engagement Subscale Means and Standard Deviations

Subscale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>Independent Thinking</i>	38.03	5.23	67
<i>Active Engagement</i>	40.79	4.52	67

Figure 1: Scatterplot of ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT by INDEPENDENT THINKING

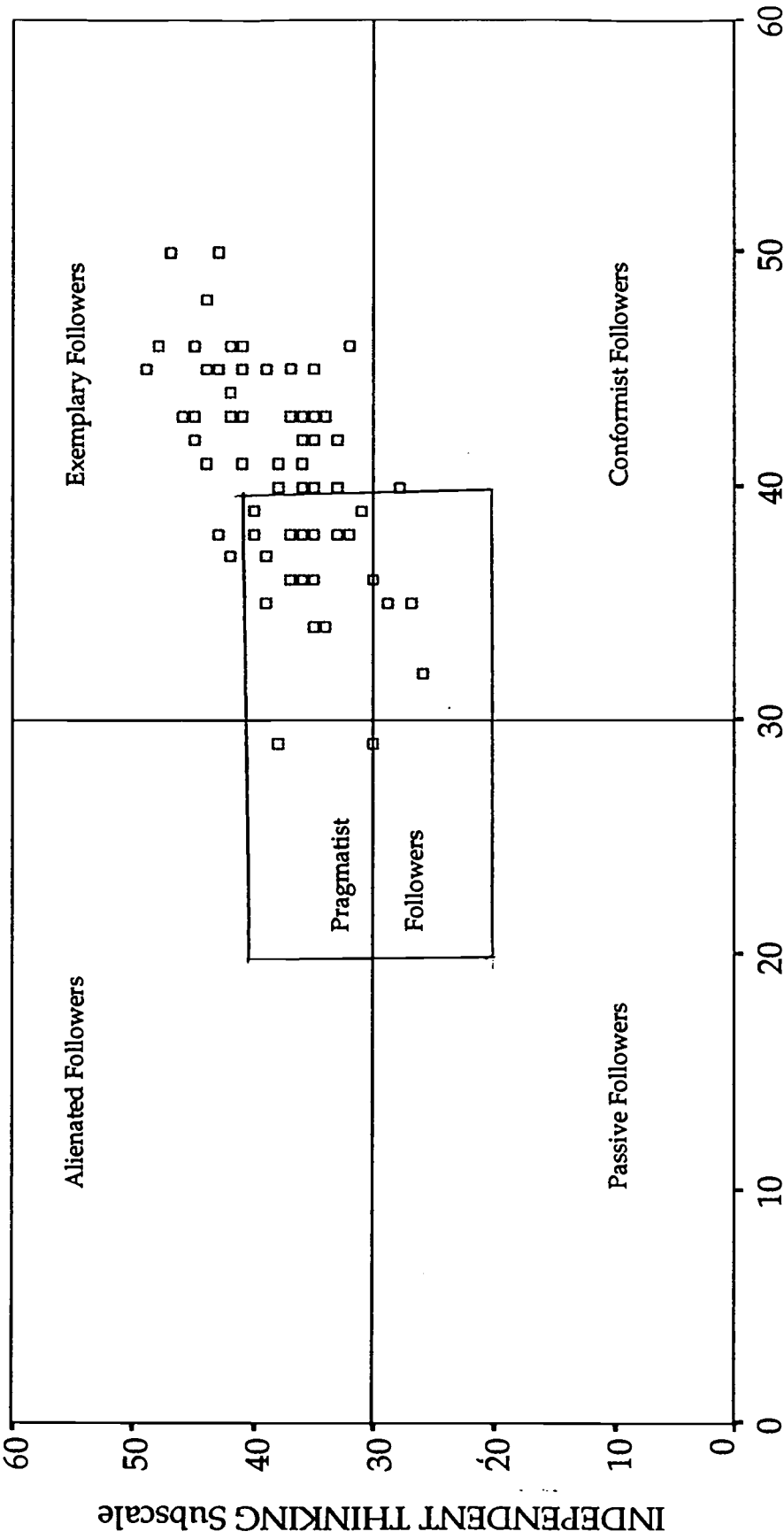


Table 3

One-way Analysis of Variance Results for the *Independent Thinking* Subscale

Variable	Source	df	MS	F-ratio	F prob.
Gender	Between	1	80.84	3.187	.079
	Within	63	25.37		
Age	Between	2	20.54	.808	.451
	Within	61	25.44		
School Location	Between	1	10.15	.351	.556
	Within	64	28.95		
Building Level	Between	1	.24	.009	.926
	Within	64	28.17		
Years in Current Position	Between	2	.91	.032	.969
	Within	62	28.45		
Years in Education	Between	2	1.44	.053	.949
	Within	62	27.38		

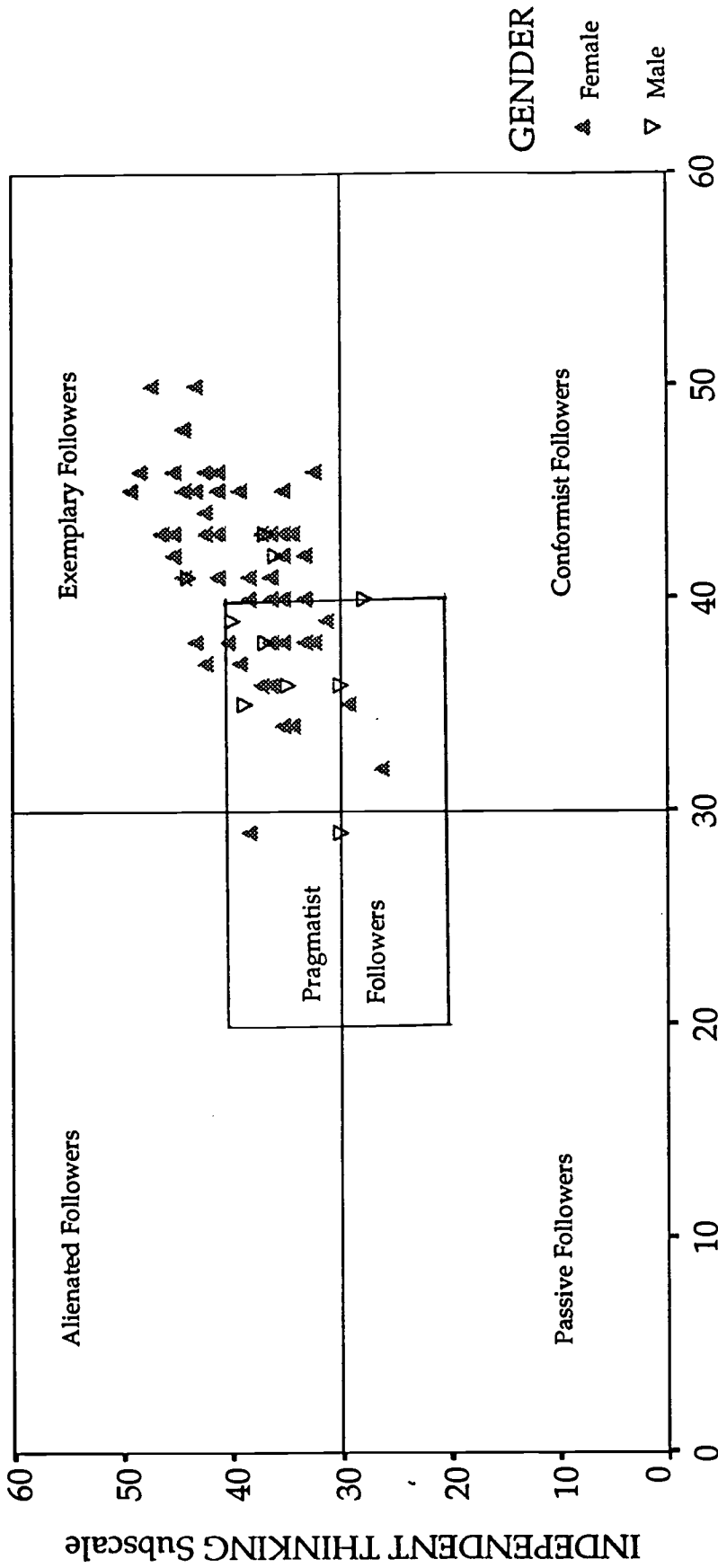
Note: \* significant at  $p < .05$ .

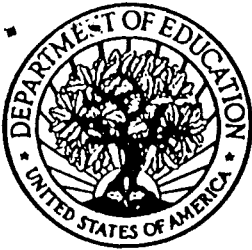
Table 4  
One-way Analysis of Variance Results for the Active Engagement Subscale

Variable	Source	df	MS	F-ratio	F prob.
Gender	Between	1	100.45	5.294	.025*
	Within	63	18.97		
Age	Between	2	19.97	.997	.375
	Within	61	20.02		
School Location	Between	1	16.69	.672	.416
	Within	64	20.51		
Building Level	Between	1	.24	.814	.370
	Within	64	28.17		
Years in Current Position	Between	2	4.89	.235	.791
	Within	62	20.82		
Years in Education	Between	2	4.42	.208	.813
	Within	62	21.29		

Note: \* significant at  $p < .05$ .

Figure 2: Scatterplot of ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT by GENDER  
INDEPENDENT THINKING by GENDER





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